

## ***Homines Sacri* in Contemporary War Novels: A Comparative Insider–Outsider Perspective**

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### ***Abstract***

*This paper examines the status of Iraqis in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* (2013) and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds* (2013) within the circumstances of war in Iraq and addresses the repercussions of the American-led 2003 war on Iraq from an insider–outsider perspective, that is, Antoon's portrayal of his native land, Iraq, vis-à-vis that of Powers, an American who served in Iraq as a machine gunner for the US Army. This paper draws on Derek Gregory's conception of *homo sacer*, which is initially derived from Agamben's 1998 work. *Homines sacri* (singular: *homo sacer*), which emerge when the law suspends itself, are placed outside the law and can be abused and/or killed advertently. The insider–outsider perspectives in the aforementioned novels converge in the way that Iraqi civilians are given the 'bare life' status. The fragility and vulnerability of Iraqis in the face of American intervention can be seen both in life and death as the struggles of the living in performing the necessary Muslim ritual of cleansing and burying the deceased. However, the insider's perspective in Antoon's novel emphasizes the muted voices of the *homines sacri*.*

**Keywords:** War Narrative; War on Iraq; *Homo Sacer*; Sinan Antoon; Kevin Powers

### **Introduction**

Literature is a dynamic milieu of expression, reception, and interaction between all constituents around the authorship and readership of the literary work. Works of art are the products of specific circumstances and settings as the author is affected, consciously or unconsciously, by the current cultural, historical, and political surroundings as well as his long-accumulated beliefs and knowledge pertaining every detail in his work (Jameson, 1981). Furthermore, works of art are not pure artefacts moulded in vacuum; they are created in larger interactional negotiations and affiliations which affect and get affected by other oeuvres (Young, 2009). Literature is also a space for history to be reached, investigated, examined, and shaped. It is a place to capture the historical moment from such an angle that serves an idea, a concept and/or some political perspective (Said, 1983). Literature, especially the novel, is also the place to serve some future political agenda, advance some ideas while refuting others and every now and then, propagate militancy against "the other" (Ranci re, 2010). This paper problematises the militancy against the other within the context of war in Iraq as represented in two award winning novels published in 2013. The first is *The Corpse Washer* by the Iraqi author, Sinan Antoon. The second is *The Yellow Birds* by an Iraq war veteran, the American author Kevin Powers. The

comparative reading of the two perspectives provides both an insider and outsider stance of the abuse suffered by the citizens of Iraq.

### War on Iraq and Fiction

Iraq has been headlining the global political news for more than half a century starting from the Iran-Iraqi War in the 1980s, through the First Gulf War in 1990s, to the blockade on Iraq from 1990 to 2003, to the Second Gulf War in 2003, and finally to the present day racial, religious sectarian conflict. Myriad of images and videos surfaced during these years to recount some facets of the wide-spread devastation throughout the geography of Iraq. The stories that come out of the Iraq war represent the multiple perspectives that each writer holds. As Jocelyn Alexander and JoAnn McGregor (2004, 80) state, "What type of stories are told about war depends on the character of the war, who is doing the telling and under what circumstances." Each war story thus encapsulates the authorial-defined social reality (Raihanah, 2009) of how he or she foresaw the 'character of the war' and its effect on the people of the land.

As an Iraqi, the author Sinan Antoon lived through the Iran-Iraqi War in the 1980s and First Gulf War. Though he left for the United States in 1991, Iraq occupied a large share of his interest and imagination where most of his novels are set. His second and self-translated novel, *The Corpse Washer* (2013), which first appeared in Arabic in 2010 as *Wahdaha Shajarat al-Rumman (The Pomegranate Alone)*, won the Best Arab American Book Award in 2014, and was translated into other languages. Both Arabic and English versions of *The Corpse Washer* received positive reviews including the following: "a remarkable achievement, [. . .] a compact masterpiece, a taut, powerful, and utterly absorbing tale that, with luck, will secure Antoon a wider, more

international readership" (Forbes, 2013, np). Roy Scranton (2014, np) contends that Antoon's novel is a must read as it offers "a moving literary elegy" for the countless Iraqis killed in the war as well as those bury them.

