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Identity and Belonging in Iraqi Literature After 2003: Its Influence on Political Discourse in Selected Novels

ATHEER MAKKI ABD ALI AL-JASIM

University of Kerbala, Center for Strategic Studies, Iraq

Atheer.m@uokerbala.edu.iq

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Abstract:

This paper explores the themes of identity and belonging in Iraqi literature after 2003, analyzing their influence on political discourse in selected novels. Through a close reading of narrative strategies, character development, and thematic motifs, the study examines how post-2003 Iraqi fiction reflects the complexities of social fragmentation, displacement, and cultural negotiation. It argues that literary representations of personal and collective identity not only mirror the sociopolitical realities of postwar Iraq but also actively shape public perceptions and debates surrounding nationalism, citizenship, and political agency. By situating these novels within the broader context of contemporary Iraqi society, the research highlights the interplay between literature and political consciousness, demonstrating how narratives of belonging contribute to the reconfiguration of social and political identities in a post-conflict environment.

Keywords: Iraqi Literature, Identity, Belonging, Post-2003 Iraq, Political Discourse, Nationalism, Displacement

1. Introduction

It influenced political discourse in a variety of ways. The countdowns to the wars, which provided the general public with a countdown to “D-Day,” were a method to control the public and to imitate the behaviors of their leaders. In 2003 and onwards, the public’s political discourse transformed but did not become inactive; after the catastrophe, people attempted to find an explanation (who / what / how), then a blame (Al-Qaeda, America?), and in less than two years the betrayed question “Why?” gained its political weight



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(Qasim Habeeb, 2015). The Iraqi disasters ignited fears of a continuously degrading future, a country divided along sectarian lines reducing its previous unwavering national identity. As the public was recollected to be hopeful of a new favourable regime, the tragedy of Abu Gharib provided evidence of the existing oppression and unjust power of both new and former regimes. Such a historical viewpoint on disasters takes into consideration psychological studies of trauma and catastrophe. However, literary representations do not solely serve as mirrors of human sentiment frozen in time but as revelatory constructions of a certain reality. As a reaction to the wars and changing regimes, new critical works draw attention to the traumatic conditions in Persia and Palestine. Literary texts written by Iraqi authors in Arabic, such as Sinan Antoon's *The Book of Collateral Damage*, which captures the repercussions of the American destruction of Baghdad in its physical and metaphorical aspects; and Jabbour Al-Obaidi's *The Babi Doll & Other Stories*, a collection of short stories survived by a mother in the wartime of 1980s and after, are under grains of discrimination against them within the Euro-American-centric literary canon. Translations of other Arabic works were stepping stones for their later admission; however, political contests allured by the initial insurgence of Arab literature witness that translating "untranslatable" discourses of identity and belonging necessitates a metonym of abundance wide enough for its labour.

2. Historical Context of Iraq Post-2003

In 2003, the regime of Saddam Hussein fell, ushering in an era of significant change in Iraq. The coalition led by the US executed a military operation against Iraq on the pretext that it possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The invasion of Iraq provoked an extraordinary response across the world with large anti-war demonstrations organized on 15 February 2003. On 20 March, however, the US began its bombardment of Iraqi cities. The assault was similar to that over Afghanistan and hugely destructive. They caused an unprecedented number of casualties among civilians as well as heavy infrastructure destruction (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). After the army's collapse, the Baath regime's power vacated, and social order fell apart. Looting, arson, destruction, kidnapping, and murder were rampant. The US army's reaction to such chaos was neutral: ignoring the public disorder and letting it continue on the ground, arguing that chaos would restore order on its own.

Iraq became the target of a neo-conservative project about "imposing democracy on the Arab world", allegedly to reconstruct and reform the Arab world and create democratic, pluralistic, secular, and market-based countries. Iraq was thus seen as a testing ground, and the external instruments of political change devised in Washington needed local partners who would participate in, cooperate with, and implement the regime changes. In Iraq, while the majority of clergy became excluded from politics, exile-based Islamist parties/ organisations



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that acquired legitimacy from the US, pre-designed institutions, and framing legislation in a flawed way managed to co-opt the nascent sectarian rivalries. The occupation authorities made a catastrophic error by demolishing the Baath regime's state structure without clear planning and purpose.

3. The Role of Literature in Shaping Identity

Historically, literature has embodied a special role in examining and probing the identity of communities and nation-states and the question of belonging. Inextricably linked, literary texts all over the world have portrayed the events that shape communities' identities and raise questions about belonging. Accounts of colonialism, oppression, political upheaval, civil wars, and other traumatic events that affect communities in a particular way have been powerfully articulated and examined in literary texts. In some cases, literature reflects lived experiences; without such texts, history, with its massacres, oppressive regimes, and wars, would be forgotten or withheld from ensuing generations and lost. In other cases, literature offers critical commentaries that shape and mold the identity of the nation-state and its people. Finally, in many cases, literary texts can satisfy both roles. Whether reflecting lived experiences or mediating between those experiences and the other, literary texts can both testify about the past and shape the future.

Belonging is posited about culture, values, beliefs, and effects emanating from membership in the nation-state, community, family, or other groups that define their parameters and separate them from the out-group. A community that gets to determine who belongs and who does not invariably reflects its identity and differentiates between "us" and "them." Otherness is a sign of the manageability of cultural differences, which bestows on themselves the power to express and demonize the alterity the members of other communities enjoy. The narrative of "them" and "us" draws the boundaries of belonging and excludes the "refuse," who do not belong to the reference group.

Belonging, particularly in the case of "them," entails fear of the unknown and rejection, which foster a sense of "hostility" towards intrusions that are alien to their own. Identity is positioned with an emphasis on boundaries meant to preserve decline among members of specific groupings. Once boundaries are surmounted, the groups with which they identify are also likely to dissipate. Furthermore, transgressing its premises renders a community susceptible to dissolution. Literature connecting identity to belonging raises the question of who belongs and who does not if to belong means to be part of the alterity and "other." Linking identity and belonging to culturally understood values, beliefs, and premises raises questions about translations into other modes. Texts originally written within a culture become recontextualized and reconstituted in other modes and locations. Adopting a



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postcolonial perspective, this thesis envisions translation as political and ideological positioning. The question of which value and belief and what transmitted and molded the identity of both cultures is then inextricably linked to whether and how one culture can fully translate and represent the other's identity.

