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Iraq Wars from the other Side: Transmodern Reconciliation in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

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Abstract: In the last years, more and more literary accounts of recent and current wars in the Middle East have been published. In most cases, they are authored from a Western viewpoint and provide a narrow account of the Muslim world. This article focuses on Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* because it opens the scope. That is, it constitutes an alternative to the imagery of the American film industry. Moreover, as Antoon is a Christian, his account of contemporary Iraq is particularly peripheral and hybrid. To analyse the novel, this article makes use of Transmodernity, a concept coined by Rosa María Rodríguez Magda in 1989. Yet, instead of Magda's Transmodernity as a neatly Euro-centric phenomenon of worldwide connectivity, Ziauddin Sardar's version of the concept is preferred. Sardar's Transmodernity adds to connectivity a message of reconciliation between progress and tradition, particularly in the context of non-Western cultures. This paper defends that Antoon's novel opens the debate on Islam to challenge the prejudiced Western discourses that have 'legitimized' war. To do so, Sardar's 'borders' and Judith Butler's grievability are particularly useful. In a Transmodern context, novels like Antoon's show that humans should never be bare lives.

Keywords: Sinan Antoon; *The Corpse Washer*; Transmodernity; unthought; borders; grievability; violence

1. Introduction

Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* [1] was first published in Arabic in 2010. Three years later, the same author published it again in English in the USA. There is currently an increasing corpus of novels and short stories which account for recent wars in the Middle East. However, most of them are autobiographic or semi-autobiographic stories by Western soldiers, journalists or photographers (Phil Klay's *Redeployment* [2]; Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* [3]; Barney Campbell's *Rain* [4]; and Pat Barker's *Double Vision* [5] to name some outstanding examples). There is an increasing number of texts by secular-minded Iraqi writers like Antoon—and others such as Hassam Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition* (2014) [6] and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2014) [7]—that bear witness to the multiple realities of Iraq in the last decades. Antoon being a Christian in a mostly Muslim country and an exile in the US explains the hybrid status of *The Corpse Washer*. Indeed, the novel renders a much more complex perspective on war and its effects than that of the American film industry. Jawad Salim, the protagonist, is a youth to a Shiite family of corpse washers in Baghdad. However, Jawad wishes to become a sculptor and thus, despite his family's reticence, he eventually attends the Arts School of the city. His dreams do not last long, though; Saddam Hussein's dictatorship, the American invasion and the embargo make art redundant. Meanwhile, the piles of corpses in the streets force him to return to his family tradition of washing and shrouding the dead. In this context of mass death and cultural emasculation, the protagonist must learn to mourn permanent losses to prevent an overall sense of melancholia the novel recalls. He loses his two girlfriends; his uncle, a communist exiled in Germany; his brother, a fallen soldier in the war against Iran; and finally, his father. *The Corpse Washer* is a tale of

lost people, but also of lost opportunities until the very end. Indeed, he eventually fails to cross the Jordan border to start anew abroad as an artist. Thus, his artistic career is reduced to an exhibition for young Iraqi artists where he presents a conceptual piece of art, a torture chair, to which he thinks of adding “a tiny cage” and putting “a real bird inside” [1] (Loc. 1422). Jawad’s work aims to represent his own cultural and political imprisonment. However, in pointing to his imprisonment, there is a conscience of it and a political commitment in the artistic event: Both in his cage and in the novel itself.

To account for and frame Antoon’s novel, I will address Transmodernity. The concept, firstly coined by Spanish philosopher Rosa Rodríguez Magda in 1989, which breaks with Postmodernity. In her view, Transmodernity constitutes an overall paradigm shift [8] (p. 1) which results from a new grand narrative, namely globalization, and is fostered by the current society of technology [8] (p. 3). Yet, hers remains a Western concept. Indeed, Magda suggests that Transmodernity is still inscribed in the logic of Modernity since, following Hegelian dialectics, the combination of Modernity (thesis) and Postmodernity (antithesis) results in Transmodernity (synthesis) [9] (p. 8). Magda’s term has changed since the late eighties: From her categorical statements on the relation between Transmodernity, Modernity and Postmodernity [10] (pp. 133–142) to a more nuanced position on globalization as the new grand narrative [11] (p. 5). Be it as it may, Magda insists on the transmodern paradigm shift. Parallel to her conception of Transmodernity, other critics like Enrique Dussel and Ziauddin Sardar challenge the Western-centrism of Magda’s original term and regard the ‘trans’ of Transmodernity as a reference to transcultural dialectics. Magda argues that Transmodernity addresses a rhizomatic and technological society conceived in the West in the First World, although, she concedes, it assumes and permeates other cultures [11] (p. 3). By contrast, Dussel and Sardar approach Transmodernity from non-Western standpoints; the former from the Philosophy of Liberation [12,13] and the latter from Islam. In both cases, the post-colonial discourse is reframed to accommodate a new sense of globalization that agglutinates rather than excludes. They are not against progress as long as it is compatible and fosters the dialogue with pre-Modern or a-Modern traditions, be they South-American or Islamic. In this light, Sardar argues that with the coming of Transmodernity, “things change radically; but they also stay the same. Societies and individuals become transmodern while retaining the basic components of their cultural identity. In Transmodernity, both sides of the equation are important: Change has to be made and accommodated; but the fundamental tenets of culture and tradition, the source of its identity and meaning, remain the same” [14] (n.p.).