From the other side of the world, the author Kevin Powers builds on his experience as a war veteran in the United States Armed forces deployed in Iraq between 2004 and 2005 to write his debut novel, *The Yellow Birds* (2013). The novel was received positively by and large. Some reviewers considered Powers' novel as echoing celebrated war novels such as Ernest Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* (1929) and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (1990) among other great war novels (Charles, 2012; Tait 2013). Powers established himself as one of the renowned war novelists through his ability to narrate the incontrovertible atrocities of war and its permanent wounds (Nester, 2013).

Contextually, both *The Corpse Washer* and *The Yellow Birds* address principally 2003 war on Iraq and its aftermath, albeit their temporal scope is relatively dissimilar. *The Corpse Washer* chronicles an insider's perspective of living through the multitude of political, social, religious, and economic conflicts within Iraq brought on by the different wars starting from the 1980s. It is set in distraught Iraq where Jawad Salim is obliged to abandon his dream job as a sculptor and reluctantly inherits his father's corpse-washing family tradition. While washing the dead, Jawad becomes a witness to the daily occurrence of death in Iraq so much so that it permeates his sleep and nightmares.

On the other hand, *The Yellow Birds* is narrated by Private John Bartle who tells his story while serving in the United States Army between 2004 and 2005. He recounts his experience being deployed in Al-Tafar, Iraq, with his colleagues, Private Daniel

Murphy (Murph) and their commander, Sargent Sterling. They combat with Iraqis and witness the despicable face of war where death and destruction are the ultimate consequences. Both novels can be placed within the genre of contemporary war fiction, especially within the context of twenty-first century war in Iraq. However, the perspective of the two novels differs with Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* providing the insider Iraqi voice and perspective, while Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* providing the outsider point of view, specifically that of the American soldier.

Growing numbers of American novels are set in war-torn Iraq, many of which are written by American war veterans including Kevin Powers's *The Yellow Birds* (2013), Matt Gallagher's *Youngblood* (2016), and Roy Scranton's *War Porn* (2017). Iraqi authors have their own share of narratives that capture the horrendous experience which include Mahdi Isa Al-Saq *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq by Riverbend* (2005), Hassam Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition* (2014) and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2014), among many others. In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon's Christian background within a mostly Muslim country as well as his self-exiled position in the United State provide a unique perspective. His novel presents a powerful and necessary counterpoint to American narratives concerned mostly about the suffering of American soldiers (Scranton, 2014). It offers an idiosyncratic and multifaceted perspective to the narrative's handling of sectarian-war-torn-country under foreign influence and colonization.

Based on the two literary canons of Iraq and the United States of America, two distinct voices and representations of the Iraq war can be ascertained. On the one hand, numerous American war veterans employ their experience in the battlefield and produce many literary works as a way of

reintegration (Usbeck, 2018). They cultivate public discourse on post-9/11 wars and "pursue concrete results for individual veterans' well-being" (Usbeck, 2018, 2). In *The Yellow Birds*, Powers conveys what other novelists such as Tim O'Brien appear not to comprehend regarding America's current wars (Hawkins, 2014). Powers helps readers to experience the veracities of war by focusing on a soldier's memories (Walter, 2016). The main character, Bartle, is a victim of war, American community, and political fraudulence (Mann, 2016). His feeling of guilt is an overwhelming shadow motivated by the consciousness of "the disintegration of any trace of humanity"; he tries to reiterate human connectedness to counter the brutality of war (Precup, 2017, 188).

On the other hand, in post-2003 Iraqi literature, the metaphysical, whether through the subconscious, nightmares, or the supernatural, are frequent stylistic conventions, recounting the appalling violence and its many afterlives (Bahoora, 2015). Antoon's novel presents a melancholic struggle, replete with castration anxiety over detaching from death and everyone, through art (Restuccia, 2018). It reflects on the inevitability of death, largely on the washing of corpses, mostly described in awful detail (Restuccia, 2018). Though José Yebra (2018) argues that Agamben's theory is helpful to understand the status of Iraqis in *The Corpse Washer* under the rule of a state of exception, he does not elaborate on the concept of *homo sacer* to explain Iraqis' position.