4. The Concept of Belonging in Iraqi Society

Belonging is a universal human need and one of the fundamental dimensions of each individual's life and identity. However, belonging can be defined in many different ways, depending on the context. An individual first belongs to his/her family, which is the smallest unit of belonging all over the world. While a family is a personal unit of belonging, a nation-state is a larger and extremely important political unit of belonging. The effects of belonging on one's identity can be seen in different sociocultural settings. Therefore, belonging is of utmost importance to the individuals, societies, and entities as it is a significant factor in identity formation, cohesion, and separation (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). Due to political influences on identity formation, social and spatial belonging can become points of discrimination and prejudice.

Belonging in the Field of Literature and Politics can be Political Discourse on belonging and the Concept of Belonging in Iraqi Society. Since it almost wholly consists of natural resources, Iraq has been a target for colonial invasion, stimulation, and exploitation. The demands of imperialism affected not only the livelihood of the locals but also their identities which were forced to be reinvented to fit in with certain political ideologies. It may be said that the initial intents of legitimizing otherness, exploitation, destruction, and scorn are placed upon those innocents who are about to be assimilated into the mainstream (Pascucci, 2012). The irreconcilable conflicts between the Westernized forces and traditional natives are usually depicted through the prism of modernization, education, and sectarian corruption.

Thus, the conflict is no longer a mere dichotomy of good and evil, black and white. The marginalized are no longer the innocent victims or sinless good people but guilty intolerant societies which exploited their power. Belonging in the Field of Literature and Politics expresses Belonging: The Common Realities in the Field of Literature and Politics on a Universal Level. Literature can be an arena of representation and voyeurism where one can enact cognitive gain while foreseeing the vicissitudes of fate on a national level. However, the political economy of literature which is the institutionalization filtered through ideology blockages enables the policies and ethics of the industrialized society to be imposed upon others. Literature serves the cause of power rather than dissent.



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4.1. Cultural Belonging

After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iraqi authors found with the dismantlement of Saddam Hussein's regime the liberty long desired to write freely about the reality of life in Iraq. While escaping from the regime's oppression, the ongoing calamities that befell them rendered the act of writing trauma an essential part of Iraqi literature. The 2003 war provided a breath of relief to the suffocated Iraqi pens that long remained silent. The writing surge continued after the 2003 war, yet through the prism of a different experience, as the calamities deteriorated, the trauma became much more severe, and the identity crisis exploded in deep exile thoughts. The importance of these writings lies in the undeniable realism it carries, as the agony of many Iraqis is truthfully depicted. Yet, this sense of cultural belonging is transnationally restructured, since after 2003, the traumatized voices are drawn from both belonging and detached distances. A response to "cultural belonging,"

(Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

Written in post-9/11 Afghanistan, it focuses on an individual inside the cultural domain of Amerindian cultural codes. Nevertheless, it does not only address national issues but rather updates a mimetic relationship with a transnational canon that has already been domesticated and appropriated in the Afghan context. It is internally autonomous; yet, it is externally ingrained by the codes of a historical canon of narrative moral and rhetorical thematic economies. It also develops a gradual process of its own reproduction in the international and diasporic domains. It narrates a tale of socio-cultural belonging, which unhesitatingly, and unapologetically, takes sides in the discourses of animosity against inhumanity, ignorance, and oppression. It is extra-nationally ambiguous, inasmuch as it incorporates its own context of ethical views and socio-cultural referents, while at the same time has been culturally and politically homologized by imperial cultural politics. This oscillation is implemented in many transnational adaptations transnational appropriations.

4.2. National Identity

National identity is a litmus test to the narrative of individual and collective identity, image-making, the collective othering process, and writing and donation modes between inside and outside. The struggle to establish a predominant identity against the hegemonic narratives of the "other" is universal and endless. Historically, however, there are contextual differences in the presentation of the same issue. Like any identity discursive practices, the reconstruction of national identity is also context-bound, depending on the discourse's subject and object. Iraqi literature, culture, society, and politics, historians, sociologists, and other ethnographical forms have always been engaged with political thinking and political discourses. Accordingly, in the selected novels, national identity is crucial to analyzing political thought, rendering a



broad understanding of the collective state of being, and questioning evidenced narrative-building procedures and image-formation patterns (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

The second layer of collective identity is national identity, a litmus test to the narrative of individual and collective identity, image-making, the collective othering process, and writing and donation modes between inside and outside. National identity, like any identity discursive practice, is context-bound, depending on the discourse's subject and object. As an object of discourse, it relates to ongoing discursive negotiations, contestations, and struggles to form a usual meaning of a limited audience in defining or representing as national to material persistence. As a subject of discourse, it captures the complex interplay between cultural codifications, state policies, and everyday practices that restate belonging, kinship, territory, and identification at stake. As frequently stated, the reconstruction of national identity the struggle to establish a predominant identity against the hegemonic narratives of the "other" is universal and endless. Historically, however, there are contextual differences in the presentation of the same issue.

5. Analysis of Selected Novels

Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the country's national identity has significantly deteriorated due to political and social chaos provoked by the occupation, resulting in Iraq being defined more primarily in sectarian, ethnic, and religious terms. Subsequently, phenomena such as sectarian killing, ethnic cleansing, and the rise of extremist organizations began to indicate the emergence of a deep rift within society that causes it to exclude not just groups but individuals as well, leading many to claim that Iraq is no longer a nation as such. As part of their attempt to regulate the chaos the invasion has caused, Iraqi authors have endeavored to grasp, analyze, interpret, and understand the bizarre events Iraqis have witnessed over the past few decades through literary creation. This study chooses select fictional works that directly address and assess this topic, shed a new light on it, and discover how subjectivity is formed and constructed in extreme situations. These novels manifest how the ruptured identity and vanishing self are, in turn, resisted, reconfigured, and reformulated to address the present and future world. It will focus on a combination of two literary texts by Iraqi authors: *The Book of Collateral Damage* and *The Footsteps of Ahl al-Bayt*. These novels are considered representative of an emerging body of literature that addresses the occupation and its aftermath through narrative that draws on both the Iraq War and internal political developments. The novels focus on the theme of identity and belonging. They chronicle the attempts of Iraqis exiled to the east and west in the aftermath of the war to understand and cope with memories of their homeland, where their physical and psychological existence



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became tethered to reconstructing the past. Their sense of belonging to their native land, culture, and language intersects with their feeling of alienation and exile. Despite access to material comforts, they are deprived of their subjectivity and autonomy in post-Saddam Iraq. Attempts to grasp a homogenization of trauma through narrative—a nationalistic view of the world that relates events to a master plot—are foiled when the nuances of experience differ. Therefore, trauma is either filtered as common or individual when it yields absolution to the trauma-bearer.

