

Washing the Fallen: Art, Storytelling, Ritual, Remembrance, and Resilience in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

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Abstract

In *The Corpse Washer*, Sinan Antoon transforms the makeshift wash-houses of post-2003 Baghdad into stages where art, storytelling, and ritual converge to preserve human dignity amid widespread violence. This essay examines how Jawad's careful washing of the war-dead, coupled with his invitation to grieving families to recount each life, becomes a collective act of witness and resistance. Drawing on theories of ritual performance, cultural memory, and narrative testimony, the analysis highlights three intertwined practices: the novel's vivid, painterly imagery that turns corpses and wash-house space into a living artwork; the ritual choreography of cleansing gestures and scented waters that reaffirms social bonds; and the dialogic structure of storytelling that safeguards individual identities against erasure. The recurring image of the pomegranate tree further underlines the tension between bloodshed and renewal, symbolizing resilience in ruined surroundings. By treating the wash-house as both a communal art installation and a memory archive, Antoon offers a model for understanding how

narrative-ritual practices sustain hope and solidarity in the face of trauma. This study suggests that *The Corpse Washer* not only expands literary ritual studies but also affirms literature's power to enact collective survival.

Keywords: Artistic Ritual, Storytelling, Collective Memory, Resilience, Sinan Antoon.

Introduction

The aftermath of the 2003 invasion of Iraq saw Baghdad's civilians confronting unprecedented levels of violence, leading to a significant increase in the use of improvised "corpse-wash houses" in Shiite neighborhoods where bodies of the war-dead were ritually cleansed [1]. Sinan Antoon's novel *The Corpse Washer* dramatizes this practice, positioning Jawad, the eponymous washer, as both ritual officiant and narrative listener within a devastated urban landscape.

Ritual theorists have long emphasized the capacity of ritual performance to negotiate social rupture and reconstruct communal bonds. Victor Turner describes ritual as "the social dynamics of ritual performances" that both reflects and reshapes collective identity [2], while Catherine Bell highlights ritual's "agency" in generating embodied meaning through repeated practice [3]. In literary contexts, scholars like Jan Assmann locate cultural memory in the interplay between text, ritual, and public commemoration [5]. Yet the specific intersection of corpse-washing rites and narrative remembrance in fiction remains underexplored.

Moreover, narrative scholarship, drawing on Paul Ricoeur's insights into testimony and identity [4], underscores storytelling as a mode of ethical witness. In *The Corpse Washer*, Jawad's insistence that bereaved families recount the lives of the dead before cleansing their bodies transforms a private mourning ritual into a collective act of testimony and resistance. This fusion of ritual and narration offers a model for understanding resilience in conflict literature.

This paper analyzes *The Corpse Washer* through the lenses of ritual theory, memory studies, and narrative testimony, arguing that Antoon's depiction of corpse washing operates as both performative ritual and acts of communal remembrance that foster resilience. Following this introduction, Section 2 outlines the theoretical framework; Section 3 describes the methodological approach; Section 4 presents a close reading of key scenes; and Section 5 concludes with reflections on the novel's broader contributions to literary, cultural, and ritual studies.

The novel's structure, which intersperses Jawad's first-person narrative with fragments of history, poetry, and folk wisdom, further reinforces this idea of literature as a communal, restorative ritual. Each chapter acts as a new layer of this symbolic burial shroud, carefully wrapping the reader in the textures of Iraqi life and death. The narrative's circular, rather than linear, progression mirrors the cyclical nature of grief and remembrance, suggesting that the work of mourning is never truly finished but is instead an ongoing process of revisiting and reinterpreting the past. In this way, Antoon challenges conventional notions of a single, authoritative history, instead presenting a mosaic of voices and experiences that collectively bear witness to a national trauma.