Both Powers and Antoon's novels received considerable attention from literary critics and reviewers; however, no comparative study has been conducted to inspect the insider-outsider/civilian-militant perspective(s) in these works. Taking such a comparative perspective helps comprehend implications of literary representation of war on Iraq. This paper

inspects the consequences of blockade on Iraq in 1990 and the following American-led wars in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* and Kevin Powers' *The Yellow Birds*, drawing on Derek Gregory's conception of *homo sacer*. It seeks to demonstrate the substantial damage on Iraq and Iraqis as captured in these two narratives.

### States of Exception and Their *Homines Sacri*

An important outcome of war is the effect it has on the locals of the land who become powerless occupants of the very geographical spaces they call home; they are disfranchised from the right to rule or control their own land. Within the context of the wars in Iraq, the excessive use of military power on the land and its people has caused hundreds of thousands of casualties and destruction. In the recent American-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the geographies of both countries witness excessive use of military power. Mass explosions, fires and devastation are photographed and videotaped. Targets chosen by American surveillance via satellites are destroyed with 'smart' weapons. No matter how advanced these technologies are or how these armies claim to take civilians lives into consideration, thousands of innocent lives are taken. Civilians appear to be the utmost sufferers in these wars. Investigations are mostly called upon after each catastrophe, however, noncombatants continue to be murdered with no major consequences. Needless to say, no one could be held fully accountable. There seems to be a massive contrast between the value of human life between Americans and other Westerners' lives, on the one hand, and those of the victims, on the other (Gregory, 2004).

Sovereignty is an enterprise of disciplinary control where autonomous power can carry out its supremacy through the law. The

dominant power can suspend the law by declaring a state of exception, wherein the law is suspended while still in force (Agamben, 1998). Such state of exception qualifies absolute power to implement its role by every possible means, including murder and elimination of others, while being technically within the law. Those subjected to a state of exception are reduced to "bare life" in which their rights are abdicated, and their lives can be taken with no legal consequences (Agamben, 1998, 8). Agamben terms those with a state of bare life, who may be killed but not scarified, *homines sacri* (singular: *homo sacer*) which is appropriated from 'archaic Roman law': "An obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order [. . .] solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed)" (Agamben, 1998, 8). The *homines sacri* are outlaws in a manner where they are placed outside the law by the sovereign powers. It is Agamben's contention that in today's world the state of exception is becoming the norm and more people are reduced to a state of bare life (Parfitt, 2009).

Viewed from the lens of *homines sacri*, any nation that exercises this kind of sovereign power may disavow or suspend the law of the said land causing its people to be "made outcasts, placed beyond the pale and beyond the privileges and protections of the Modern" (Gregory, 2004, 249). Within the context of war narratives, death of members of a particular nationality is either bemoaned or seen as collateral damage. The deaths of American and other Western citizens matter, unless if they are killed opposing or witnessing the wars in Afghanistan, Palestine, or Iraq (Gregory, 2004). In relative terms, the 3,600 victims of 9/11 are remembered constantly in the West while the hundreds of thousands, or more, of civilian casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq are barely mentioned or remembered. Within the context of Afghanistan, Žižek (2002, 94) captures the

issue best in this statement: “The ultimate image of the ‘local population’ as *homo sacer* is that of the American war plane flying above Afghanistan”. Similar reports on the apparent inconsequential status of the civilians’ lives are captured within the Iraqi context, as Gregory (2013, 225) asserts, “on numerous occasions Iraqi civilians were dispatched without a flicker. The specter of *homo sacer* haunted Iraq as it did Afghanistan and Palestine”.