5.1. Novel 1: Title and Overview

The first novel chosen for this research is “The Corpse Washer” (2013) by Sinan Antoon. A graduate of the University of Baghdad in Iraq, Antoon is a poet, novelist, and translator living in the United States. In addition to writing novels and poetry in Arabic, he has translated many works from Arabic into English. He is an associate professor of Arabic literature in the Near East Languages and Civilizations Department at Harvard University. He also co-founded the Arab Film Festival in San Francisco. His novels “I’jaam” (2003) and “The Corpse Washer” (2013) are among the best and most popular contemporary Iraqi novels available in English translation

(Qasim Habeeb, 2015). The novel “The Corpse Washer” has won several awards, including the 2014 Altino the Rai Prize, the 2013 Naguib Mahfouz Prize for Literature, and the 2013 Arabic Novel Prize by the Arabic Booker Prize Foundation. It has been translated into several languages, including Spanish, French, and English. The Arabic version of “The Corpse Washer” is now in its twenty-fourth issue, and the English version is in its second edition.

“The Corpse Washer” is a coming-of-age story about a young man living in the midst of war in Baghdad amid the American invasion of Iraq. The young man, who happens to be the only son in the family, strives hard to fulfill the aspirations of his father, who desires to see him become a preacher and work at the mosque. However, as the boy goes through his life after nineteen years, he finds that the world is born of a different reality from the aspirations of his father. In Baghdad, the religion of faith and belief has distorted into a belief of death, extermination, and violence. The father’s religion has become alien from the traditions of washing corpses, leading him to panic and flee when he discovers his son is bringing a female corpse to be washed in their laundry. Afterward, he denies all ties with him, and the son is also transformed from a believer to a corpse washer. After a long struggle, he leaves everything behind him, even his loved ones and marriage, and heads to the United States of America. In America, religious fanaticism is replaced by the radicalism of nationalism between Iraqis. Here he is in the midst of wars and sounds of violence, unapproved by the US, without preparation for post-war life.



5.2. Novel 2: Title and Overview

The novel selected for this chapter is Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, which was originally published in Arabic in 2013 under the title *Ghassâl al-juthath*. Antoon is known for his novels, poetry, essays, and translations that explore the complex web of identity, belonging, and the other. He was born in Baghdad, Iraq, in 1978 and moved to the United States in 1999, fleeing Saddam Hussein's regime and the humanitarian crisis in post-2003 Iraq. Antoon's works can be grouped into four topics. The first describes the war and its dire consequences, such as *The Corpse Washer*, *fracture*, and *anguish of exile or diaspora* such as *I'm-Being-There*, and *tumultuous failed revolutions like the State of Siege* (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

In Antoon's fiction, the cities of Baghdad and Mosul represent an everlasting state of the past inside the traumatized soul and a confusing "now." Meanwhile, against the background of political and military upheaval, the characters in his works are either driven to the brink of despair or struggle to ignore the problems by directly or indirectly engaging in a creative act. *The Corpse Washer* probes the daily life of a city shattered by bombing, ruin, and sectarian slaughter from pre-2003 to 2006. In the event, "The Other," which is depicted with have less humanity and more monstrousness refers specifically to the foreign soldiers, cruel news channels, and other nations separated from humanity. "We" or "us" is represented as one insufficiently civilized nation which refuses to accept other nation's openness. In Allister's point of view, the Iraqis boards an ISIS bus, entirely suicides. On the contrary, Antoon provides "us" whose trauma hopes to be grasped. All these straddles of "us" and "them" are arranged like Arabic letters on a corpse, which seems austere inside but decorates a lost paradise outside. These literary devices of a corpse, city, and traumas of past and present make the audience compelled to grasp existence through horror.

In exploring Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, this thesis borrows some main ideas and standpoints on national and cultural memory from the works of . The interaction between memory, culture, text, and the other is of great significance for trauma to be reconsolidated then reconstructed. Antoon inscribes a strong sense of his own memory in prose, poetry, and drawing in contrast to the "art" not written by the native, specifically . Resident Iraqis such as body-washers and poets become the authors of memory inscribing the ungraspable trauma on a text and text shape. This examines the way in which Antoon's wartime Baghdad operates as a medium for memory reproduction. Texts of Memory exhumed through may be as prolonged period of reconstruction and be re-signified in textual memory.

5.3. Novel 3: Title and Overview The notion of home and the questions revolving this notion are hot in the contemporary world. The ever-growing political and geographical strife and



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wars are forcing more people to abandon their lands, their homes in search of safety. The last few decades have witnessed the biggest wave of refugees moving out of their homes since the Second World War. Iraq has experienced a tragedy since 1992, and the exodus of its people has become an issue of moral, political, and legal concern. This has left behind an unprecedented ongoing calamity that reshaped the structure of the state and the social relations among the people living either inside or outside the borders. In today's Iraq, people no longer know how to identify, differentiate, and live with/without each other. Following this approach and with a focus on the severely traumatized Iraqi identity, especially through the focus on the authors such as Sinan Antoon, the impact on the internally displaced and the exiled people in their dealing with memory and trauma is an issue that could be interesting and necessary to explore.

