

Beyond Trauma: The Interplay between Memory, History, and Contemporaneity in Sinan Antoon's *Ya Maryam*

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Abstract: This paper discusses Sinan Antoon's novel *Ya Maryam* and its representation of contemporary Iraq in the wake of the tragic events that took place after the American occupation of Iraq in 2003. It sheds light on the sectarian crisis and the violent and atrocious events that turned Iraq into a minefield. The novel is more descriptive than prescriptive, not only allowing us to see the gloomy and violent reality of the present but also the tolerant past through the interplay between memory, history, and contemporaneity. Drawing on Pierre Nora's conceptualization of memory and moving beyond the opposition between history and memory, we argue that Antoon's use of intimate places and photographs allows him to bring both history and memory together as complementary records of the modern history of Iraq and as witness to that history. Through the generation gap between an uncle and his young niece, Antoon brings together Iraq as a single unified country through the reconciliation of past Iraq portrayed through the uncle's memory and present Iraq as seen in the eyes of the niece. This reconciliation aims to solidify the meaning of national identity that transcends religion and time and confirms the Iraqiness of all Iraqis. Though the novel ends graphically and tragically with the death of its main protagonist, Yousef, the trauma of his loss allows for the transformation of his niece and ends with the confirmation that Iraq is for all Iraqis irrespective of ethno-religious identity.

Keywords: history, Iraq, memory, photograph, religion, Sinan Antoon, *Ya Maryam*

1. Introduction

Due to the presence of the British mandate and colonial domination, the history of modern Iraq since its inception has been a series of violent and traumatic events, of revolutions and coup d'état, and of wars and massacres. It is within this historical and political context that Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi poet, novelist, translator, and scholar wrote *Ya Maryam*. Antoon was born and raised in Baghdad where he finished a B.A. in English at Baghdad University in 1990. He left to the United States after the 1991 Gulf War and obtained a doctorate in Arabic Literature in 2006 and has been living there since then. Antoon's identity is quite complex. Before leaving Iraq to the States, he was considered an Iraqi Christian; after leaving Iraq and settling in the States, he has acquired more of a diasporic hyphenated identity. He belongs to a large community of Arab-American writers but also to Iraqi-American writers whose novels are concerned with the social and political issues in his homeland, Iraq.

Antoon's novels depict the trauma and pain of modern Iraq reality. He "is one of many contemporary Iraqi authors who are asking to be heard to convey the troubled history of the whole country" (Habeeb 2015: 6). According to Habeeb, the prolonged years of wars, tyranny, embargo, and an ongoing civil war have a great impact on defining and shaping the content as well as the formal and stylistic techniques of Iraqi fiction. Fiction has become an essential tool to reveal the destruction of the country and the increasing annihilation of its inhabitants (2015: 7).

Therefore, his novels can be seen as part of what comes to be known as Iraqi war fiction, which tackles issues of political oppression and tyranny and the aftermath of Saddam Hussein's reign and cover the troubled and tumultuous history of Iraq or what Antoon calls in his first novel *I'jaam* "National hemorrhage" (2007: 54). These novels show the deteriorating situation and the move from the reign of terror and oppression to a life of destruction and looting, sectarian wars, and unemployment. Among the most known Iraqi war novels is Zainab Salbi's memoir *Between Two Worlds* (2006) which depicts the horror experienced by Iraqi citizens and those in direct contact with Saddam. The other one is the nightmarish recycling of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: Frankenstein in Bagdad* by Ahmed Saadawi (2013) that follows the synthetic body assembled from the parts of the Iraqi victims and his revenge on those terrorists and corrupt government officials who are behind the death of each of the bodies from which he has assembled his parts. A third one is *The American Granddaughter* (2011) that discusses the various reactions to the American invasions. The three novels are representative of the various approaches or topics that dealt with the post-Saddam era.