*Homines sacri* is further exacerbated by the discourse of Islamophobia where the religion of Islam and its followers, the Muslims, are vilified as the Other in narratives (Raihanah et al, 2015). The definition of Islamophobia from the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Runnymede Report is “any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other of public life.” (Farah Elahi & Omar Khan, 2017, 1) The relevance of this definition to the discussion of *homines sacri* is evident. The misrecognition of Islam and Muslims within by Islamophobes make it permissible to treat Muslims, as Judith Butler (2009, 42) argues, as “not quite human, and not quite alive, which means that we do not feel the same horror and outrage over the loss of their lives as we do over the loss of those lives that bear national or religious similarity to our own”. In her seminal book, *Frame of War*, Butler (2009) raises a question about those who are considered “grievable [. . .] as belonging to subjects with rights that ought to be honoured” (41). She also shares a proposition posed by Talal Asad as he contends that “we feel more horror and moral revulsion in the face of lives lost under certain conditions than under certain others” (41). Asad contends that what we feel is partly conditioned by how we

understand the world and “that how we interpret what we feel actually can and does alter the feeling itself” (41).

For the present purposes we will build on Gregory’s contention about the implication of *homo sacer*. *Homo sacer* emerges where the law suspends itself, its absence falling as a shadow over a zone not merely of exclusion but a zone of abandonment (Gregory, 2004, 62). What matters is those who are marginalized as well as those who are placed beyond the margins. “[H]omines sacri are included as the objects of sovereign power but excluded from being its subjects. They are the mute bearers of what Agamben calls “bare life,” deprived of language and the political life that language makes possible” (Gregory, 2004, 62-63). While the sovereign is the one regarding whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, *homo sacer* is the one whom all men act as sovereigns (Agamben, 1998).

### Chasms of Bereavement

Chris Hedges in *What Every Person Should Know About War* (2003) estimates that 20<sup>th</sup> century wars have witnessed to around 108 million casualties. Since the two major wars, United States military have been involved in three others in the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, namely, the Korean War between 1950 and 1953, the Vietnam War between 1964 to 1975 and the Iraq war from 1991 to the present (Tirman, 2011, 4). The numerous war memorials for soldiers who lost their lives in these wars are a reminder of how much their lives are valued by their society (Bond & Fitzgerald, 2007). Yet as John Tirman (2011, 3-4) rightly argues these memorials do not pay attention to the lives of the “victims who are not American”: “The cost of war to the population and common soldier of the ‘enemy’ are rarely found in the narrative and dissections of conflict, and this habit is a durable feature of how we remember war.” The number of Iraqi casualties in the first 18 months of the 2003 United States

invasion of the country was estimated at over 100,000 (Roberts et al, 2004; Tirman, 2011). Nonetheless not much is ‘heard’ about these deaths beyond the published numbers. As Tirman (2011, 7, 16) suggests, the lack of “voices of the victims” and the “poison of indifference and fractiousness over the topic of civilian deaths in American wars” may be the reasons why not much has been reported on this subject. Yet through literary representation of war especially from an insider’s standpoint, the world at large may begin to commemorate these victims of war with awareness and perspective. In the two works of fiction discussed in this paper, the victims of war are given more emphasis than the “cause and military strategies” (Tirman, 2011, 7) of war.

In *The Corpse Washer*, death seems to unquestionably frame the lives of Iraqis under American auspices. They are only subjects awaiting their destiny. As death hovers over the narrator, Jawad’s life through his corpse washing job, a recurring nightmare keeps visiting him. His subconscious acts as the playground where the residue of intolerable violence witnessed is manifested (Bahooora, 2015). He sees his girlfriend Reem laying naked on a marble bench. He is not sure yet whether she is dead or alive. A speeding Humvee approaches and a group of masked militants descend, hit him and amputate his head. With his severed head, he sees his slain body amid a blood pool. The armed men drag Reem and force her into the Humvee. He cries but does not hear his own voice (Antoon, 2013). Since Humvees are associated with American soldiers throughout the novel. Jawad’s dream implies Americans’ accountability for the split blood in Iraq which is primarily and exclusively American. The lives of Iraqis seem to have no value in this context as no one heeds his coldblooded slaughter.