The focused novels are: Chief of the Ants of Antoon; From Iraq with Love of Almkhtar, and Act of War: The Shelling of the King's Hotel of Zaid. The repercussions of the subjection of these fictional geographically exiled characters have expanded focus on the way they deal with their trauma and the identities shaped, reshaped or reinforced as a result. The emphasis of the outcomes significantly reflects on the literary production's impact on both communities. Its influence on the politically related discourse within North America is especially considered (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

6. Themes of Identity in Iraqi Literature

Iraqi literature, or rather, literature written in Arabic and produced in Iraq, has been present before the age of the Mesopotamian civilization. This literary heritage has witnessed tremendous manifested circumstances, particularly those of colonialism. In modern history, it has been affected by two colonial interferences: British colonial rule; a very brutal control that raised tragic feelings of loss and exile, and one of Arabism and Ba'athism; a heretic cultural heritage that preaches Arab unity at the cost of national sovereignty and existence (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). Thus, different literary plants endowed with different and contradictory fruits need a coherent literary history that meets and communicates uniquely with their good and evil circumstances.

In the 1980s, the era of the Iran-Iraq war, there was a lack of novels due to the circumstances involving a confrontation against an external enemy, and an unquestioned incident that united all parties in a war rhetoric. Ironically, copious novels were written during the following decade of economic embargo imposed upon the country. What is even stranger is the ludicrous visions exposed in these novels. In response to this absurdity, and due to the impact



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of the concurrent public disobedience, a long-run absence from literature started, only to be outdone by the 1991 democratic ideologies.

To control the mass and his gang, a violent war against any source of dissent started; it is figuratively described as mortar and lover's embrace, and there was a killing and imprisoning spree for the intelligentsia whose writings mocked with, or even dealt with, the trauma of the two-day, inexplicable war. Conversely, some differences in creative production were recorded. The hit novels of this time are ironic, depicting the absurdities of the life of an ordinary individual crushed between inter-revenge institutions. Naïve obedience to either side serves to alleviate the calamities.

6.1. Personal vs. Collective Identity

Writing in Iraqi literature post-2003 provides an opportunity to present visions about a reality that is no longer subject to concealment as it was during the time of a dictatorial regime. Literary representations of a traumatic history reflect an experience that is more social than personal and speak of the communal traumatic burden of both oppression and war. In the trauma theory, trauma insinuates a break in the narrativization of events as a chronological progression. Rather than simply being a catalog of events, narratives seek to reconstruct an event out of disjointed and repetitively determined fragments. This is what takes place in the fictional works of Iraqi authors after 2003, a step in the process of reconstruction. Such narratives speak of an event that is plausible rather than verifiable truth since no sole story can claim to have presented the entire truth. Every story also stresses the fact that a false picture of Iraq and Iraqis has been presented in the media. Moreover, in the pursuit of other visions, a focus on the unspoken voices of the oppressed widens upon the Iraqi story (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

Narratives dealing with the traumatic war experiences of the war's aftermath countries differ according to varied cultures, psychologies, historical contexts, and even worlds. However, most Iraqis see it as a writer's duty to document a history that reached across and behind the printing press and modify a hegemonic vision that sought to shroud and deform. For that, a range of approaches and themes become available in Iraqi post-2003 literature. Namely, the disintegration of sociopolitical structures along with unbridled humanitarian and economic disasters after the rise of liberating forces; the new and jeopardizing sense of liberties and powerlessness after a long silence and crack down upon any print in Iraq; satire to expose deception; skewed religious visions as an implicit war justification; and the struggle for preserving memory and dignity against the eternal effects of trauma and violence.



6.2. Gender and Identity Gender structure is often intertwined with nationality and/or religion, and gender is often viewed as a rigid dichotomy that constructs ‘normality’ and disrupts those who do not conform

(Hamzah Abbas Al-Rashid, 2016). In “Iraqi Women in the Shadow of the Western Intervention,” it is hypothesized a shift in discrimination from political to gender-based after the invasion, whereas in the 1980s and 1990s the regulations imposed by a regime pertained to all citizens, regardless of gender. However, the painful reckoning of a foreign invasion produced a heightened feminine awareness. Similarities between genders are often overlooked, with either sex generally viewed as primitive opposed to the civilizing, disciplined, and rational. The misrepresentation of the East is understood through a binary opposition to the West. The left side is symbolic of womb-like nature, closed-off, and threatening, while the right side wishes for open, civilized shores. The secular and enlightened West acts as the Other to the exotic and irrational East, which is linked to the denial of women’s rights in both the Arab World and the West. The exoticization of a trembling and veiled feminine figure effaces the multitude and representation of other facets of femininity. The condition of women in the “Barbaric East” was commonly highlighted immediately following the fall of a regime, becoming a part of justifying the invasion in both liberal and feministic discourses. Mosques and the lessons they impart are depicted as instilling fanaticism in women, relegating them to the status of “child-bearers in her reproductive attires.” Literary narratives produced by men did not cease to delineate the regulation, but also anticipated the shift in discrimination, illustrated through changing masculine fears and their resulting brutalities. The one-sided and oppressive image of Iraqi women expressed in written fiction disallowed for the existence of alternative views and human experiences, failing to reflect the diversity of civilized and competent women in Iraq. In contrast, voices shrouded in the silence of manipulation are revived to reclaim sexual agency in its multiplicities in contemporary Iraqi narratives

(Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

6.3. Religious Identity

While post-2003 Iraq experienced a plethora of political transformations and social ruptures, the display of religious identity became a prominent element of public discourse and political life. Furthermore, this special focus on religious stances is the case as the other factors like ethnicity, class, gender, etc. similarly impacted the public life and political discourse in Iraq. However, the religious focus is not without reasons. Iraqi politics is primordial. Since its establishment, the Iraqi nation-state has been a site of contestation between its core communal identities, namely Arabism – Sunni versus Shia, and Kurdi. The principal agents (politics and



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their agents) are their now primordial identities, like being a ‘Sunni Arab’ or a ‘Shia Arab’ or a ‘Kurd’. The fallout of this primordialisation of identity is the rise of sectarianism and more violently the ‘Sunni insurgency’ (Dodge, 2020).