This article focuses on Sardar because he is the most prominent theorist on Transmodernity from the viewpoint of Islam. Although Antoon is a Christian exiled in the USA, *The Corpse Washer* accounts for a mostly Muslim country attacked, invaded and under the economic sanctions of Western forces. Hence, Sardar’s conception of a transmodern Islam will prove useful to analyse Jawad’s narration and the novel’s discourse. Sardar’s borders and Arkoun’s ‘the unthought’ will be particularly helpful. Related to these concepts, I will make reference to Butler’s ‘grieving’—which she has theorised in relation to violence, liveability, recognition, precariousness and dispossession for more than a decade now—to account for the way *The Corpse Washer* addresses loss resulting from war in Transmodern times.

2. Transmodernity and Islam in Times of War. The Case of *The Corpse Washer*

Although this volume of *Societies* deals with transmodern war, both *The Corpse Washer* and this article address not only its side-effects but also the factors necessary to understand and combat the primary causes of the Gulf wars. In a transmodern globalized world, war has also undergone some transformations [15]. This is not only due to new technologies, whereby war has become a virtual game with actual casualties. Computing devices and sophisticated weapons make of war a global event with unprecedented global effects. The wars of Iraq are paradigmatic of this shift from conventional to transmodern war. It seems a contradiction in terms, as long as Transmodernity conveys a global connectivity. However, and here comes, in my view, the other characteristic of current conflicts, apart from the increasing role of technology. War has produced and is producing a process of

cultural emasculation on mass scale [15] (pp. 5–6). The Western-centric view of war has spread an iconography of Islam that has permeated worldwide and that legitimates any Western state-sponsored attack. This has been particularly the case since 9/11, when the equation terrorism = Islam became a visual effect of unflinching consequences.

2.1. *The Unthought in the West and the East*

The mainstream conception of Islam as radicalized, irrational and threatening that justifies and characterises current global wars is historically inaccurate and, hence, as Sardar argues, needs revising. In contrast with what is a widely spread prejudice, he points out: “A critical spirit has been central to Islam from its inception. The Qur’an is generously sprinkled with references to thought and learning, reflection and reason” [14] (n.p.). Sardar supports his point recalling this verse: “the worse creatures in God’s eyes are those who are (willfully) deaf and dumb, who do not reason” [16] (8: 22). However, the critic concedes, the acknowledged critical standpoint of the Qur’an was soon discarded. He tries to explain why that hallmark of classic Islam is mostly absent from the current Muslim world where a unique interpretation of religion prevails. As the editor of the journal *Critical Muslim*, Sardar argues for the need to question “all forms of knowing, ideas, structures, cultural formations and representations that seek to dominate—within Islam and Muslim societies as well as the ‘West’” [14] (n.p.). It is not that the journal does not look for sites of transcultural encounter. It is indeed its main purpose. However, it is only in rejecting one-sided viewpoints and discourses of unilaterality and domination that the hiatus between cultures can be bridged. In this sense, Mohammad Arkoun’s ‘the unthought of Islam’ constitutes a key issue. He describes it as “an Islam that is isolated from the most elementary historical reasoning, linguistic analysis or anthropological decoding” [17] (p. 11). This conception of unthought Islam as uncritical, reactionary and irrational is what, for Sardar, justifies and grants power to radical groups. Arkoun denounces and regrets the prevalence of unthought Islam nowadays. However, Arkoun’s denunciation of the unthought as a threat against the original Islam can be extended to the West. When the Western world carries out military interventions in Muslim countries to fight the unthought Islam, it is feeding the “Islamic States” instead. The war on terrorism as the most conspicuous version of the unthought is often unthought itself because it relies on similar principles of univocity, domination and exploitation: Some Western countries’ foreign policies rely on the same unthought principles as the enemy they fight against. For Sardar, the unthought has reached “many ideas that we take for granted as inherently good, such as Capitalism, Democracy and Free Market” [14] (n.p.). He contends that they are “over-arching and oppressive ideologies that do not, or cannot, deliver social justice” [14] (n.p.). It is hence mandatory to accept that “these dominant paradigms are now dangerously obsolete” and that “challenging this orthodoxy is as important as challenging fundamentalist representations of religion” [14] (n.p.). That is, religion, capitalism and the free market (let alone democracy) are not negative *per se*; but they need to be rethought to accommodate a large part of the population that has been left aside and to accommodate a transmodern reality that transcends the West. Should this occur, the radical othering that justifies and encourages wars would greatly decrease. In *The Corpse Washer*, the hero/protagonist bears witness to the confrontation of these dominant paradigms and the escalation of the unthought at both domestic and international levels. It is my main contention that the novel represents how the Transmodern paradigm shift fails in current Iraq because confrontation, rather than connectivity, prevails. Jawad regrets the conflict between Sunnis and Shiites as well as the American invasion. The tension provoked by this paradigm of domination, exploitation, dispossession and eventually death is what triggers the protagonist’s traumatic nightmares and the war that dehumanises humans as the imaginary other. He suffers from dissociation, bearing witness to himself staring at death: “I see my body to the left of the bench, kneeling in a puddle of blood” [1] (Loc. 60); but also from a trauma that haunts him through the night: “Death is not content with what it takes from me in the waking hours, it insists on haunting me even in my sleep” [1] (66). Thus, the novel intersperses so-called realistic chapters, in which Jawad tells the history of his family and his country, and other fantastic and/or dreamlike chapters (6, 20, 25, 30,