In the same vein, death is omnipresent in

Powers’ *The Yellow Birds* albeit from an American soldier’s perspective. Malik, the Iraqi translator for the US Army, is one of the very few Iraqis whose names and personalities are given a narrative space. As he gets gunshot, his blood tarnishes Private Bartle and Private Murph’s uniforms. Nonetheless, nothing seems “more natural than someone getting killed” (Powers, 2013, 11). Murph wonders, “[d]oesn’t count, does it?” and Bartle answers, ‘No. I don’t think so’ (11). As an Iraqi who is assisting the American soldiers, Malik is not to be included in the list of casualties; his death is not to be counted. Powers hints to the insignificance of Iraqis’ life for Americans. The lives of Iraqis and Americans are not of the same value in American decision makers (Gregory, 2004). When asked about more than 500,000 Iraqi children who died in Iraq following the 1990 war, Madeleine Albright, a US permanent representative to the United Nations and later US Secretary of State, answers “We think it’s worth it” (Quoted in Gregory, 2004, 175). Though both Americans and Iraqis are destined to die because of war, in Powers’ novel the former is acknowledged and grieved for, while the latter is unacknowledged and remain invisible.

Death inflicted by war in Powers’ novel is blind and appears to not heed gender or age. Elderly people and young children are no exception. In one episode, Bartle narrates how an American soldier fires relentlessly on a forthcoming car until it is all holes though there is no evident danger (Powers, 2013). An old local woman falls out of car and tries to drag her body to the side of the road; “She crawl[s]. Her old blood mixed with the ash and dust” (Powers, 2013, 22). Upon her death, there is “no grief, or anguish, or joy, or pity” (22). The death of the innocent woman does not affect the soldiers in the least. Afterwards, the same soldier who opened fire on the car shares a cake with his colleagues as if nothing

significant has just occurred.

However, in *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon (2013) documents the consequences of the pre-2003 blockade on Iraq and its repercussions on the civilians. Despite the no-fly zone that was imposed over southern and northern Iraq after 1992, atrocities by the American soldiers continue to affect the civilians. As Jawad narrates, “fighter jets would kill innocent civilians and even herders. I never knew whether it was out of sheer idiocy, or whether it was a game, using Iraqis for *target practice*” [Emphasis Added] (Antoon, 2013, 59). Antoon (2016) contends that to understand present-day Iraq it is crucial to understand and remember what happened before 2003. Despite the declared purpose of such no-fly-zone, simple people are targeted and killed. Antoon (2016) refers to the famous incident when a 13-year-old Iraqi shepherd was killed by a missile while he was tending family sheep while other four shepherds were wounded. Such incidents occurred recurrently in Iraq through that period (Gregory, 2004). In the same vein, after the beginning of 2003 war, Jawad takes the coffin of his father in a car to bury him in Najaf though “[o]nly a mad person would want to be inside a moving car while bombers and fighter jets were hovering overhead, ready to *spit* fire at any moving object” [Emphasis Added] (Antoon, 2013, 65). Civilians in this context are treated as targets not as human beings. Their lives are not significant as no efforts are made to recognize if they pose a threat or not.

In another episode, Sinan captures the routine harassment encountered by Iraqis with the soldiers who patrol the area. On their way to bury Jawad’s father in Najaf, their car is approached by a Humvee, “looking like a mythical animal intent on devouring us” (Antoon, 2013, 66). They are ‘humiliated’ and treated like criminals, ordered to get out of their car with their hands up and commanded to ‘get down on the ground’ at gun point:

