

Lost Identities: Exploring Identity Crisis in Contemporary Iraqi Fiction

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هويات ضائعة: أزمة الهوية في الرواية العراقية المعاصرة

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ABSTRACT

The concept of Identity Crisis—as a psychological theory and a theme—has become prevalent in contemporary Iraqi fiction, typically reflecting the socio-political turmoil that the country experienced over the past few decades. This research article explores the theme of identity crisis in a sample of Iraqi fiction—The Corpse Washer (2013) by Sinan Antoon. The article relies on Erikson's Identity Crisis to analyze how Jawad, the main character in the novel, struggle with his identity in the context of war and cultural transformation. It seeks to illuminate the complex layers of identity crisis depicted in The Corpse Washer and the resilient human spirit that manages the difficulties of self-identity in turbulent times. It is found that Jawad's experiences are shown to correspond with Erikson's stages of identity development in this analysis, which also highlights the universal themes of self-discovery and resilience in the face of cultural changes. **Keywords:** Contemporary Iraqi fiction, cultural alienation, displacement, identity crisis, identity formation.

المخلص

مفهوم أزمة الهوية كنظرية نفسية وكفكرة باتت سائدة في الرواية العراقية المعاصرة وغالبًا ما تعكس المعمعة السياسية الاجتماعية التي مر بها البلاد خلال العقود الأخيرة. إن هذه المقالة البحثية تستكشف أزمة الهوية في عينة من الأدب العراقي المعاصر ألا وهي رواية وحدها شجرة الرمان للروائي سنان أنطون (٢٠١٣). تستند المقالة على نظرية ايريكسون الخاصة بأزمة الهوية لدراسة صراع الشخصية الرئيسية (جواد) في العمل الادبي المذكور اعلاه في إطار الحرب والتغير الثقافي. تسعى هذه المقالة الى توضيح التعقيدات التي تتخلل أزمة الهوية المستخدمة من قبل الكاتب في الرواية وكيف لمرونة البشر في التعامل مع صعوبات الهوية الذاتية اثناء الاوقات العصيبة. تبين في النهاية ان تجربة جواد تتناغم مع مراحل تطوير الهوية التي جاء بها ايريكسون مما سلط الضوء على اكتشاف الذات والشكامة امام التغيرات الثقافية كموضوعات العالمية **الكلمات المفتاحية:** الرواية العراقية المعاصرة، الاغتراب الثقافي، الازاحة، أزمة الهوية، تكوين الهوية.

1. Introduction Since 2003, Iraqi fiction has seen a thematic shift. Identity crisis has become a recurring theme, mirroring the turbulent political and social past of the nation. The national identity of Iraq has been eroded and its society has been more fragmented during the past few decades due to wars, dictatorships, economic sanctions, and sectarian violence. My uncle asked me in an e-mail for news about sectarian clashes. I said that I felt as if we had been struck with an earthquake which had changed everything. For decades to come, we would be groping our way around in the rubble it left behind. In the past there were streams between Sunnis and Shiites, or this group and that, which could be easily crossed and were even invisible at times. Now, after the earthquake, the earth had all these fissures, and the streams had become rivers. The rivers became torrents filled with blood, and whoever tried to cross, drowned. (Antoon, 2013, p. 149)

Iraqis have become increasingly confused and alienated as a result, especially the younger generation who have grown up in a violent and unpredictable environment. In addition to providing a diverse and complicated