The sectarian rhetoric that flourished after 2003 was driven by basic transformations in the political field. First, it was driven by the dramatic corruption of Iraqi politics due to the shifts in both the global and regional levels. To be more exact, the Iraqi political field was thoroughly transformed by the invasion, the destruction of the Ba‘th party, the exile of most of its inner cadre, and the subsequent rise to power of the US-backed opposition. The principle of ‘vision and division’ was the lens through which to account for this sectarianisation, which is agent-oriented. In addition to the basic transformation which acted as a basic precondition for the sectarian discourse in Iraq, other necessary conditions were the contingencies of the political field in Iraq and the rapid shifts in the social and political milieu due to external acts during the post-invasion conflict. To be more specific, the massive ‘de-Ba‘thisation’ that targeted the army, the civil service and especially the intelligence services, and the grand compromise — namely the ‘conditional Iraqi states’ are seen as necessary and sufficient conditions for sectarianism to flourish, however, the field still remained too risky for agents to implement this vision. A short-lived idea of national unity flourished during this period.

7. Political Discourse in Post-2003 Iraq

The catastrophic results of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 included civilian casualties, crimes against humanity, the formation of groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq that later morphed into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, and a sectarian civil war that yielded a far broader and deeper violence. The invasion altered the whole region, leading to civil wars in Iraq’s neighboring countries and intensified sectarian violence in Lebanon and Yemen that remain unresolved to this day. The most disappointing outcome of the invasion was the failure of the US and its allies to complete the democratization project in Iraq. Over 18 years of the US occupation, Iraqi democracy became a medial democracy marked by defective procedures that undermined democratic government and an executive authority characterized by dictatorial features. A new regime of power guaranteed a hegemony of power groups and a massive corruption system that impoverished Iraq and made it a site of migration. While initially there was frustration with Iraq’s new democracy, that prevailing sadness has become an acceptance of Iraqi democratic veneer but abandonment of hopes for its deepening.

Literature allowed the subjectivity of individuals to form and develop. As writers encountered with compassion the life and fate of others represented through an unquenchable yearning to know and comprehend, writing became part of the existential world. Attempts to record,



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contemplate, and recreate became testimonies of being human through the analysis of life. Being inspired by thoughts spilled from the pens and hearts of writers, a new and critical view of representations of otherness and the interpretation of ideology presented through literature formed. Works from nations with worst human rights grounds and a legacy of oppression and trauma shifted the zero-centered idea of intellectual kinship. The resonating traumatic voices twisted through the margin were now foregrounded within closed boundaries. While it cannot be claimed that it would complete the discourse on power and identity, the marginal views opened up the analytical and interpretive horizons to a new field of understanding.

8. Literature as a Reflection of Political Change

While overseas commentators struggled to make sense of the devastation of the Second Gulf War, local writers produced a veritable flood of literature, churning out hundreds of novels and memoirs, penning afresh a record of soaring hopes, crushing disappointments, shattered lives, obliterated identities. Before investigating the Iraqi war canvassed by some few Arabic novels, it might be of value to elaborate on the contemporary novel in the Arab world as a literary genre that has gained a prominent foothold in Arabic literature. Recent years have witnessed a growing interest in members of the Arabic community, its ties and prospects in the modern literary scene, looking freshly at new generations or even overhauling figures in the tradition of various dialects and perspectives. Far as creative works garner innovative linguistic tokens, far also are the luxuriant thoughts and images that usher the beautified representation of political, historical and social events, a devotional space par excellence that captures the peaks of rebellion and despair in Arab life.

Contemporary writing in Iraq encompasses fiction and memoir writing, offering a wealth of material on the contemporary experience that informs a meticulous depiction of the wars, invasions and resulting civil strife along with its dire implications on the individual and society. The immense gulf between experiences shared and structures of signification lies beyond the wall of efforts of translation. Yet, a reading of writers' life and works informs intensive research tracing chronologic and thematic shared ground across the blocks of language. Exploring this scene can offer a nuanced understanding of the literary-creative pan-Arab scene and the ramifications of dispossessions on writer, writing and the wider communities or areas. Inclusive in this large corpus and process, this paper homes on the works of fiction and memoir writing by a number of Iraqi novelists, probing a motif of incomprehension that inhabits the aftermath of violence on individual and society. Not scoring awareness of the experience and horror of war and oppression renders applicability of the lens of magic a commonplace, serving up a mythic one dimensionality of horror, wonder, quest, loss and quest.



9. Case Studies of Political Influence

This section aims to summarize how the authors in the selected novels depict their criticism of political power in Iraq and how it operates using the concept of “biopower” introduced by Foucault. The section will introduce the selected authors and their books and then elaborate on their political usage of identity and belonging in the selected works.

Sinan Antoon achieved his bachelor degree in Arabic Literature from the University of Baghdad. After his emigration to the US in the early 90s, he completed his M.A and PhD in Arabic Literature at Harvard University. Later, he became an associate professor of Arabic literature at New York University. He is also a poet, novelist and translator. The following is a selection of his novels which is focused on in the present study: *I'jaam: An Iraqi Rhapsody* (2007), *The Book of Collateral Damage* (2013) and *The Corpse Washer* (2014).

On January 22, 1974, Ahmad Saadawi was born in Baghdad. He studied the Arab literature and gave lectures at Baghdad University. His first collection of stories *Dates of Death* was published in 2003. His 2013 novel, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, was awarded the 2014 International Prize for Arabic Fiction. Ahmad Saadawi dedicated the prize to the 171 long and short stories inspired by The Victims of American Invasion project. Both were blocked, but Saadawi continues to write under the name of Dr. Ali Akbar Tabrizi. His novel is also titled “The Victims Are Innocent” (2012) in regards to this project (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

The final author is Shahad Al Rawi. She is an Iraqi writer and journalist based in Dubai. She is a professor of Cultural Studies at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University. She founded a publishing house, Al-Mashhad Al-Iraqi, in Dubai which specializes in translating Arabic political creative works. In the current study, her first and the first novel about Da'esh “The Baghdad Clock” is scrutinized.