At the same time, Antoon's novel complicates the very possibility of separating ritual from politics, memory from trauma. The corpse washer's basin becomes a microcosm of post-2003 Iraq, where the intimate act of purifying a body is inseparable from the violence that produced it. Jawad's work illustrates what Achille Mbembe terms "necropolitics," [11] in which sovereignty is exercised through the management of death, yet Antoon inverts this logic by showing how ritual transforms the anonymous corpse into a subject of memory and care. By foregrounding embodied practice and narrative testimony, *The Corpse Washer* asserts that resilience arises not from erasing

violence, but from naming and ritually tending to its aftermath, thereby re-humanizing those whom war and sectarianism seek to reduce to statistics or silence.

Theoretical Framework

Literary art deploys imagery and form to evoke emotional and ethical responses to trauma. W. J. T. Mitchell defines an “image” as “any likeness, figure, motif, or form that appears in some medium or other,” and observes that such images “seem to take on ‘lives of their own,’” underscoring their quasi-autonomy as interlocutors with viewers. This suggests that visual language in literature can function as a kind of living presence, offering prospects for communal survival even amid devastation [6]. Rita Felski emphasizes the role of aesthetic receptivity in opening readers to unexpected connections and affections within a narrative, thereby allowing literature to function as a space of witnessing and moral engagement rather than mere critique [7]. In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon’s vivid, painterly descriptions of the wash-house and its rites thus perform an aesthetic work that renders death both visible and transformable into communal art.

Rituals, Turner explains, operate as social dramas that both reflect and negotiate communal tensions and transitions [2]. Catherine Bell extends this view by framing ritual as an embodied practice that generates agency through the symbolic manipulation of material elements and gestures, rather than as a mere enactment of fixed doctrine [3]. The step-by-step washing and shrouding in Antoon’s novel can therefore be read as a dynamic ritual performance that both acknowledges loss and reaffirms social bonds through repeated, meaningful action.

Jan Assmann distinguishes between communicative memory, everyday recollections shared within a living culture, and cultural memory, which is institutionalized through texts, symbols, and rituals [5]. *The Corpse Washer* materializes cultural memory by embedding the

wash-house rites in a narrative that preserves individual names, stories, and material traces of the dead. Through this interplay of ritual and text, Antoon constructs a form of mnemonic architecture that resists forgetting in a city marked by erasure.

Paul Ricoeur posits that narratives constitute a core dimension of human identity and ethical reflection, transforming events into coherent testimonies that grant voice to both speaker and audience [4]. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism further underscores how meaning emerges in the interaction between multiple voices and perspectives within a text [8]. Jawad's soliciting of life stories before performing the washing rite enacts this dialogic testimony, positioning storytelling itself as a ritualized mode of ethical witnessing.

Resilience research highlights the processes by which individuals and communities adapt positively to adversity. Ann Masten characterizes such processes as "ordinary magic," rooted in everyday systems of support and meaning-making [9]. Norris et al. define community resilience as a set of capacities, social capital, communication, governance, that enable collective recovery after disaster [10]. In Antoon's novel, the integration of artful ritual and shared storytelling cultivates both personal and communal resilience, demonstrating how narrative-ritual practices can function as mechanisms of survival.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis of Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, focusing on the interplay of artful imagery, ritual description, and narrated testimony. Guided by Creswell's framework for qualitative inquiry [11], the research foregrounds close reading as its principal tool, attending to language, symbolism, and narrative structure. Key passages, those depicting the washing rites, the elicited life-stories of the dead, and the recurring motif of the pomegranate tree, were selected for in-depth examination. Drawing on Brooks's conception of

close reading as “the attentive and sustained consideration of textual detail” [12], each scene was analyzed for its aesthetic composition (color, texture, spatial arrangement), its ritual choreography (gestures, sequence, material elements), and the dialogic dynamics of storytelling (speaker, listener, ethical bearing). Insights from memory studies and ritual theory guided the interpretation of how these formal elements function collectively to enact cultural remembering and model communal resilience. Through this integrative approach, the analysis reveals how Antoon’s narrative transforms a private mourning rite into a richly textured performance of collective art and survival.

Analysis and Discussion

Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer* transforms the wash-house into a liminal site where art, ritual, and narrative converge to sustain communal memory and resilience.