Antoon's four novels follow suit. They were published in the following order: *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* (2002), *The Corpse Washer* (2010), *Ya Maryam* (2012), and *Fihras* (2016). This paper focuses on Antoon's third novel *Ya Maryam*. However, it would be hard to read the first three novels without noticing their historical and political trajectory. It is as if they were on a relay race and each narrative was passing on the baton to the next one, covering different parts of the modern Iraqi history and politics. It is as if Antoon was chronicling the history of oppression and trauma in Iraq. In *I'jaam*, he covers the three decades under Saddam Hussein's reign. In *The Corpse Washer*, he covers a larger period of time from the 1980s, beginning with the war with Iran and then with Kuwait, ending with the US invasion of Iraq. In *Ya Maryam*, he widens the scope and the historical period references, spanning a period from the 1941, Iraqi coup d'état, to 2010. His first three novels can be seen as trilogy of pain, trauma, and realization.

The traumatic aspects of the first two novels have been tackled in detail in Habeeb's paper "Writing Trauma in Iraq: Literary Representations of War and Oppression in the Fiction of Sinan Antoon." Habeeb sheds light on trauma, showing "the way each one of them focuses on one or more symptoms associated with traumatic disorder" (Habeeb 2015: 7). In contrast, *Ya Maryam* moves beyond trauma and focuses on the intimate places of memory to stress the protagonist's sense of belonging and confirm his Iraqi identity in the midst of all the destruction and annihilation. Despite Antoon's choice of a Christian protagonist and his

discussion of sectarian wars and religious violence, he says something different from the previous two novels which mainly stress the trauma inflicted on Christians. In *Ya Maryam*, he does not focus on trauma but subtly tackles the question of religion, a very sore and sensitive topic and succeeds in neutralizing it. He conflates history and memory to bring to the fore the pre-sectarian reality of Iraq that transcends the religious and political affiliations for the sake of an inclusive national identity. The fulcrum of the novel is the house and the photographs. The house is a symbol of Iraq, and the photographs are *les lieux de memoire et histoire* (the places of memory and history, on which the paper will focus). Through these symbols, Antoon brings the private and public together to counter the bloody and traumatic reality of contemporary Iraq, using a complex and nonlinear narrative.

To capture the complexity of the contemporary Iraqi politico-religious scene, Antoon's *Ya Maryam* is a polyvocal, non-linear, and multi-perspectival novel. It focuses on one Christian family and traces the events that take place on one day thus echoing James Joyce's *Ulysses*, as if Antoon's narrative calls for a modern rereading of the contemporary Iraqi scene. It is divided into five chapters. Two chapters, the first and the third, are narrated by the main character, Yousef, and are given the same title: "To Live in the Past"; they are separated by a third person omniscient narrative, which takes us on a historical tour through Yousef's photographs, which are already mentioned to us by Yousef at the end of the first chapter. This second chapter titled "Photographs" gives us a historical, chronological survey starting when Iraq was in its embryonic stage as a nation-state. It presents Iraq's tumultuous history in the 20th century and the various regimes: the monarchy (1921-1958), the first republic (1958-1963), dictatorship, until we get to the watershed moment, which is that of 2003. The penultimate chapter, "The Sad Mother," is narrated by Maha, Yousef's niece. And finally, the last chapter, chapter 5, "Mass (The Holy Sacrifice)" is narrated once again by the omniscient narrator.

This paper draws on Pierre Nora's concept of history and memory, seeing them as allies not opposites. We argue that through this reconciliation between history and memory, Antoon solidifies the meaning of national identity that transcends religion and time and confirms the Iraqiness of all Iraqis. The novel acts as a powerful witness to the atrocities that are taking place in contemporary Iraq, depicting the sufferings and systematic expulsion of Iraqi Christians, the politicization of religion, and its exploitation in breaking up Iraq and liquidating it. However, this dramatization of such atrocities is mainly used as a contrast to a relatively safe and tolerant Iraq where Iraq belongs to all. The novel unfolds this in two ways: first, through the two main characters where each one is representing a period: the uncle, the past, and the niece, the present and their heated discussions of religion; second, through photographs and remembrance. This leads to the confirmation of the Iraqiness of the Iraqi Christians and the sacrificial act that will transform Maha's trauma and violent reaction to drama and calculated action. We use the concept of Iraqiness in the same way used by Tahrir Hamdi as a means of uniting Iraqis and enabling them "to take part in a common heritage and believe in shared Iraqi values" (2016: 37).