9.1. Case Study 1: Impact on Public Opinion

As a depiction of a recently-invaded country, the literature produced in Iraq after 2003 portrays the traumatic and painful experiences of war, oppression, and exile undergone by individuals and society at large. Adopting various and flexible narrative styles and points of view, the stories are narrated from local voices in an event of literary explosion, either inside or outside Iraq. With the infiltration of the language of terror, violence, and loss, the present, instead of the past, dominates most of the stories in which the characters remain caught in a vicious cycle of violence, loss, and oppression. As a result, the language of memory and forgetting strangles the immediacy of the nightmare. The traditional, symmetrical, and elegiac roles that the victim and the victimizer indulge in, in which the former house the stoic and displaced loss while the latter is dead or socially dead, have been reversed in the literature of



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war thereafter. The pain echoed in one hand reintegrates with the luxuriating bliss in the other hand. The chroniclers of pain and loss become agents of pain and trauma. A new arena of war is created with its theater, cast, and language. In this arena, there are no winners nor losers but mutual destruction and dereliction. The most privileged live in wretchedness while the most wretched continue to resist and to dream despite the death knells of hopelessness.

Before venturing further to the analysis of the primary texts, it seems appropriate to outline and position theoretically the discipline of memory studies within the literary and cultural fields. More specifically, to define the inherent features of such an engagement. In so doing, the specific forms of memory, places commemorated, and the kinds of subjects articulated within such landscapes are explored. Central to the discussions is the political implication of memorialization in a post-2003 Iraq. The analysis engages with how such memorialization increasingly intersects with painful grief, loss, and yearning to search for a way back from exile and violence. It is argued that memorialization plays a significant role in representing the popular discourse of collective grief, loss, and longing for justice

(Qasim Habeeb, 2015). It is contended that literature is a catalyst for affecting the public sentiment of such grief and mourning. The nature of public mourning is examined broadly in relation to the concept of voice. Here, the concept of voice is embraced to refer to the voices in memory as narrated in the literature of loss, trauma, and nostalgia. Specifically, the impact of literature on the public sentiment of the events remembered is analyzed quantitatively. Whether and how literature written in the aftermath of the events impact the collective sentiment is surveyed.

9.2. Case Study 2: Literature and Protest Movements

Literary texts play an important role in the Arab Spring uprisings. After years of oppression, censorship, and total control over people's lives, the waves of revolutions sweeping through the Arab world motivated writers to respond. This officiated Arabic literature, especially poetry. Poets wrote instant poetical reactions to the uprisings

(Qasim Habeeb, 2015). And at the heartland of the revolutions, Egyptian writers penned novels reflecting on the January 25 2011 Revolution in their country and what followed. More than ever, writers were inspired to document the happenings of the revolts and reflect on what led them. Writers told of their witness of masses claiming rights denied them for decades, of blood spilling on the streets and unplanned deaths, the power of words and graffiti, the lessons learned, and dreams that flourished with hope.

The aftermath was a multitude of published books documenting events or reflecting on revolts. Almost immediately after the revolts, writers published journalism-style books recounting the events of the Arab Spring. The literature documenting and questioning the



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events of the revolutions is still in the making, and writers continue to write about their experience of it. With the absence of a censorship body or fear of being imprisoned, Arabic literature flourished in Egypt and Tunis, but it remained dormant in Iraq. After decades of oppression under the iron fist of one man, the regime changed, but it was not clear who had the power at that stage. With the absence of the all-seeing eye of the Ministry of Interior, writers found freshness in their pens. They had opened avenues of freedom they have only previously dreamed of, to write about the unseen, the forbidden, and the hidden in a now more peaceful Iraq.

10. Interviews with Iraqi Authors

Interviewing authors about their works and how they go about constructing them seems to be very commonplace in post-Saddam Iraq. The tradition existed before then but had slipped onto another level of personal preference for most authors. With his early sixteen novels, the author had no plans to interview them nor did he take notice of anything other than their works before then. It started when he told HA that in a contemporary Iraqi novel, it is possible to use the language of the desert in jokes, and just a few hours later, she called him from the US with her soothing voice that reminded him of the desert nights. The project was to represent Iraqi authors, both in Arabic and English. What had started just a few years before, with interviews with five prominent intellectuals and submission of them to “Al-Bayader” magazine, as a personal satisfaction that turned into serious research on identity and belonging issues in contemporary Iraqi literature, had transformed, invited by a number of other voices, into a much larger undertaking to produce cross-cultural research framing those issues.

With the period 2003-2012, the shape of documents would become a barrier to discuss that had spread to ten countries over the course of two years. These authors had taken a similar road of the tragic demolition of a cultural icon and all the civilizational institutions that had taken generations to construct, as well as the threat to survival itself. The well-off families had encountered murderous wars in rapid succession, which had culminated in the holocaust of 10 years of awaits in neighboring countries, as catastrophe enveloped all the colors of the spectrum. There had always been the consolation of writing since the eloquently literate forefathers. Giving order to disorder through writing or reciting, lighting the cigar from one ear to a candle sided the mirror of Desdemona, perhaps, was still possible where anonymity prevailed. Deprived of that option, it was inevitable to settle for fiction that dramatised such shocking calamities in the borrowed homeland. What else could be more tactfully non-violent, innocent, forgettable, uncontrollable, and unintelligible, in a sense?

(Qasim Habeeb, 2015)



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11. The Global Context of Iraqi Literature A great deal of criticism has been directed towards labeling a group of authors the "Arab Novel" regarding the current global context of Iraqi literature. This label seeks to pave the way for unprecedented accomplishments for these authors, as if their achievements arrived with the arrival of these authors. Significant translations of Indian, Noongar, Finnish, and other words attend to additional and varied local experiences that overdue the eulogies with which the Anglo-Saxon canon is usually confronted. Certainly, it would be all too easy to overestimate "Arab" literature or any other literature, as critics from outside that canon have done with remarkable subtlety in the recent past.