The novel’s prose repeatedly evokes painting and sculpture, casting corpses as living canvases and the wash-house as a creative studio. In one scene, Jawad and his assistant Hammoudy prepare water infused with ground lotus and camphor, producing a fragrant foam that “spread a pleasant smell” before being poured over the corpse’s face “... I inserted my index finger into his mouth and rubbed his teeth. Mahdi had started mixing in the ground lotus ... I poured another bowl of water over the man’s head and washed his face.” (p. 120). This tactile, olfactory detail reads as a painter’s layering of color and texture, rendering death visible yet transformable through ritual artistry.

Beyond physical cleansing, Antoon foregrounds storytelling as an integral rite. When confronted with a badly burned corpse, Jawad refrains from washing and instead invites the mourner to speak: “If the corpse is too mutilated, burned, or swollen so that washing is difficult and could make it disintegrate, it is not compulsory to wash it,” I said. “Why don’t you tell me

your story?” (p. 136). This prompt frames narrative testimony as a form of ritual care, by voicing trauma, families reclaim agency and enshrine individual lives against collective erasure.

The recurring image of the pomegranate tree anchors Antoon’s exploration of life-death entanglement. Reflecting on its blood-red fruit, Jawad muses:

The living die or depart, and the dead always come. I had thought that life and death were two separate worlds... But now I know they are conjoined, sculpting each other. My father knew that, and the pomegranate tree knows it as well. (p. 170)

Here, the tree’s roots drink “the water of death” yet “always budding, blossoming, and bearing fruit,” (p. 64) embodying resilience amid ruin and mirroring Jawad’s own survival through ritual performance.

Jawad’s dual practice of washing and record-keeping sustains both personal and collective resilience. He sketches faces from memory and logs names and causes of death in his notebooks, asserting “My memory became a notebook for the faces of the dead” as each “cause of death” transforms into a testament against oblivion “... I found a few empty pages and decided to write down the names of the dead I was going to wash” (p.121), “Names filled one notebook after the other... Instead of names, I wrote down the causes of death” (p.121). Through this fusion of ritual action and narrative inscription, Antoon envisions an “art of survival” in which communal testimony and embodied rites together forge pathways of hope beyond violence.

Antoon also positions the wash house as a threshold between silence and speech, where the unspeakable horrors of war are mediated through sensory ritual and narrative imagination. The body becomes not only a vessel of loss but also a site where cultural memory is inscribed, negotiated, and transmitted. By juxtaposing Jawad’s reluctance to inherit his father’s vocation

with his compulsion to preserve traces of the dead, the novel foregrounds the paradox of witness: the washer simultaneously restores dignity to the corpse while absorbing fragments of its violent history. This dual role implicates Jawad in a wider collective burden—his intimate contact with mutilated bodies forces him to metabolize trauma that is both personal and national. Yet, through recurring gestures of washing, sketching, and writing, he transforms death from a purely destructive force into a generative one, capable of producing continuity across ruptured time. The wash house thus operates as an archive of embodied memory where grief, art, and testimony intersect, reminding readers that even in the face of relentless violence, the rituals of care and storytelling sustain the possibility of renewal and meaning.

Antoon shows resilience not as denial of death, but as the act of continually re-narrating, re-performing, and re-ritualizing loss. In the washing scene, he shows ritual as embodied resilience.

Father approached the washing bench from the east side and said in a hushed voice:

“In the name of God, most Merciful, most Compassionate. Your forgiveness, O Lord, your forgiveness. Here is the body of your servant who believed in you. You have taken his soul and separated the two. Your forgiveness, O Lord, your forgiveness.”

Then he started to gently wipe the belly to make sure all fluids were out of the body...

After finishing the second wash he cleansed his own hands and arms again. The third wash was done with pure water alone...

Father took the camphor bag and measured out a spoonful into a small container. He rubbed some of it on the dead man’s forehead, nose, cheeks, chin, palms, knees, and toes—the spots that touch the ground when one prays...