*The soldier shouted, “Put your hands up! Now! Put your hands up, now!” I put them up and told Hammoudy and Abu Layth to do so as well. The soldier shouted again, gesturing for us to move away from the car. “Step away from the vehicle!” [. . .] “Down. Down. Get down on the ground.” [. . .] We got down on our knees. Two of them headed toward us, pointing their guns at our heads, and stopped about five meters away. [. . .] The third soldier removed the cover of the coffin with the barrel of his machine gun and got up on the driver’s side to take a look and then said, “It’s a fucking coffin. Clear. Clear.” [After they left.] [w]e stood up and shook off the dirt from our clothes. I realized that we’d just survived death. A slight move in the wrong direction would have resulted in a shower of bullets. [. . .] As we got our car back on the road, Hammoudy said, “Looks like these liberators want to humiliate us.” [Emphasis added] (p67-68)*

Albeit Americans’ claim to retain Iraqis’ rights and make Iraq an example democracy in the Middle East, they are treated with contempt and humiliation. They are merely the “objects” of the sovereign power with almost no rights of claim (Gregory, 2004, 62). The novel mocks American propaganda of liberation with the line from Hammoudy: “Looks like these *liberators* want to *humiliate* us”. This aspect is seen in the weapons used which leave a long-term repercussion. As Gregory (2004, 172) rightly observes, if the Iraqis do not die from the unrelenting “post-war” bombing, they die from the legacy of the war itself. The remains of the shells used by the coalition contain uranium leads to many fatal diseases like cancer. In *The Corpse Washer*, long after Jawad’s friend, Reem, disappears, she writes him a letter declaring the reasons behind her sudden departure, she is diagnosed with cancer. Her doctor tells her that “cancer rates have quadrupled in recent years and it might be the depleted uranium used in the ordnance in 1991” (Antoon, 2013, 114). The novel reiterates the ‘bare life’ status held by the Iraqis in this context as no precautions are taken to ensure healthy lives and wellbeing of

civilians.

In addition, in *The Corpse Washer*, Sinan paints a picture of how death is inflicted on civilians without any consideration. In one episode, the American soldiers are shown to target a parked taxi while the driver stops to take a leak. As he unzips his pants, he hears an explosion. He turns and sees his car and the passenger turned into a “ball of fire” as “an American Apache” moves away (Antoon, 2013, 145). He drags the charred man from the car and tries to put the fire out. He reports “the incident, but no one explained *why* the Americans had fired at the car” (146). He later files a petition for compensation, “but *it’s all talk*. Nothing came out of it” [Emphasis Added] (146). This episode illustrates both the fragility and vulnerability of the Iraqis in the face of American intervention. To reiterate, Iraqi civilians are treated like animals by the American soldiers. Their lives continue to be targeted “as if they were insects” or “mad dogs”. As one of the characters narrates: “Every moving object on that highway became a target for the fighter jets and bombers which were hovering and hunting humans *as if they were insects* [ . . . ] The Americans were firing at any vehicle. We ran like mad dogs for more than two hours without turning back” [Emphasis Added] (117).

Similar observations are seen in Gregory’s (2004, 165) study: A journalist accompanying the US army confirms that “the Iraqis were driven ahead of us like animals”. Iraqis are reduced to “cockroaches” and “sheep,” “sitting ducks,” “rabbits in a sack,” and “fish in a barrel” (165). Locals are regarded and treated as less human and more bestial, and hence, their lives are not of value. For those who died in the war afflicted areas in Iraq, death cannot be more humiliating as corpses are piled, and human remains are collected around death sights. Being buried with a whole body becomes a privilege in

post-2003 Iraq in *The Corpse Washer*. When human remains are collected from death scenes, “fortunate” people are those who die “without losing an eye or their entire head” (Antoon, 2013, 108). *The Yellow Birds* captures similar images of the dead with the corpses of locals being left to decay while the smell mingles with the odour of sewage: “The stench of the dead had cut itself free from the other odors coming from Al Tafari. The trash fires and sewage, the heavy scent of cured lamb, the river; above all this was the stink of decay from the bodies themselves” (Powers, 2013, 88). Iraqis are also humiliated after death. No respectful rituals accompany Iraqis to their tombs. However, Powers’ narration does not appear to hold anyone accountable. War is personified to be the owner of such atrocities.