32, 36, 38, 40, 53) where the protagonist comes to terms with the underside of his realistic narration. Indeed, a cultural and historical trauma like the military invasion of a foreign power often hides more personal insidious traumata.

2.2. *The Art of Death*

The Corpse Washer sometimes reads like a CNN report on Iraq from the viewpoint of an Iraqi narrator accounting for the recent history of the country. However, it is most often a rather poetic document that portrays and breaks with stereotypes. The article in which Jawad's uncle Sabri compares Iraqis and palm trees is a case in point. The country, a vast orchard in Sabri's words, is homogeneous and heterogeneous, as well as the passive agent of its uneven destiny. This struggle of the country against its destiny is especially obvious in Jawad's story. He is an atheist [1] (Loc. 855) in a very religious atmosphere, an artist in a scenario of destruction and war. To break with Arkoun's concept of the unthought, Jawad recalls pre-Islamic culture and the original critical Islam. Simultaneously, he also questions the side-effects of atheism. In apostrophising his father, a religious man, Jawad says: "You were heavily armed with faith, and that made your heart a castle. My heart, by contrast, is an abandoned house whose windows are shattered and doors unhinged" [1] (Loc. 78). His (so-to-speak) countercultural position makes the protagonist particularly vulnerable with his country leaders, the invaders and even his family. Likewise, his love affairs are also unconventional, his first girlfriend being a divorcee and the second one a young relative and refugee. However, he is fundamentally a rebel because he breaks with his family tradition, choosing to be an artist instead of a corpse washer. To do so, he intends to exile leaving behind his widowed mother. Indeed, the secret of his resilience against war, invasion, dispossession, death and unthought Islam, is art. There are two quotations that the hero's attitude about art, life and death brings to mind. The former, by Picasso, is quoted literally: "Every child is an artist. The challenge is for the artist to stay a child when he grows up" [1] (Loc. 414). Jawad tries to come to terms with reality through art and thus overcome the most radical face of Islam and the response from the West. In becoming an artist, the protagonist breaks with the unthought and the borders it raises while he bridges the gap with the other. He does so following the lead of his first art teacher, Mr Ismael. Opposite to the imagery of Muslim countries spread by the West and radical Islamists alike, Mr Ismael argues for art as the alternative to prejudices and war. For the teacher, Jawad recalls, "art was intimately linked with immortality: a challenge to death and time, a celebration of life" [1] (Loc. 421). His words remind the second quotation, which is implicit throughout the novel, namely Theodor Adorno's words on the unfeasibility of poetry after the Holocaust. Adorno's controversial quote has been both interpreted and misinterpreted. Unlike unthought Islam, which rebuffs dissension, plurality and criticism, the teacher vindicates the memory of pre-Islamic cultures in Iraq: "He [Mr Ismael] said that our ancestors in Mesopotamia were the first to pose all these questions [about art] in their myths [. . .] and that Iraq was the first and biggest art workshop in the world" [1] (Loc. 421). Drawing on Adorno's argument that poetry is barbaric after the Holocaust, is Jawad's claim for art during the American invasion and war also barbaric? I would say it is just the opposite. Adorno's words have often been (mis)read out of context. In this sense, I find Brian Oard's paraphrase particularly convincing: "To persist, after Auschwitz, in the production of monuments of the very culture that produced Auschwitz [. . .] is to participate by denial in the perpetuation of that barbaric culture and to participate in the process (reification) that renders fundamental criticism of that culture literally unthinkable" [18] (n.p). In other words, persisting in the unthought culture that both Islamists and Western powers have often relied on to deny critical cultures and promote profitable conflicts instead is barbaric. In *The Corpse Washer*, art is what could guarantee liberty and hence it is not only not barbaric, but mandatory. It is in this light that Mr Ismael asks children if they know "the Liberty Monument in Liberation Square" [1] (Loc. 427), a symbol when freedom falters. Likewise, an arts critic reacts to the war with a poem and Jawad comes across an article praising the Arabian Nights and the Arabic literary tradition [1] (503).