The dead man looked like a newborn in swaddling clothes. Father prayed as he washed, but he had not said a single word to Hammoudy. They had worked together for years and

communicated with each other only through gazes and nods, at one in their rhythms. (p. 24)

This exemplifies how washing is performed with precision and reverence. The metaphor of rebirth (“a newborn in swaddling clothes”) highlights the ritual as a transformation, not merely sanitation — it is a sacred performance that secures dignity for the deceased and resilience for the living.

Jawad remembers the first time he watched his father wash a body: the careful ablutions with lotus leaves, camphor, cotton, and the wrapping in shrouds, his father repeated prayers: “Your forgiveness, O Lord, your forgiveness” as he washes each part of the corpse and the ritual that transforms the dead man into “a newborn in swaddling clothes.” This detailed description highlights ritual as both technical and spiritual, where death is framed as a return, not an end. After finishing, his father places palm or pomegranate branches in the coffin, a gesture to lessen the torture of the grave. This shows continuity between religious ritual and folk belief, where nature mediates between life and death.

Jawad recalls his brother Ameer (Ammoury), the “ideal son,” whose coffin arrives draped with the Iraqi flag—a solemn ritual for those who fell during the Iraq-Iran War. Antoon pauses the narrative for a litany of memories: learning to fly a kite, sharing a room, defending Jawad’s artistic choices, and encouraging him despite disappointments.

I heard a car stop in front of the house and doors being slammed shut... I drew the curtain open and saw a taxi with a flag-draped coffin on top of it. My heart sunk into an abyss.
... My mother stood next to the taxi, beating her head, staring at the coffin and screaming
“Oh my... Ammoury... Ammoury’s gone... My son is gone.”
... A silent tear fell on my cheek as I rushed to deliver the news of Ammoury’s death to

my father...

We didn't wash Ammoury. According to tradition, martyrs are not washed. He was buried in his military uniform.

After the funeral was over the black banner hung for months on the wall at the entrance of our street:

"Think not of those who die for God as dead, but rather alive with their God." (p. 18)

The act of remembering Ameer turns Jawad's grief into an extended memorial narrative — storytelling becomes ritualized remembrance. Similarly, Jawad recounts the stories of families who bring their dead. One scene shows relatives too horrified to watch the body of a man burned at a petrochemical plant. Jawad vomits afterward, while his father calmly reassures him: "Don't worry. You'll get used to it." Trauma, here, is reframed into an inherited story of resilience — the son must absorb both horror and tradition.

In the novel, art confronts ritual boundaries. Jawad's desire to capture memory visually is rejected by his father, who prioritizes sanctity over representation. Jawad narrates,

Once, father got very angry when he found out that I was sketching the face of a dead man he'd washed just that morning. He scolded me: "Shame on you! The dead have their sanctity. Draw your father or Hammoudy as much as you want, but leave the dead in peace!"

Flustered, I lied, saying that I had been sketching the face of a relative who had accompanied the dead man and not the dead man himself.

He snatched the notebook from me and pointed to the sketch and said: "Don't lie! Here he is lying on the washing bench!" He ripped the page out and tore it to pieces. (p. 33)

The tension reveals competing modes of remembrance: ritual silence vs. artistic expression. For the father, the washing of the dead is not an act to be memorialized through human creativity but a sacred obligation governed by divine law. To reproduce the face of the deceased on paper risks violating the very sanctity that ritual seeks to preserve. By contrast, Jawad, as an artist, views representation as a way to resist erasure and extend memory into a different medium. What his father perceives as transgression is, for Jawad, a form of testimony.

This episode highlights a broader cultural conflict: whether memory is best protected by secrecy and ritualized silence or by artistic exposure and visibility. Antoon dramatizes this clash to suggest that remembrance in Iraq's landscape of perpetual death cannot be contained within a single mode. The father's reaction embodies a traditional ethic of restraint and reverence, while Jawad's impulse reflects a modern, secular desire to give form to trauma through art. In this way, the novel stages a critical dialogue between continuity of ritual and the innovation of art — both necessary, yet often mutually suspicious, means of resisting oblivion.