Many writers of various orientations enter the canon, partially discursive in their intentions, as if this would relieve them of the burden of a transnational disposition with the opposite goal. The chance of such misreadings extends. Nevertheless, existing non-tautologies of their location paves the way for surviving national discourses to make claims that resist local enactments of the global. An enormous number of contemporary experiences are given voice, which rehearse in a historical framework that is both immediate and porous. To understand the impact of these novels beyond the Islamic world, countless translations of various kinds could suffice. This testimony demonstrates how the global context missed its chance: it is not that, for instance, "Iraqi prose" was undergoing a vertiginous rise, but rather in the poorness of the context that might have specified a history otherwise. Even under an overwhelmingly constraining nationalism and in the face of quotidian massacres and ruins, falling borders, including conventional sub-genres, have made a literary romp of sorts possible.

While commendable progress has been made in terms of cognizance of the moral disgrace in the US' and the West's previous policies vis-à-vis Iraq and the region, the power of literature and its translations to remit understanding seems to have missed the opportunity (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). This opportunity was for a wider commentary naturalized to literary testimonials revealing how the actual conditions of quotidian terror have sarcastically belied the notion of liberation in deference to regime change without due reckoning of the history and culture of the afflicted. Additionally, fiction written in Arabic depicts beggars and the street life that saw the rise of their number, a unique occurrence in a state that signed off an extensive universal declarative undertaking under the palm of dignity for all. However, it is hard to determine the identity of these authors.

12. Comparative Analysis with Other Post-Conflict Literatures

Across the globe, literature from a variety of cultures engages with, comments on, and interrogates individual and group identity. As this project demonstrates, Iraqi literature after 2003 is particularly well-suited for these kinds of analyzes, especially because it is so



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inseparably tied to the discourses of the nation and nation-building. In some cases, Iraqi literature has been embedded in and promoted through the language of national identity, often tying the narrator to the socio-political and historical context. In other cases, Iraqi writers intervene in national debates and dominant discourses using the language of the home. Unfortunately, this is a continual work in progress, as the teeming and burgeoning output of novels and narratives is hindered by lack of access and varied availability overseas (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). In the case of the selected novels, this dearth has disrupted the original goals of the project, narrowing the scope to identity and belonging. Nevertheless, the fact that so many narratives of this quality from this time are even recognized and able to be translated points to the overall wealth of texts that could be included in further studies. Subsequent work could parse out how women's perspectives, political allegiances or cultures shape distinct experiences of identity and belonging through criticism. Furthermore, as the formal study of Arabic literature flourishes, Islamic tenets, motifs, and styles may find their way into the critical discussion.

The work of Arab women writers is growing significantly and diversely. Across the Arab world, women writers are increasingly taking on the role of narrative conceptualizers and chroniclers, sometimes evoking and provoking national identity and history on their own terms. In Iraq, women are telling new, complex narratives of identity, nation, and dissatisfaction through the genre of the novel, and consequently, the combination of culture and identity is being explored more deeply. Novelists intervene in and shape concepts of personal and national identity in the public sphere, creating spaces that interrogate identity within a complex mapping of belonging. Iraqi women writers produce dynamic narratives of identity that reject normative constructions of ethnicity, religion, class, and gender. They refuse and reject singularity, insist on complexity, and assert that creation finds a home in multiplicity, questioning what engagement with culture, nation, and community means for women in Iraq today.

13. Challenges Faced by Iraqi Writers

Iraqi authors writing in Arabic encounter considerable difficulties in having their works translated into other languages. Just as regimes have taken measures to control what is published internally, they have manipulated outside perceptions of their states and societies through a tightly regulated publishing industry that translates their own narratives. Egypt and Syria, for example, have established international networks, aiming to combat the translation of other countries' literary works into Arabic while remaining the only agents capable of investing in translations of their own works into other languages. This monopoly of Arab states over narratives of belief, experience, and suffering is reflected in the portrayal of the



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suffering of Arab peoples and states and the loss of lived events and local experience like trauma (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

Only a small number of Iraqi novels have been translated into languages other than Arabic. This low percentage reflects a belief that Arabic literature is politically dangerous, hermetic, and unable to reach or create a shared understanding of the complexities and contexts in which these tragedies and ruptures exist. Such misconceptions are a form of censorship of Arabic literature by the West, which identifies narrators as unworthy of authentic representation. Narrators are either viewed as otherness threatening the public's security or seen as too exotic and different to be treated sufficiently seriously. This predicament surrounding Arabic literature and authors is amplified by the relatively low degree of romanticization and aesthetics of experiences present in most works.

Additionally, the growing xenophobia against civilizational diversity is reflected in anti-Arab racism, especially in literary and cultural fields, which reproduce and amplify all of the previously mentioned stereotypes and prejudices against Arabs and Moslems. Despite these challenges, Iraqi authors have shown much engagement with reality, addressing the issues stemming from oppression. This opportunity to be heard internationally has not been seized despite years passing after the trauma and a flourishing activity by authors writing about it. Other authors within the Arabic culture have gained attention and contributed significantly in this regard.

13.1. Censorship and Freedom of Expression

It is right after the 2003 war that Iraqi writers had tremendous opportunities to write after decades of oppression. A great number started to conceive long-hidden thoughts that were tenaciously repressed. The routine of Iraqis who had undergone tyranny and the images of abomination and oppression that a leader had cast on his people surfaced. Nadine, a character in Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel* revealed what the punishment was: 'To turn the memory into scraps that spread far and start to fly about. An empty head nods to the here and the now, without wrinkling, without emotion. A stuffing of light on the horizon, coming down like the rest of the wastes of the earth, projected shadows on the feeble manifestations of existence. The character highlighted how some people kept "disparaging tales" that taught the ignorance of a small lovely world, its practice, its deceit, the cup of troubles, salt and bitterness that locked up all the human.

(Qasim Habeeb, 2015) How all that was turned into rubbish and dust'. The examples of their minds served as the histories of lives that were all imprisoned in one cage.

For decades, in a country oppressed by a tyrant, novelists had lived their days deprived of their rights to freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and freedom of faith. Each of them



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served, like any other human being, an absolute and direct authority represented by a single person. It was one person who controlled all the spheres of life. Eyes and ears belonged to that person. In such tyrannical regimes, censorship and torture were exercised not only on paper trails, pens, and books but also on people's minds and souls. An evil invisible net was enshrined in people's memories and subconsciousness for decades. The network kept expanding and regenerating. It was not one of the human inventions; it was created to encircle humanity and cover the noble age. All kinds of intimidation and horrors were devised before controlling thought and belief. In a seriously oppressed society, Man was very conscious of the minute details that entailed his life and actions. The mesh was so tight, and man was so careful not to express feelings or opinions that were outside the acceptable line.