In *The Corpse Washer*, albeit the deceased do not have the right documents (Antoon, 2013, 131), their death is acknowledged as the body is being prepared for its final resting place. The list of causes of death that Jawad writes down indicates the importance placed on how the life was taken from them which included “a bullet in the forehead, strangulation marks around the neck, knife stabs in the back, mutilation by electric drill, headless body, fragmentation caused by suicide bomb” (131). He registers their faces in his memory to assign their entities some respect where their names are unknown (Antoon, 2013). Antoon through his protagonist Jawad appears to retain some of the lost reference for Iraqis which offers a counter-narrative to the senseless killings of civilians that is captured in *The Yellow Birds*. Antoon’s choice of a corpse washer as the main character and narrator in his novel accentuates the centrality and inevitability of death. It also serves as a death-meter as it provides comparable statistics of deaths before and after 2003 war. As Jawad reflects, “But death back then was timid and more measured than

today” (Antoon, 2013, 3). Death in the aftermath of 2003 “*is more generous, thanks to the Americans*” [Antoon’s emphasis]; “more and more [. . . are] killed by the Americans (104). The numbers of fatalities and the state of each case help to grasp the gravity of the situation and the circumstances surrounding their death. Jawad attributes names, feelings, and distinguished features to the dead. He ascribes human value to these corpses, so they are no longer mere numbers. Antoon’s novel seems to provide a counter *homosacer*-effect; it re-establishes the humanly status of the dead by emphasizing its value.

War in Powers’ novel, nonetheless, is held accountable for the deaths witnessed by the American soldiers. “The war had tried its best to kill us all: man, woman, child” (Powers, 2013, 4). War is personified as the power that kills a thousand American soldiers by September 2004 (4). The number of Americans killed in the Iraqi war is relatively smaller to those suffered by the Iraqi. However, as Bartle narrates, “Those numbers still meant something to us.” (4). The narration by Bartle also includes Iraqis in the collective pronoun “us” to indicate war’s overwhelming power over them. Thus it would appear as if, both the Iraqis and Americans suffered together under the influence of war. However, the bodies of Iraqis, depicted in *The Yellow Birds*, are scattered “at irregular intervals” (4), some are hidden in alleys and “found in bloating piles in the troughs of the hills outside the cities, the faces puffed and green, allergic now to life” (4). Thus, unlike the Iraqi soldiers and civilians, American soldiers’ deaths are treated respectfully. They are not left to decay in streets. Powers in this novel appears to distance the American soldiers for being held accountable for the atrocities committed in Iraq. He captures war’s influences on the American soldiers to the point that they become mindless of their “own savagery now: the beatings and the kicked dogs, the searches and the sheer brutality of our presence. Each action was a

page in an exercise book performed by rote. I didn’t care” (Powers, 2013, 159). The narrator Bartle acknowledges the fact that Americans’ very presence in Iraq is savage. However, their violent acts are not to be penalized given that the American soldiers are turned into wild beings because of the circumstance of war. It appears as a convenient argument for Powers to blame war for the crimes committed against the people of Iraq.

However, in *The Corpse Washer*, Sinan calls the Americans out for the long-standing carnage committed in Iraq. Much like the pre-2003 era, the destiny of post-2003 Iraq is in the hands of non-Iraqis. As Jawad reflects on the death of the former president of Iraq Saddam Hussein, “*Those who brought him down were the ones who put him there in the first place. They armed him to the teeth in the war...*” [Antoon’s Emphasis] (Antoon, 2013, 103). Iraqis are thus governed by the default sovereign. They are deprived of the right to choose their own destiny and to make their own history. Iraqis under the sovereign rule of the Americans are helpless objects who are entirely at the mercy of the occupying power. Likewise, when Jawad’s uncle, Sabri, enters Iraq from the Iraqi Jordanian border, he was “welcomed” by an American soldier who was patrolling the border (Antoon, 2013, 85). The only Iraqi official in the checkpoint “wear[s] slippers” (85), who receives orders to stamp passports from American soldiers. When Sabri collects his passport, he notices that, “even the name of the state [Iraq] no longer existed. The stamp simply read, “Entry-Traybeel Border Point.” As if Iraq had been wiped off the map” (86). In a nutshell, post 2003 Iraq, as captured in *The Corpse Washer*, has become a land ruled by the sovereign occupiers and the Iraqis are made foreigners in their own land.