perspective on Iraqis' experiences in the twenty-first century, contemporary Iraqi fiction has arisen as a forum for addressing and questioning this identity issue. Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* presents one angle or viewpoint on the difficulties Iraqis have in forming their identities and show the various ways that they are adjusting to life after war. When people's shared interests diverge from those of the group they belong to, they experience an identity crisis, which is a type of social identity threat. Significant personality changes may result from this isolating experience. The word "crisis" is derived from the Greek word "krisis," which denotes an unsafe or unstable circumstance with unfavorable effects. Erikson distinguished three ways in which identity crises can appear: intensity when confusion overwhelms the ego identity, prolongation when the realignment of identifications from childhood and adolescence takes a long time, and exasperation when attempts at identity resolution are unsuccessful. While assisting wounded soldiers who had lost their ego identities and sense of self, Erikson came up with the phrase during World War II. Erikson (1968) linked identity crisis to a phase in which people are out of sync with their old identities and mismatched with their new social and personal environments. He saw similar symptoms in internally conflicted youth who were engaged in an internal war (p. 17). According to Robert Ewan, an "identity crisis" is the inability to find support in a social role or career, inner fragmentation, and uncertainty about one's life's direction. The person experiencing this emotion may feel alienated or alone (Ewen, 2014, p. 161). Erikson's psychosocial theory states that particular vulnerabilities at each developmental stage that result in crises are largely caused by awareness and incipient instincts (Erikson, 1980, p. 56). According to Erikson's stages of identity crisis theory, identity confusion is the outcome of an individual's interactions with their environment in the initial stage. Erikson highlights that the course of developing a person's identity is dynamic and changes over time (Hoare, 2002, p. 26). Erikson's view of crisis is not always pessimistic; he considers it as an important opportunity for personal development and a necessary turning point in a person's life, provided the person manages the crisis well. Erikson's use of the word "crisis" to characterize a person's inner conflicts and quest to comprehend who they are, what they want to become, and what they need from themselves is another observation made by McLean and Syed (McLean & Syed, 2015, p.116). Identity crisis can occur more than one time in a person's lifespan. It should be noted that the serious cases arise during adolescence as individuals begin to discover who they are and their objectives. Language barriers and cultural differences, for example, can have a significant impact on how someone defines themselves. That said, it also can manifest itself when individuals experience difficulties. Feelings of alienation, shame, lack of confidence, and loneliness may arise from this (Kroger, 2007, p. 34). According to Erikson's perspective, identity development is a constant process that commences in childhood and places people in their social environments. It is particularly important for people to conform to and remain stable within social groups. An individual's identity crisis is influenced by multiple factors at different ages, such as gender, social class, ethnic background, and social structure (Cote & Levine, 1987, p.79). Individuals construct their identities in different ways based on their psychological states at the time, which are frequently marked by fear and anxiety. In order to manage anxiety and keep the person from going insane, defense mechanisms kick in (Cramer, 1997, p. 34). It has been observed that an individual's identity may be at risk due to overuse of defense mechanisms. Erikson's theory emphasizes how important crises are in molding a person's identity and personality. Every crisis offers a chance for learning and expansion, and a properly resolved one results in a resilient and well-adjusted personality. Developing a stable sense of self and identity during adolescence is a difficult task that is influenced by culture, family, friends, and the environment. Resolving these crises successfully in adolescence improves ego identity development and prepares people to face adulthood with resilience. On the other hand, a lack of ability to manage these crises may lead to disorientation and confusion about one's identity. As a result, it is imperative that people handle these crises effectively.

2. Discussion With the backdrop of the Iraq-Iran war, Sinan Antoon's poignant and powerful novel *The Corpse Washer* delves into the theme of identity crisis. Antoon creates a profoundly poignant story that explores the challenges that the main character, Jawad, faces in navigating his identity as a conventional corpse washer in a world that is changing quickly. The novel examines the conflict between tradition and modernity, individual goals and social expectations, and the pursuit of self-discovery in the face of adversity through the experiences of Jawad, whose dream is to become a sculptor, struggling in the face of the larger ramifications for people who live in a society that is going through significant change. He says to his father: History is a struggle of statues and monuments, Father. I will not have a share in all of this, because I have yet to sculpt anything important. Even Saddam's huge statue in Firdaws Square was brought down right after