2. *Lieux de memoire et histoire*

Acting as a witness to the past and present, *Ya Maryam* uses memory as a means to map out the history of Iraq. For “The quest for memory is the search for one’s history” (Nora 1989: 13). Therefore, memory becomes the way of recalling the past as a complementary method to history and a counterforce to the present. To clarify this point, we draw upon Nora’s concept of *les lieux de memoire*. The term was coined by the French historian Pierre Nora who developed his theory of *les lieux de memoire* in his introduction to a seven-volume study of France’s history and national memory. He “examines the polarization so often established between abstract, intellectual history and the affective stuff of memory” (Fabre 1994: 6,7), between official and unofficial history, which he compares to history and memory respectively. According to him, history is a “reconstruction” and “a representation of the past” (1989: 8). It has a conspiratorial role whose task is to suppress, destroy, and annihilate memory and what has taken place in reality (Nora 1989: 9). On the contrary, memory defies fixed structures and subversively works through history to sift and sort historical traces that history has already destroyed (Nora 1989: 8). His theory works well in showing the discrepancy between the official history as told by those in power and the unofficial history of the marginalized and oppressed. However, *Ya Maryam* moves beyond the opposition between history and memory. It demonstrates a kind of collaboration between the two. For even though, “Memory attaches itself to sites, whereas history attaches itself to events”, in *Ya Maryam* both history and memory are brought together to create a continuum “for there to be a sense of the past there had to be a ‘before’ and an ‘after’” (Nora 1989: 22,16).

Therefore, the main dichotomy in *Ya Maryam* is not between history and memory but between a relatively safe and optimistic past and an insecure and bitter present. The novel talks about Yousef, an octogenarian who is hosting in his house distant relatives and is preparing for the anniversary of the death of his sister Hannah. The novel begins with recalling the incidents of the previous night’s heated discussion about the current violent situation in Iraq. It begins with the disagreement between Yousef and Maha, his relative and ends in the church with reconciliation at a very dear price, the death of Yousef. Between the dispute and the death of the protagonist, Antoon, through bringing past and present, through a series of remembrance, conflating history and memory, and through loss, discusses issues of identity, tolerance, and resistance in the face of effacement, violence, and resignation.

3. The past/present dichotomy

The novel begins with Maha’s words “You live in the past, ‘Ammo⁽¹⁾” that reverberate throughout the novel. Her words pave the way for the past/present comparison. This comparison acts as a counterforce opposing the systematic destruction of Iraq, which the novel does through a series of subtle choices and careful representations to forge a counternarrative that exposes the lies and fabrications of various political forces. These forces want to transform Iraq into total chaos, cleansing it of any Iraqi that does not fit the politico-religious agenda.

The first thing that the novel tries to undermine and refute is the Islamic-Christian schism. This is shown throughout the novel. The novel begins with a clear disagreement and heated discussion between Maha and her distant uncle, 'Ammo Yousef, who, unlike Maha, believes that what happens in Iraq affects Muslims before Christians and considers the two as victims of conspiracies that fueled their conflicts. According to Yousef, those who emigrated from Iraq did not do that because of religious and sectarian conflict but mainly because of political reasons that seem to instigate as well as exacerbate the religious and sectarian conflicts. Yousef's moderation, maturity, and poise allow him to "speak about issues of injustice and suffering. . . within a context that is amply situated in history, culture and socio-economic reality" (Said 2003: xviii).

This apprehension allows Antoon to bring up at an early stage the question of religion. For Maha, religion is her term of reference where she sees the world in terms of us vs. them, Christians and Muslims, a colonial opposition that Yousef does not apply in his national context. For Yousef, the problem is more than religion. It has to do with politics and interests. He is aware of the political situation and the deception of the common people. Thus, he does not blame a single religion rather he acknowledges the difficult position of Christians within the politico-religious agenda of Iraq. In the following exchange from Chapter One, Yousef and his relatives, Maha and Louay, are discussing the situation of Tariq Aziz, who was the Deputy Prime Minister (1979–2003) and a close advisor of President Saddam Hussein, and the possibility of his execution:

"Had he [Aziz] been one of them, they wouldn't execute him. But, of course, because he is Christian, his blood is cheap."

I answered her calmly, "What about those who were executed before him, who were they? They were all Muslims. He is the first and last Christian sentenced to death."