Recurrent nightmares plague Jawad, and in them the rituals of washing acquire distorted, nightmarish dimensions. His lover Reem appears in a liminal state between life and death, asking him to wash her before they can be reunited:

I wonder whether she is asleep or dead... She warns me: 'Don't kiss me. Wash me first so we can be together and then ...' ... Masked men rush in, slit his neck, and abduct Reem. 'The Humvee speeds away... The rain keeps falling on the empty bench.' (p. 10)

Here, the washing ritual becomes erotic, traumatic, and political all at once. The intimacy of Reem's body and her demand for purification before union recasts the practice as both a gesture of desire and a condition of belonging. Yet the intrusion of violence — the masked men, the beheading, and the abduction — collapses private longing into the brutal reality of Iraq's

wars. Washing, which in Jawad's family has always signified a transition into dignity, is turned by his subconscious into a prelude to loss and violation. The dream therefore demonstrates how personal grief and collective trauma intertwine: memory of love cannot be separated from the memory of death.

The Corpse Washer presents the Iraqi experience of war as one where bodies, memory, and ritual become inseparable. Antoon situates Jawad in a world where the violence ensures a perpetual influx of the dead, yet he refuses to reduce these lives to statistics or anonymous casualties. Instead, each washing becomes an act of aesthetic and ethical resistance — a way of reinscribing individuality into the collective body count. Through its fusion of dreams, ritualized gestures, and narrative testimony, the novel insists that resilience is not the absence of grief but the capacity to continually transform death into memory, silence into story, and ritual duty into an enduring art of survival. In doing so, Antoon reclaims the wash house as both archive and sanctuary, a threshold space where the living wrestle with the dead in order to carry forward the possibility of cultural continuity and human dignity amidst devastation.

Conclusion

Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* weaves together artful imagery, ritual practice, and narrative testimony to forge a powerful literary enactment of remembrance and resilience. By portraying Jawad's wash-house as both a performance space and a site of communal storytelling, the novel affirms the capacity of embodied rites to negotiate individual and collective trauma. Ritual washing, with its choreographed gestures, scented waters, and layered textures, functions as living art that both acknowledges loss and asserts human dignity. Concurrently, Jawad's solicitation of life-stories transforms mourning into a dialogic memorial, ensuring that each name and narrative resists the erasure wrought by violence.

This fusion of ritual and storytelling reframes the wash-house as a locus of “art of survival,” where resilience emerges through repeated practices of witnessing and care. Antoon thereby extends ritual theory, usually applied to formal ceremonies, into the informal, improvised context of post-war Baghdad, and enriches memory studies by illustrating how narrative archives can be physically enacted. The novel’s integration of aesthetic, mnemonic, and communal dimensions offers a model for understanding how literature can function as cultural infrastructure: preserving individual identities, fostering ethical solidarity, and sustaining hope amid devastation.

Future research might fruitfully compare Antoon’s narrative-ritual framework with other conflict literatures, explore the transposition of such practices into diasporic or virtual spaces, and investigate the role of material storytelling across different media. In doing so, scholars can continue to uncover the ways that art, ritual, and narrative together enable communities to remember, heal, and endure.

Ultimately, *The Corpse Washer* situates literature itself as a ritual act, where the act of writing becomes a symbolic extension of washing, preserving, and honoring the dead. Antoon’s novel demonstrates how fiction can assume the ethical responsibilities of ritual by providing a space where fragmented memories are reassembled into a shared narrative of endurance. In this sense, the text transcends the boundaries of individual mourning and situates Jawad’s intimate gestures within a collective cultural memory, offering readers both inside and outside Iraq a way to witness, empathize, and participate in acts of remembrance. By fusing the aesthetic with the ethical, Antoon not only documents trauma but also transforms it into a resource for communal solidarity, ensuring that even amid the devastations of war, art and narrative continue to affirm life against erasure.

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