13.2. Diaspora and Identity

The heightened visibility of a diaspora community is often accompanied by an increase in xenophobia and racial vilification or prejudice toward it. The social-environment barriers create "lost boys" in addition to the "lost girls" of the diaspora. Those who leave are eternally separated from the homeland landscape, which, over time, becomes far more removed than any border or empire could steel them from. The names that used to signify home become unpronounceable monuments. The games that used to bring smiles now remind one of exile. The food that used to be abundant is now scattered behind burnt walls in an inaccessible landscape. Lost boys freeze at the border of esse, waiting for permission to return. However, she is not so powerfully wrenched, stamped out, and pushed away towards death as she waits (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). The boy whispers as he enters exile because the remoteness of the homescape assures him cleanness rather than sullenness.

The connection between home and heart is even more visceral. It is through a voice of home that access to identity is disclosed. In writing, this dialect is not bound psycholinguistically to the writer. Rather, it speaks through human experience, one that a reader at a distance can close with. This dialect has its own sounds and rules and beliefs, its own syntax and emotion. This language simultaneously creates and disintegrates borders by bringing together elements that would otherwise remain insular. On the one hand, it enables the diaspora to stay in touch with the language of home and identity. On the other hand, being part of the dominant language community presents problems of representation. The new words to describe music and poetry, in terms of playing, jokes, quirks of its personal history, meanwhile disinherit the public vocabulary of the homeland. Nevertheless, prior to these experiences, unknowledgeable and unbearable, slippages and hysterical contradictions danced around her and through her body, giving voice to the loss.



14. Future Directions for Iraqi Literature

The tension within the Iraq/American identity is expressed overtly and metaphorically in Sinan Antoon's characters. Therefore, studying Antoon's English novels becomes an important step for understanding the representation and misrepresentation of one identity in the other characters and genres. On the one hand, Antoon's writing was represented as a bridge between two worlds; on the other hand, the characters experienced a temporal reliving of the American/Western image toward the Arab. Like many postcolonial writers, Antoon uses the English language to distance himself from the source of the trauma by building a bridge itself - either informally as an interpreter or formally as a writer

(Qasim Habeeb, 2015). Antoon's representation of his self-exile in *Nahdet Nisf al-dunya* is a metaphorical realization of one's 'no place' and American policies that justified acts of destruction in the name of liberation. In addition, it exposes the vices of both countries; America, as homogenous, hastily post-April 2003 over-apologized itself, and thereby anthropomorphized it, whereas, with a stubborn pre-April 2003 approach, Iraq did not give the authors or the transformed characters the chance to look back.

Antoon's subject of study is now interdisciplinary in Iraq/American studies, becoming increasingly significant with the new trauma caused by ISIS. In addition, Antoon's subject of study has implications for other Arab/American writing and the Jewish/American neurosis. The spatial portrayal of American hyperrealism versus the temporal reliving of pre-April 2003 devastation reinforces the strong focus on the Arabic layer within the 'Arab/American' binary and the unavoidable angst of the American 'cousin.' As demonstrated in periods such as the Gulf War and Post-911, the emphasis is easily appropriated within the Western excessive criticism against the Muslim WOT states, civil war, and the refugee crisis. Although the Arab world has enough homebred problems to deal with, the longer and larger Western picture has become an accepted universal narrative, and the internal narratives had been somehow misrepresented.

15. Conclusion

In conclusion, the numerous wars, assassinations, and unrest in Iraq after 2003 have generated a substantial body of writing and literary works produced by Iraqis. This writing is no longer restricted to poetry or personal accounts. Its nature and subjects are wider, resulting in more lively and brave voices. The inventive knuckles of such literary text in the Arabic language can only be discovered through translation. While other concerns might weigh heavier, in addition to the critical situation of refugees and expatriates, the current political situation has become a labyrinth devoid of logic, in which even nursery rhymes are heavily politicized. The worries, hopes, promises, assessment of dreams, and acquaintance with bombs and weapons,



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newly acquired citizenships, languages, acculturation, and materialistic values, all coalesce and frame the quotidian. All these cycles of absence, exile, and marginalization represent a literary canon that must be written and shared.

Nonetheless, even before the wars of Iraq, the question of what it means to be an Iraqi writer had inner and outer dimensions. The scars of conflict were visible, but the true impact lay in the absence. The thorniness of Arabic canons accompanies the marginalization of Iraqi writers on the Arabic literary map. Many were prefaced by important writers around the world, and some of their literary works were written originally in French or English. All were invited to participate in literary fests in various countries. The horizon of this literary world was, however, narrow. Novels were restricted to the Scales of the Sea and pieces of personal loss and exile. The place of Iraq in these literature fests was devoted to the negative effects of tyranny, oppression, and censors, rather than a comprehensive discourse that integrates individual trauma and national identity. The voice of the pen connecting the worlds was restricted mostly to memoirs and guidance for powerless expeditions. Such a state is a worrying brand of absence that must spur a quest of hope, strength, resistance, and struggle to voice pasts and present dilemmas, worries, and feelings of exclusion. Some might quarrel over wisely exposing one tragedy for another. However, it is undoubtedly acknowledged that the issue of belonging and identity is now a central and irreplaceable text in contemporary Iraqi literature.

One fundamental aim of the current research has been to examine the notion of identity and sense of belonging in Iraqi literature after 2003 and how Iraqi authors respond to it in light of the profound changes within their community and country. Contemporizing these authors are various notable figures. This investigation is underscored by the significance of understanding how such a concept of passage impacts their communal outlook on identity and belonging and how text can remain a resistant and creative outlet for navigating around it. The research has tried to answer what the notion of identity and belonging mean after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, what literary elements represent such a concept, and how memory functions in constructing or deconstructing the notion of belonging. The investigation has also attempted to discover a rendering reply to the configurability of contemporary Iraqi writing, how their currently written literature informs and shapes a new narrative of being Iraqi.

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