"Dear, they are executing us everywhere without trial and nobody objects. Churches are being burned and people are forced to immigrate, and they are killing us right, left, and center."

"Not only are churches being burnt. The mosques that have been burnt are many more, and Muslims who have been killed are in thousands."

"Let them kill themselves and leave us alone. We have nothing to do with it."

"It is not about us having something or nothing. The problem is because there is no state, and minorities can only be protected under a strong state.

We don't have either party or militia or water melon" (2012: 24-25).

Then Louay, Maha's husband, makes a comment saying that Muslims do not want them in the country. To this Yousef responds: "How come? This country is for all. It is our country and our grandparents'. We were here before others and history proves that. . . museums act as a witness to that. We are here before others. If it is not our country, whose country is it? Tell me" (2012: 26).

What this dialogue presents is the ability of the religious and sectarian struggle to take a deeper turn and wipe out the national identity. This is done in quite a complex way; when killing takes place, both the killer and the killed are

Iraqis. Maha, who is seeking justice and is thinking in terms of binary opposites: us (Christians) vs. them (Muslims), does not realize that and blames it all on religion. She is directed by her own crisis and ignorance of the past without realizing the complexities of the struggle, the war, and the forces that led and shaped them. Throughout the novel we keep having echoes of this initiating incident, which keeps the focus of attention on what Antoon believes religion to be: a red herring.

However, her accusation of Yousef as someone stuck in the past makes him reflect on that and pave the way for a subtle and thematic turn in the narrative that represents his dear past that he is fighting to protect. He admits that he has a long history to cherish while she does not. The following interior monologue, worth quoting at length, clearly captures the main thrust of the narrative and paves the way for the transformation of Maha, who will eventually adopt Yousef's view and vicariously relive his past:

Has the past really died so I can't live in it? Isn't the past continual and alive in some way, coexisting with the present and fighting with it? Or is it locked up in the framed photographs hanging on the walls of the house and kept in albums? Didn't she stand for a long time in front of the hanging photographs and ask me more than once about the members of her family standing within their frames? Where did life take them, or how and when did death snatch them away? Didn't she ask me to tell her the stories that the photographs store? I always responded enthusiastically, coloring it in detail, and sometimes following the threads that link it to other photographs. Or the one that connects them with other tales not caught by the camera's eye, stories hung in my memory with sighs and smiles, and others preserved in an archive guarded by the heart.

Am I really escaping from the present to the refuge of the past, of which she accused me? What is wrong with that, even if it is true, if the present is booby-trapped and full of explosions, killing and ugliness? Perhaps the past was like the garden of the house that I love and take care of as if it were my own daughter. I escape to it from the noise of the world and its ugliness. It is a paradise in the heart of hell or "autonomous area" as I sometimes call it. I will defend it because she and the house are all I have left.

I must forgive her, for her time is not my time, and her youth is not my youth. She opened her green eyes to wars and sieges and tasted at an early stage scarcity and homelessness. As for me, I lived in good times, and I still remember them and believe that they are true (2012: 10-11).

It is Maha, after all, who is interested in the past in her insistence to know what stories these photographs store. By doing so, she triggers and prods memory and remembrance and opens the way for the past to alleviate the pains of the present.

4. History and memory: Photographs and remembrance

This sense of the past is preserved by the photographs, which "fight against effacement and oblivion" and capture "the fragile and unstable nature of life itself,

of its traces and evidences” (Taminiaux 2009: 10) and attach themselves to both sites and events. Each one, records history and takes us through Yousef’s memory to various lieux de mémoire – such as the house, the church, and various neighborhoods – allowing us to access very intimate places that reveal the true nature of the Iraqis. These lieux de mémoire along with history associated with them, as history is one of the methods for enhancing a sense of belongingness (Tuan 1989: 6), allow him to solidify his sense national identity.