With his next art mentor, Professor Isam al-Janabi, Jawad comes familiar with sculpture, which turns his real passion. In particular, the youth gets fascinated with Giacometti, his icon henceforth. Having a look at a book on the Swiss artist, Jawad reads: “He said that what he’d wanted to sculpt was not man but the shadow he leaves behind” [1] (Loc. 577). Giacometti’s symbolic act addresses the bare life of humans (a concept I will come back to later) when confronted with their vulnerability, here represented with a mere shadow. Although Jawad’s own aspirations to become a sculptor eventually fail, he sculpts human shadows in continuing his father’s job as a corpse washer. The war produces corpses to wash while art becomes redundant because it is too much to afford. The American bombing of Jawad’s Arts school is a metaphor of culture breaking to pieces. Very graphically, the protagonist recalls how the building “looked like a corpse that had been skinned and then had its entrails burnt and its ribs exposed” [1] (Loc. 989). *The Corpse Washer* is both a testimony of the feebleness and strength of art and tradition to overcome war effects in a transmodern scenario. In a globalized context, the problem is not the number of connections operating worldwide. The problem is that connections often respond to warfare interests, thus setting up borders that dehumanize rather than humanize relations. War dehumanizes because the enemy becomes (in Appiah’s words) the “imaginary stranger” [19] (2007: 87–99), i.e., one that is not materialised in a concrete human being and is in consequence unrecognisable [1] (Loc. 2150, 2242). In other words, the enemy is non-human because s/he is just imagined as the other, rather than as a concrete human being. When the war gets worse, Jawad’s artistic aspirations turn unfeasible as if “there was a mysterious force taking [him] back to the mghaysil” [1] (Loc. 1651). Washing corpses brings the protagonist back to tradition and his family [1] (2184). Like sculpting stone, washing dead bodies is a ritual rather than a regular job. This is evident in Jawad’s dreams, when the limits between life and death, and art and reality collapse. In one of them, he is about to wash a piece of art: “One of Giocometti’s statues lies on the washing bench. I assume I am meant to wash it. As I pour water over its tiny head, the sculpture dissolves into tiny fragments. I put the bowl aside and try to pick up the pieces and repair the damage, but everything disintegrates in my hands.” [1] (Loc. 1874). The metaphor of art’s demise in Jawad’s hands when a statue of Giacometti disintegrates draws on the sculptor’s own failure to convey the shadow of the man. Giacometti’s impotence is transferred to Jawad, both in his daily life in war times and in the traumatic acting out of his nightmares.

As mentioned above, washing the dead is rendered in artistic terms. As a child, Jawad stares at his father and his assistant Hammoudy while they perform the ritual:

The scents of lotus and camphor wafted through the air [...]. The first object that struck my eyes was the marble bench on which the dead were washed [...]. Father filled [a] small bowl with water and motioned to Hammoudy, who sprinkled some of the ground lotus on the dead man’s head. Father started to lather the hair and scrub it [...]. The third wash was done with pure water alone [...]. Supplications were written on [the body’s] edges in a beautiful black script [...]. The dead man looked like a newborn in swaddling clothes. [1] (Loc. 208–305)

There is a lot of meaning in the whole process, one which connects the living and the dead through symbolic acts, movements, words and materials. That is the essence of art in the novel. However, the protagonist ends up being a failed sculptor. As a mghassilchi, he uses water and dust in a symbolic act; but unlike that of the artist as creator of life, as a washer, he performs acts of mourning. For Jawad’s father, using dust and water for shrouding is culturally meaningful: “The origin of life is water and dust and if there is no water for ablutions or washing, then pure earth can be used” [1] (Loc. 354). For Jawad, by contrast, it is the proof of his failure as an artist and the mass death overtaking his country.