your death. I thought I would be happy since I detested him so much, but I felt I'd been robbed of the happiness. (Antoon, 2013, p. 103) Jawad is, therefore, forced to abandon his art dream to adopt the job of his father who is portrayed in *The Corpse Washer* as a traditionalist who upholds the long-standing family practice of cleaning and preparing corpses for burial (Deer, 2017, p. 327). Jawad's sense of self and purpose are shaped by this profession, which is firmly ingrained in religious and cultural traditions. But as modernity intrudes on customs and the war consumes Iraq, Jawad is forced to choose between his inherited identity and the rapidly evolving world around him. When Jawad experiences pressure to adjust to new circumstances, his identity crisis manifests. The value and applicability of his profession are called into question by the changing social dynamics brought about by war and the predominance of Western culture. His sense of purpose is dwindling, and he feels marginalized as the modern world seems to ignore his heritage and the need for his traditional services declines. Another aspect in Jawad's identity crisis is represented by the lack of harmony between his own aims and the aims of those who surround him. He wants to realize his dreams and become liberated from the limitations that traditions lay. He is forced to stick to social mores such that he keeps his family business going. Jawad's struggle with balancing desires as an artist with the role he forcibly plays serves as a case in point regarding the crises which emerge as personal preferences oppose social norms. He feels trapped and unable to discover who he is. This is demonstrated when he says in the opening of the text, "my heart [...] is an abandoned house whose windows are shattered and doors unhinged. Ghosts play inside it, and the winds wail." (Antoon, 2013, p. 3). This crisis sheds light on the hardships experienced by those who live in traditional societies wherein cultural norms, not personal goals, are dominant. The Iran-Iraq strained relationship is what triggers Jawad's identity crisis. The high death toll casts him aside in the unknown. As a corpse washer, he sees disfigured bodies everyday which is enough to intensify his existential crisis. He mulls over the meaning of his existence, the war, and life overall. That is, Jawad is imposed to feel as such due to the horrors of the war. He is tortured by the memories which makes him question his humanity. Moreover, the literal war between the two countries can stand as a representation of the inner war that he suffers from. The cultural norms and social structures which offered a kind of stability are damaged by the destruction. Among all of this, he is left lost and stranded. The Iraqi American novelist deals with the subject of identity crisis in a skillful manner, offering a distinctive angle through which one can appreciate the struggles people experience as they are trying to find their true selves.

3. Conclusion In conclusion, *The Corpse Washer* provides an example of identity crisis. It suggests that there is an essential core that binds a person to his culture, family, and heritage. Identity crisis lets readers consider the dynamics between personal aims, family expectations, and culture forces. Jawad is sketched as a good example of a victim of identity crisis. He finds himself torn between his desire to pursue art and his family's ancient practice of corpse washing, which is based in Shiite Muslim tradition, at the beginning of the book. His internal strife perfectly captures the conflict between modernity and tradition, a tension that permeates both his personal life and the larger Iraqi context during the Iran-Iraq War. The novel's main theme is the idea of identity as a flexible and constantly changing concept. Jawad's unwillingness to follow his set course emphasizes how important personal choice is in defining one's identity. His aspiration to overwhelm the surrounding limitations and challenges exemplifies the need for autonomy. His crisis acts as a reminder that identity is a constant process of discovery and could never be fixed. Overall, the Iraqi people's collective identity is seriously questioned by the war with Iran. The nation struggles with issues of national identity and values as it deals with drastic changes and widespread loss. The novel offers a window into the struggles of a whole nation during a time of upheaval and transformation through Jawad's personal journey. The book also clarifies the effects of cultural deterioration in times of war. Jawad's crisis gets worse as Iraq's cultural heritage and traditions start to crumble. He is forced to think of his place in a chaotic environment. Antoon's exquisite storytelling skillfully leads us through Jawad's journey of self-realization, self-acceptance, and meaning-seeking in a chaotic world throughout the entire book. The book makes the argument that identity is a flexible concept that is shaped by past events, present circumstances, and outside influences. The way that Jawad changed into a corpse washer and then went back to work in that field illustrates how identities change over time. Even though he initially objects to the family custom, he eventually finds comfort in accepting it as a way to stay connected to his roots and uphold the legacy of his culture.

All things considered, *The Corpse Washer* is regarded as an insightful examination of the complexities of identity at the individual and societal levels. With the backdrop of war and cultural upheaval, Sinan Antoon's exquisite storytelling encourages readers to reflect on the dynamic nature of identity and the profound effects

of outside forces on the self. Jawad's journey from resistance to acceptance, which reflects the changes experienced by a country struggling with its identity, emphasizes the novel's enduring message that there is a deep well of strength and resilience that can be drawn upon even in the face of identity crisis.

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