The most intimate place is the house, which according to Gaston Bachelard, “is our corner of the world. . . our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word (1994: 4). It is the site “of our intimate lives” (Bachelard 1994: 8). Thanks to it, “a great many of our memories are housed” (Bachelard 1994: 8). It is in Chapter Two that a great many of Yousef’s memories are housed. What begins as an accusation “You live in the past” is now animated through photographs and brought to life to give accountability and legitimacy to Yousef’s analysis of the status quo of Iraq. The “Photographs” Chapter is divided into 15 parts showing chronologically Yousef’s life, his family, and the political history of Iraq. These photographs act like a family album that “expresses the essence of social memory” (Bourdieu 1990: 30). Pierre Bourdieu (1990) further argues that:

The images of the past arranged in chronological order, the logical order of social memory, evoke and communicate the memory of events which deserve to be preserved because the group sees a factor of unification in the monuments of its past unity or – which amounts to the same thing – because it draws confirmation of its present unity from its past (31).

This is what is highlighted and seems to reflect the deep-rooted conviction to which Yousef adheres.

This Chapter seems to do also what Nora claims memory help us do “the decipherment of what we are in the light of what we are no longer” (1989: 18). Yousef acts as a historian whose integration of history and memory brings about a “new type of historian” who “is ready to confess the intimate relation he maintains to his subject” (Nora 1989: 18). Therefore, “the historian has become no longer a memory-individual but, in himself, a *lieu de mémoire*” (1989: 18), i.e., a site/place of history. Each photograph takes the form of memory and memory in Nora’s words “takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects” (1989: 9). It is in these sites that the quest for memory becomes the search for one’s history (Nora 1989: 13). It brings together identities and memories. These important entities according to Eleni Bastéa, “are not things we think *about*, but things we think *with*” (2004: 8). Therefore, the abstract ideas and remembered incidents from the past that Yousef discussed earlier are rendered concrete and projected physically in the shapes of photographs in Chapter Two, solidifying what he has been talking about, proving its reality and endowing it with value. For the photograph according to Roland Barthes (1981), “does not necessarily say *what is no longer*, but only and for certain *what has been*” (85), and what has been shows how Yousef’s personal

history reflects the collective history of Iraq. These photographs act as the witness to that history, transforming Yousef to an historian and curator who protects this past and acts as a counterforce to the destructive forces of the present.

The first photograph shows Yousef when he was eight years old as part of his family photograph. It is dated in 1941 one Friday, months earlier from the coup by Rashid Ali al-Kaylani. The date therefore registers the Iraqi attempts to limit British influence in Iraq and to create the first independent Arab nation (Hunt 2005: 71). This date is further emphasized by the reference to the date of his father's death, 1957, one year before the revolution of 1958, a year celebrated in Iraq as Iraqi Independence Day (Hunt 2005: 76). By dating Yousef's memory to such moments of high hopes, Antoon makes "a shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to remembrance" (Nora 1989: 15). For memory "is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural, and yet individual" (Nora 1989: 9). Hence, these photographs, which become lieux de memoire et histoire provide a deep psychological evidence of what Yousef has been trying to show to Maha in Chapter One.

In his heated discussion in Chapter One with Maha, Yousef tries to show her that what is happening in Iraq is not what we see but rather what we are made to see, for: "The process of 'forming a community' in the new land [occupied land] necessarily meant *unforming* or re-forming the communities that existed there already, and involved a wide range of practices including trade, plunder, negotiation, warfare, genocide, enslavement and rebellions" (Loomba 1998: 2). This is something Yousef is aware of, but Maha cannot see. There is a systematic destruction that has been going on that precedes the present moment and has a long history. It is implied in a subtle way. The present might be chaotic and callous, but, Iraq, as seen through the eyes of Yousef, is an intimate place with history and memory. It is his. He belongs to it as much as it belongs to him. The photograph/history-memory collaboration in this chapter plays a pivotal role for understanding the main theme of the novel. For these sites of memory and history "are mixed, hybrid, mutant, bound intimately with life and death, with time and eternity; enveloped in a Möbius strip of the collective and the individual, the sacred and the profane, the immutable and the mobile" (Nora 1994: 295).