2.3. The Borders of War

The Corpse Washer tries to bridge gaps between humans or, at least, to denounce the pernicious effects of not doing it. Indeed, when the unthought prevails, borders are often too high and strong to overcome and transmodern dialectics proves unfeasible. Transmodernity is, for Sardar, the paradigm

that ends up with borders that war insists in keeping to justify itself. He lucidly argues how borders have been edified to maintain a status quo of unthought Islam and Western domination:

They have also been used to control and contort the reality of other cultures and to maintain the hegemony of the Eurocentric worldview. It is the site at which dominion over Others and other ways of knowledge have been constructed. All the definitions of borders and transitory states in modern and post-modern theorising derive from the same source—the fear-ridden insecurity of western self-identity provoked by the expatriate experience of colonialism and the reverse process of fear of immigration of ex-colonial subjects into the metropolis. [20] (n.p.)

Antoon's novel is remarkable in this sense. Borders are rendered from the other side. In other words, the text does not focus on how unsafe Westerners feel when going to the colonies or receiving ex-colonial subjects. On the contrary, it is the colonial subject that fears the West's worldview, supremacism and border-construction. Jawad demystifies many myths that, from the West, have justified war against a threatening homogeneous Middle-East. Hence, the border itself proves to be the real threat. Border building, inherited from the colonial period (yet more prevalent nowadays than ever before), has set the difference "between Us and Them, the conceptual distance that enabled, supported and justified domination, dispossession and despoiling Other ways of life and thought" [20] (n.p.). No matter how hard both sides have tried to naturalise borders, Sardar reminds that "societies and cultures have seldom being bounded" [20] (n.p.). It is the historiographic discourses of dominant civilizations that have imposed partition to continue with the status quo that critics like Sardar and novels like *The Corpse Washer* intend to end up with. Back to an idea put forward at the beginning of this article, Sardar argues for Transmodernity as the new paradigm that rejects having humans split into demonic binaries. In his view:

Things change radically; but they also stay the same. Societies and individuals become transmodern while retaining the basic components of their cultural identity. In transmodernity, both sides of the equation are important: Change has to be made and accommodated; but the fundamental tenets of culture and tradition, the source of its identity and meaning, remain the same. [20] (n.p.)

Sardar's words are optimistic, almost utopian I would say, much in line with Jeremy Rifkin's claim for global empathy. However, Sardar gives valuable directions for a globalised world to amend its many problems. Antoon's novel follows the lead, at least as long as it points to the risks of disregarding the principles of transmodern connectivity and raising borders.

Borders are demonic and operate in all scenarios, not only at an international level, as mentioned above. In fact, Jawad regrets the borders that divide the country: "I had come to a point where I hated everyone equally, Shiites and Sunnis alike. All these words were suffocating me: Shiite, Sunni, Christian, Jew, Mandaean, Yazidi, infidel" [1] (Loc. 1790). In short, the protagonist argues for a borderless Transmodernity. Yet, although the novel is not self-indulgent about Iraq internal divisions, the war against the country led by the USA and its allies only proves that the neo-colonial project has been updated to the new circumstances. For the project to be successful, borders must stand. Otherwise, if the binary does not hold any longer, there is no dialectic principle to validate and justify warfare. The success of the acculturation process has only increased after Saddam's fall. The novel does not uphold the dictator. But, if he founded his power on internal borders, they are still more numerous and efficient under foreign rule: "Baghdad in Saddam's time was a prison of mythic dimensions. Now the prison had fragmented into many cells with sectarian dimensions, separated by high concrete walls and bloodied by barbed wires" [1] (Loc. 2292).

2.4. Grievability When the State Violence Is Legimitised

War always edifies and reifies borders that set apart Us and Them, culture and savagery, state violence and terrorism, recognition and unaccountability, grievable and ungrievable lives. If the humanities have any sense nowadays, it is precisely to break with these binaries that uphold Arkoun's concept of the unthought, as well as supremacism and war in the context of Transmodernity.

This is, this article defends, one of the main targets of *The Corpse Washer*, namely highlighting the consequences of keeping with borders and the unthought. Judith Butler has for a long time tracked the concept of grievability. In her view, “the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a liveable life and a grievable death?” [21] (xiv–xv). From 9/11, this discourse that frames which lives can be recognised as lives and which ones cannot [22] (4), has justified terrorist attacks as well as state-sponsored violence, especially the invasion of sovereign states in the Middle East. Antoon’s novel addresses these ethical issues, namely what constitutes life and death and what implies loss and its grievability. Butler’s *Precarious Life* (2004) already deals with them, especially the suggestion “that specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living” [22] (1). Only if life is constituted as life, there can be loss and in consequence that loss can be grieved. However, this does not hold for Arabic countries as long as they are identified with terrorism, the unthought and lack of democracy. When the invaders constitute the invaded other as ‘bare life’ and the invaded countries as devoid of sovereignty, life and loss are cancelled. It follows that state violence, unlike terrorism, is justified and justifiable. This is, Butler argues and *The Corpse Washer* confirms, very problematic because the difference between both types of violence (whether wielded by regular military forces or terrorist groups) is hard to determine: “If state killing is justified by military necessity, then any and all sorts of state killing can be justified by this norm, including those that kill innocents, introduce fear into everyday life, violate private purposes, render public spaces insecure and produce infinitely coercive precautionary measures” [22] (155). How then is state-sponsored violence justified and life made ungrievable? As Antoon’s text shows, this is achieved by making the culture of the other unrecognisable. Ignorance and racism makes Iraqi culture unthinkable to the American invader (Loc. 1316). When the other is unrecognizable, his/her status is exceptional and extraordinary measures are applicable. Butler makes reference to the state of exceptionality the USA and its allies have established to legitimise the indefinite detention of alleged terrorists disregarding the Geneva Convention, all in the name of security [21] (51). This exceptionality, as practiced in Guantanamo ‘prisons’, has been extended to whole countries through wars that, opposed to the transmodern ethos, promote confrontation and misrecognition instead of formulas to meet the Other

2.5. Bare Lives, Political Denounce and Pessimism

As mentioned above, *The Corpse Washer* challenges the unthought, be it on the side of Islam or the West. Hence, the protagonist is critical with Iraqi propaganda [1] (Loc. 497) and terrorist groups using Islam to meet their political purposes [1] (Loc. 714). In arguing for art and the ancestral profession of mghassilchi as two sides of the same coin, the novel recognises life as always valuable as long as death and loss are ritualised and thus, granted meaning. What for Western television and Youtube viewers are just images of unrecognisable death is, in fact, rendered as liveable lives because they are grieveable and grieved. Thus, although “corpses piled up like goals scored by death on behalf of rabid teams in a never-ending game” (Loc. 1467), life still matters. The novel ‘celebrates’ the value of life even when death is redundant and Jawad can only come to terms with its traumatic undertones through nightmares (Loc. 1609). In fact, when Jawad’s father dies, his corpse is taken to his hometown as is customary, even though the trip is risky (880). This is the way the novel denounces how Iraqis are bare lives for the invaders and lived lives for themselves. Giorgio Agamben coined the term ‘bare life’ to address how contemporary culture uses one term for life whereas old Greeks used *zoe* (or strictly biological life) and *bios* (or way of life as citizen that exceeds the merely biological) [23]. In Agamben’s view, *bios* has been often suppressed and citizens have thus been reduced to *zoe* and, hence, are devoid of a political status. This reduction of humans to mere biological life that is supervised for the sake of biopower has been constant since old Rome (and its concept of the *Homo Sacer*) to current democracies. Indeed, he points to the current “vindication and liberation of *zoe*, and that it is constantly trying to transform its own bare life into a way of life

and to find, so to speak, the bios of *zoe*" [23] (9). Agamben's theory proves useful to understand the role of Iraqis in Antoon's novel, especially how they are controlled in a state of exception from abroad, devoid of their political body and 'downgraded' to their mere *zoe*. The raw corporeality of war victims is conspicuous when Jawad feels tortured, unable to forget "the smell or the sight of stray dogs devouring soldiers' bodies" [1] (Loc. 1594). Iraqis are not only reduced to meat for dogs, but are turned to pieces when mutilated and "hung ... from electricity posts" (1604). War transforms Iraqis into dehumanised objects, already dead and lost. Their liminal status can be approached from Butler's (un)grievability [21] (33–34). The transmodern connectivity falters and the Muslims are attacked on the grounds that they are the unrecognizable (hence ungrievable) non-human other. "Every moving object on that highway", Jawad explains, "became a target for the fighter jets and bombers which were hovering and hunting humans as if they were insects" [1] (Loc. 1589, my italics). Such 'dehumanization' and 'derealisation' of Iraqi people as if they were huntable animals make their lives meaningless for the invader. In uttering the facts so explicitly, the bareness of life and the taken-for-grantedness of death are all-too-vivid, a slap in the face of the reader: "If we, the living, are worthless, then what are the dead worth?" [1] (Loc. 1941).