In these photographs that become sites as well as witnesses of the past, we are transported into the past to attend Yousef's baptism, who is called the son of Nakhil⁽²⁾ (palm trees). Of course, the emphasis on nakhil, palm trees, is a reminder of the Iraqiness of Iraq. In these photographs which are mixed and hybrid we encounter the various ethnicities and religions that make up Iraq. His parents are Chaldean. They came from the north, from Tal Kayf, historically the center of the Chaldean Catholic community of Iraq, located in Nineveh Governorate. We also have the photographer who is Armenian and his friends: one is Muslim, and the other is Jewish. We also hear about the Naurouz and the Kurdish language which his two sisters learned when they moved to study in Sulaymaniyah. Moreover, no

one can read the photographs without seeing how they trace the history of Iraq. This is shown in part five where we have a series of photographs depicting the changes that take place in the political sphere and regimes. These pictures cover forty years, from Abdelkarim Kasim's reign to Saddam Hussein's.

The death of his first family member, his brother, in 1990, is also registered by the photographs. This death signals the beginning of deterioration for Iraq. It portrays the Iraq invasion of Kuwait, and the beginning of a long history of diaspora. The diaspora is depicted in mentioning, Basil, his brother's grandson, who comes as a foreigner to his country with a group of political activists to offer aide to Iraq. The photographs stop at 2003, the end of the reign of Saddam Hussein and the beginning of a more painful phase.

5. Religious coexistence

However, the photographs seem to beckon to an important and serious issue: coexistence between Muslims and Christians. This is shown in the last picture, which Yousef hides in a drawer. Coexistence lies at the heart of *Ya Maryam*. The novel shows it on more than one level. First on the level of the names designated to the main characters. Second, in its depiction of the intimate relationships between Muslims and Christians through love, friendship, and neighborhood.

As for names, both Yousef and Maryam are names with long and symbolic history and both are acknowledged in Islam and Christianity, representing the intersection between the two. Yousef is the Arabic name of Joseph who is a prophet and the son of a prophet in both the Old Testament and the Quran. He is also the husband of Mary and the earthly father of Jesus in the New Testament. In all these religious narratives, he is known for his integrity and honesty. Maryam is the Arabic name of virgin Mary. In the Quran two chapters are entirely dedicated to *Yousef* and *Maryam*, chapter 12 and chapter 19 respectively. Yousef is the archetype of forgiveness, his story in the Quran as well as in both the Old Testament and the New one attests to that, showing his integrity and his selflessness. Maryam is the only woman mentioned in the Quran by name and has been treated differently: "O Mary [Maryam], indeed Allah has chosen you and purified you and chosen you above the women of the worlds" (*The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* 2006: 3. 42). However, the novel is not trying to identify these two major characters according to religion or subscribe them to one religion over the other. The Yousef and Maryam represented in the novel are Iraqi citizens. For Yousef is an Iraqi Yousef, his epithet attests to that for he is Ibn al-Nakhl, the son of palm trees, the symbol of Iraq, and Maryam is bluntly identified in the novel under the epitaph mentioned earlier as Iraqi Maryam.

In choosing to call his protagonist Yousef, Antoon is making use of the historical as well as religious baggage attached to the name. His name implies the conspiracy that was planned by Yousef's brothers against him. Moreover, his "ex-centric" character as someone who is outside the circle of mainstream belief and perspective, makes him in double jeopardy with his Christian community and with the Muslim community(ies); he is neither this nor that. The familial tension which starts the novel between him and Maha and the heated discussion between him and

his sister Hannah⁽³⁾ while she was alive about the Quranic version of Maryam's story highlight his different and objective stance and subtly marginalize the Muslim-Christian dichotomy. This shows how the novel adopts an Islamic-Christian stance that advocates acceptance, respect, and coexistence, not favoring any religion over the other.

The second level on which the novel depicts coexistence is through love, friendship, and neighborhood, which act as counterforce and antidote to any exclusive and hate speech discourse. We hear about love in the second part of the novel where the unidentified narrator is presenting the various photographs of Yousef's family members, showing the deterioration of the Christian situation in Iraq and the movement from coexistence to diaspora. He ends the chapter with Dalal, the Muslim lady whom he loved. Dalal's presence in the section where the familial and national narrative is being disclosed is meaningful. Love when it happens seems to fall outside human boundaries but is still subjugated to them. Yousef's mature perspective grasps this and therefore despite his inability to unite with his beloved because of religion, he never presents this failure as a case against Muslims. He knows how to differentiate between what is normal and what is abnormal.