The Corpse Washer mixes an apocalyptic scenario of mass death, black sky and black rain [1] (Loc. 821) with a poetical recalling of Iraqi traditions, corpse washing being just one of them. No matter how far Jawad is from those traditions, the protagonist is always respectful, even when he is a victim of them. Partly responsible of its own fate [1] (Loc. 817), the novel addresses the pernicious effect of war to accommodate the country to Western standards of living. The democratic *bios* the Americans want to force into the country is unfeasible precisely because it is enforced by a different culture. The fact that Western democracy is not easily implemented in the country does not mean Iraqis are aggressive extremists. Indeed, at the beginning of the war, the narrator recalls, they remain passive despite foreign attacks: "Soldiers were ordered to maintain a defensive posture and respond only if attacked. This is how we had many months of peace" [1] (784–788). Despite their attitude, the war continues until the Iraqis are dispossessed of their lives, their dead, their traditions and, finally, of their sovereignty and land. When Jawad's uncle Sabri comes back from Germany, he cannot believe that the man welcoming him to his own country is an American soldier [1] (Loc. 1141). Opposite to the constructive encounter between cultures, nations and peoples that Transmodernity announces and constitutes, war erases any possibility to meet the other beyond classic binaries. The assistant of Jawad's father dismantles the Western justification for the invasion and war. It is not for the good of the population but for other—mostly political and economic—reasons that the Iraqis are dispossessed of their own essence. It looks like, he says "these liberators want to humiliate us" [1] (Loc. 924). That is, the country's wounds are not healed, but exposed, when the country is theoretically liberated. The same goes for Sabri's words on the invasion. He claims that the invasion of Iraq responds to an unthought standpoint that feeds the unthought philosophy of Islamic radicals. Iraqis are violently dispossessed of their own country out of a supremacism that is at the heart of Modernity and which Transmodernity aims to erase. In trying to impose Western ideas on other territories, the disassociation between the values coming from abroad and those of the country clash and society itself enters a stage of schizophrenia, hating and engaging with their recent history. Sabri ruminates this idea when he argues: "These Americans, with their ignorance and racism, will make people long for Saddam's days" [1] (Loc. 1316). That a regime which dehumanizes its own citizens and establishes, drawing on Butler, who deserves to be mourned and who does not, may be longed for is very significant. The fact of being dispossessed by the other is especially problematic, and Sabri knows it all too well being an exile in Germany. Ignorance constitutes a key factor in this process of dispossession that the Western countries are operating in the Middle East. Reducing the Other's culture to a number of stereotypes against which you must react to guarantee safety is as dangerous as short-sighted. It is in this context that lives are not grievable because they do not fit Western standards and are hence uncontrollable.

Drawing on the apocalyptic tone mentioned above, the American military vehicle Humvee becomes a metaphor of annihilation. On his way to bury his father in his native Najaf, Jawad and two family friends come across one of these Humvees and some heavily armed soldiers controlling the road. The scene is very graphic, a massive American vehicle almost bumping into a ramshackle Iraqi car: “The Humvee continued to approach, looking like a mythical animal intent on devouring us” [1] (Loc. 899). With the barrel on top of the Humvee pointing to the threesome, the American soldiers search their car only to find a dead body. The apocalyptic in *The Corpse Washer* is very down to earth, people massacred and humiliated by foreign forces even in the most intimate act of burying and mourning their dead. The scene closes when, following the vehicles in the battalion, the Humvee “moved away and joined the rear, leaving a storm of dust behind” [1] (Loc. 920). Like the black rain before, this scene only confirms the sense of dispossession and dehumanization Iraqis must confront as a consequence of the war. They are deprived of *bios* and grievability and, hence, the possibilities of Transmodern connectivity are unfortunately cancelled.

3. Conclusions. Transmodern Optimism?

As the novel advances and the war ruins Jawad’s artistic aspirations, he wonders whether there is “a mysterious force” (Loc. 1653) controlling his destiny. Although tradition proves to be a condemnation for the protagonist, *The Corpse Washer* vindicates that same tradition as an alternative to the unthought of radical Islam. War destroys, but the cultural tradition that survives can and should amend what has been wounded. In a funeral towards the end of the novel, Jawad comes back to the Qur’an, not as a believer but as a man belonging in a culture worth appealing to:

The famous Egyptian recite al-Minshawi had just finished the Joseph chapter in his mesmerizing voice and started the Rahman chapter, which my father had loved. The waves in his voice would touch one’s soul gently at first and then pull it slowly until you found yourself suddenly at sea with nothing except the wind of the voice and the sails of the words. ‘*He created man from clay, like the potter*’ caught my attention. So, we, too, are statues, but we never stop crushing one another in the name of the one who made us. We are statues whose permanent exhibition is dust. [1] (Loc. 2137–2141)

It is worth reminding that Jawad’s coming back to his ancestors is the side-effect of a foreign invasion rather than the result of his own desires. At the very end, he still tries to leave Iraq. However, his is not an act of denial of his culture, but one of personal choice. In a vicarious fashion, *The Corpse Washer* rescues the remnants of a civilization that war has dismantled. For this to happen, the protagonist is sacrificed and hence the optimism of Transmodernity fades away. There is no real transcultural connectivity during the war, rather the opposite. Although the invaders and invaded share space and time, no trans-connection is possible. In fact, only death joins ones and others together. Jawad is a metaphor of the failure of Sardar’s Transmodernity, which is thus paradoxically vindicated. A transmodern scenario would not compel the main character to forcefully come back to tradition, but accommodate new ways of life (like the one Jawad aspires to) to it and vice versa. The protagonist’s predilection for sculpture is related to the beginning of life, creating life-inspired works as a sort of *demiourgos*. Yet, as a washer and shrouder, he is eventually related to death, especially war and annihilation. The protagonist’s relation with religion remains ambivalent. He revalues the soul-moving interpretation of al-Minshawi, and the obvious religious imagery of the dust. However, Jawad’s discourse does not forget the violence that religion engenders and the borders it raises, be it between Sunnis and Shiites, and between Western ‘rational’ Christianity and ‘irrational’ Islam.

The pomegranate is yet a final ambiguous metaphor in *The Corpse Washer*. In the preface, there is a reference to the Qur’an that reads: “In both gardens are fruit, palm trees, and pomegranates”. Along the novel, there are frequent references to the pomegranate as the tree of the Paradise. Drawing on Prophet Muhammad, the narrator says: “there is a seed from paradise in every pomegranate fruit” [1] (Loc. 2401). Likewise, the pomegranate is also related to fertility and (female) sexuality in Jawad’s discourse, his beloved Reem “standing in an orchard full of blossoming pomegranate trees” [1] (Loc. 1657). The symbology of the fruit becomes even more explicitly

sensual when Jawad approaches his beloved and sees “two pomegranates on her chest instead of her breasts” [1] (Loc. 1660). The pomegranate is not only an Arabic symbol, often represented in gardens on carpets [24] (n.p.), but a transcultural one. In *The Song of Songs*, the pomegranate “is often mentioned in allegories of love and as a metaphor for female beauty: ‘Your temples behind your veil are like the halves of a pomegranate’ (SS.4.3)” [24] (n.p.). Also Kabbalistic writings address the pomegranate as a “representation of the sphere linked to the divine” [24] (n.p.). All in all, the pomegranate stands for both mysticism and sensuality in symbolic terms in all the cultures of the Middle East: “This is because of the spherical structure of its fruit, its ruby red colour and the countless seeds it contains” [24] (n.p.). The recurrence of the fruit and the tree in *The Corpse Washer* is largely metaphorical. Drawing on its countless seeds, the pomegranate can transcend the religious and the culturally specific to evince the transcultural connectivity and recognition of Transmodernity. However, as mentioned above, the pomegranate is also a metaphor of death and annihilation in *The Corpse Washer*. There is one in the tiny garden of Jawad’s father’s mghaysil whose branches are used in the ritual of corpse washing. In fact, the tree lives on the water of death, which contrasts with the imagery of sensuality and connectivity mentioned above. The original title of the novel *Wahda-ha shajarat al-rumman*, being *Only the Pomegranate Tree*, points to this negative side of the metaphor. Thus, once again, the novel uses an ambivalent discourse to denounce a scenario of war where the unthought or uncritical Islam, violence, and unrecognizability still prevail. Jawad’s story bears witness to all this. Yet, in showing this apocalyptic scenario, the novel vindicates Transmodernity as a desirable, though distant, aspiration.

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