Chapter Two, which ends with his love of Dalal paves the way for the Chapter Three, which begins with his Muslim friend, Sadoun, his drinking buddy. He describes his friend and shows how close he is to him. He attended Hannah's funeral, read the Fatiha (the first chapter (*surah*) in the Quran) twice, and helped him in burying her. Their enduring relationship is a witness to the long peaceful and brotherly coexistence in Iraq. Moreover, Sadoun allows Yousef to deal with Maha's sharp reactions and to moderate his judgement accordingly. He clarifies to Yousef that the problem with Maha is that of age not religion. He tells Yousef, "Not all people are optimistic like you. Tell me, from where would they bring all this optimism like yours? What will save us from these vagabonds, rotten thieves, these turban people. It is going to be a year now, a whole year, and they can't form a government" (2012: 80-81).

Even Maha within her traumatic narrative of recollection and of tracing hers and her family's plight in Chapter Four is still able to refer objectively and warmly to her Muslim neighbor Abu-Mohamad. In her narrative, she recalls the very emotional, compassionate, and genuine farewell of their Muslim neighbor, Abu-Mohamad, that her father reports to them, when they are forced to leave their hometown. Her father tells them how Abu-Mohamad apologetically hugs him with eyes full of tears. Her father calms him down and pats him on his shoulder, compassionately excusing him and telling him: "Why are you saying so? What is your fault?" to this Abu-Mohamad responds, "We didn't take good care of you, Abu-Maha; we didn't take good care of you. You are supposedly entrusted to us." Her father calms him down and says, "We haven't taken good care of Iraq...all of us" (2012: 121-22). This scene, coming from Maha, herself, shows the importance of foregrounding the national and human over the familial and religious, stressing the tolerance of Islam and the peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims.

Thus, coexistence becomes the thread that weaves the novel together and presents these moments of bonding and neighborly love and acceptance between Muslims and Christians away from the immoral and violent world of politics.

6. The Iraqiness of Iraqi Christians

The novel has succeeded in establishing this kind of coexistence between Muslims and Christians, despite some disagreements or obstacles. This is manifested in its multi-perspectivism and polyvocality which preserve that tension and allows for more dramatic complexity. This is depicted in Maha's interview after the explosions and the death of Yousef, where the new Maha, like the phoenix, rising from its own ashes and miseries, presents the real and genuine picture of the legitimate identity of the Iraqi Christians. She believes that the root cause of the conflict lies in the way the state administers its duty towards its citizens. She blames the Iraqi government for its inefficiency and dysfunctionality. Therefore, her words do not carry any accusatory tone to the religious and sectarian conflicts the Iraqis as citizens are all suffering from. Her view becomes more analytical and logical, acquiring much more an efficient lens that helps her to read between the lines. It is as if she realizes what Robert Fisk means when he explains what Bush's administration is doing in Iraq:

America, Bush was now telling his people, 'is confronting terrorists in Iraq and Afghanistan . . . so our people will not have to confront terrorist violence in New York or . . . Los Angeles.' So that was it, then. Draw all these nasty 'terrorists' into our much-loved, 'liberated' Iraq, and they would obligingly leave the 'homeland' alone (Fisk 2005: 1252).

Her transformation is shown in the interview through two points. The first one is in her admission and declaration of the dysfunctionality of the state, which is the main reason behind the conflict in Iraq, expressed clearly in her accusations of the Iraqi government for not taking immediate action to save the day:

The question is why they waited all that time to come. Had they moved fast, they would have saved a lot of lives of those who were bleeding and would have survived had they been taken care of. Casualties would have been much fewer. I, myself, consider the Iraqi governmental responsible for this. How could these terrorists succeed in crossing check points carrying such ammunition? Where is the national security which they brag about? I'm sure there has been some collusion and neglect (2012: 154).

The second one is in highlighting her long past and heritage in Iraq. It seems that this traumatic experience has opened her eyes to the reality of situation:

They want us out of Iraq. They say that we are crusaders, and we collaborate with colonizers. This is all lies and forging of history without any proof. We did not come on tanks from outside as those who claim to be more patriotic than us. We are supported by no one: neither Iran, Saudi Arabia, nor America. America never aided us; on the contrary, they made our situation worse. At the end, we only have God and our faith. We did not come from outside; we have been here for centuries. Let everybody

hear: our history as well as ruins are our witness; our monasteries and ruins still exist and not only in the north; they are everywhere in Iraq . . . We only want to live in peace; our religion is that of peace, and this is all what I want to say (2012: 154-55).

From these two major transformational signs we can trace Maha's change in perspective and in language. The perspectival change is in her analysis of the root cause of the problem. In doing so she echoes Yousef's earlier point of view when he tries unsuccessfully to convince her and her husband, Louay, that the problem is not between Muslims and Christians but is in the state itself. The other significant change is in her confirmation of her roots in Iraq, somehow realizing the legitimacy of the past in which Yousef believes. She expresses the same thing she blames him for when she accuses him of living in the past, the past which is a major motif in the novel and the point that Maha has been missing throughout the narrative. She succeeds in recovering her past, for that invisible past to her has become visible, and she has become its spokesperson. Her words reflect Yousef's view that Iraqi Christians should not leave Iraq for they have been the earliest people who dwelled in Iraq. She again echoes in verbatim Yousef's words earlier when he tries to convince her and Louay, of the legitimacy of Christian Iraqis in Iraq: "How come? This country is for all. It is our country and our grandparents" (2012: 26).

7. Conclusion: The sacrificial act

To explain this point further, we believe that the novel is trying to address the political situation of Iraq through a theological allegory but in a subversive, subtle way. It is obvious that despite the novel's Christian focus, the novel adopts a rather Islamic-Christian stance that advocates acceptance, respect, and coexistence, not favoring any religion over the other. The most obvious evidence is revealed through the choice of both Yousef, the protagonist of the novel, and Maryam, the title of the novel.

The very structure of the novel draws attention to the modern and symbolic re-crucifixion of Christ. This is shown in the epigraph at the beginning of the novel, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not," making Yousef another Christ figure, and ends with *The Sacrificial Offering*, the sacrificial death of Yousef/Christ. Such a narrative definitely draws attention to the idea of the original sin and the need for the son of God to be sacrificed on behalf of humanity to redeem such a fallen existence. It depicts Iraq as a fallen place, profaned by the endless and relentless drive to kill and desecrate its existence. But within the logic of the novel and its focus on the national such an adaptation carries an extra meaning.

It is in the modern Iraq with all the atrocities that take place that the Christ figure becomes ahistorical figure exploited to support the colonial distorted and distorting perspective. Hence, the novel does not end with Maha's interview, but with a coda that clearly sheds light on this vicious and horrific reality we have reached. The anonymous narrator tells us that Yousef's body was lying on the floor for more than four hours, surrounded by body parts and pools of blood. He dies because of a direct shot to his heart which silenced him. However, "before the bullet silenced his heart, his lips had whispered "Ya Maryam" without finishing his

sentence. His eyes remained open even as they were drowning in the darkness of death" (2012: 156). "Ya Maryam" which becomes the very title of the novel and the cry that keeps reverberating and reminding us of the need to pray and eventually act to save our humanity. In the sacrificial offering of Yousef, the novel through trauma of loss allows for the transformation of Maha. By doing so, it reinstates human dignity and refuses to succumb to the status quo, offering a note of hope amid all the suffering, trauma, and displacement.

The unfinished sentence that ends the life of Yousef ties us to the eternal present that memory allows us to experience (Nora 1989: 8). At this point, the purpose of the photograph of Maryam as the lieu de memoire is fully realized: "to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial [. . .] to capture a maximum of meaning in the fewest of signs" (Nora 1989: 19). At this point, Antoon begins the story of remembering/ re-membering, allowing himself an eternal membership of his national identity as an Iraqi.

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Endnotes

¹ 'Ammo in Arabic means uncle. It is used both as term of respect and endearment. Whenever we refer to Yousef in relation to Maha, we will call him 'Ammo Yousef, otherwise we will call him Yousef.

²Historically speaking, the palm tree has always been associated with Iraq. In the following extract from al-Mutanabi, he refers to Iraq as the land of palm:
My tarrying in the land of Nakhla
is as nothing but the Messiah's dwelling among the Jews (Arberry 20)

³Hannah is also the name of Virgin Mary's mother. Mark the religious symbolism of her name.

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