Furthermore, Iraqis are disenfranchised from their right to relate to their history and civilization (Antoon, 2013). As “[h]istory is

*a struggle of statues and monuments,”* statues that represent Iraq’s great cultural figures are destroyed and stolen in the promised Iraq [Antoon’s Emphasis] (103). Under the auspices of American occupation of Iraq, Iraqis are disconnected with their rich history. As Jawad reflects, Americans are “rewrit[ing]” the history of Iraq by obliterating its historical roots, its bonds with its glorified past (103). Disparaging Iraqis’ past implies simultaneously disrespecting their present. National monuments with their symbolic significance in Iraq are also the subject of contempt under the sovereign rule of Americans. American soldiers who are “stationed at the [Martyr] monument” have turned it “into a barracks (Antoon, 2013, 94). Concrete blocks and barbed wire barricaded the gate and soldiers with machine guns stood guard. Armored vehicles and Humvees parked inside along the path that led to the monument itself” (94). Jawad feels “deeply offended and angered” as he witnesses “the American soldiers with armoured vehicles occupying a place which symbolized the victims of war—victims such as my brother and thousands of others” (95). Jawad’s uncle, Sabri believes that it is “a premeditated insult, calculated for its symbolic significance. It was not a matter of logistics” (95).

Sinan, through the character of Sabri, voices the sentiment felt by many in his native land. In an article published after his visit to Iraq, Sabri mourns the fate of Iraq and its people. He recognises the continuous abuse suffered by the Iraqis and asks the most pressing question, when will Iraqis have true sovereignty over their land?:

*Iraqis and palm trees. Who resembles whom? There are millions of Iraqis and as many, or perhaps somewhat fewer, palm trees. Some have had their fronds burned. Some have been beheaded. Some have had their backs broken by time, but are still trying to stand... some have*

*allowed invades to lean on their trunk. ... some stand in silence. Some have fallen. Some stand tall and raise their heads high despite everything in this vast orchard: Iraq. When will the orchard return to its owners? Not to those who carry axes. Not even to the attendant who assassinates palm trees, no matter what the color of his knife.” (Antoon, 2013, 97-98)*

Sabri’s article calls into question the *homines sacri* status of the Iraqis, akin to the muted bearers of life discussed in the earlier section (Gregory, 2004) where the Iraqis are denied true status of subjects in their own land.

The similarity between the journalistic reporting and the fictional portrayal further solidifies the argument of the *homines sacri*. Both Antoon and Powers depict similar images of Iraqi carcasses being eaten by dogs; human bodies occupy large spaces of their narratives. While dead American soldiers are kept in proper places before they are sent back to the US to be buried reverently (Powers, 2013), Iraqis’ bodies are thrown everywhere disrespectfully (Antoon, 2013; Powers, 2013). They are “plucked from their families and lives, tossed into the garbage in Baghdad’s outskirts, thrown into the river, or rotting in the morgue” (Antoon, 2013, 131). Both novels elaborate on the degraded status of their death, its unbearable smell and sight.

Iraqi characters are not drawn in depth throughout Powers’ novel. They are mostly depicted in rather distant landscapes where their identities are largely unidentified. However, their miseries and exploitation are realized in the narration. Their wails fill the stillness of Iraq’s nights; they protest Americans’ very presence in Iraq. Contrary to Jawad, Bartle only relates the scenes, actions, and reactions without taking part to counter the injustice inflicted on Iraqis. Antoon addresses overtly and persistently American’s accountability for the most part of death, humiliation, and sectarian divide in Iraq. They are responsible for Iraq’s

status quo since the eighties. On the other hand, Powers covertly puts blame on the American presence in Iraq and American soldiers' misfortunes on war without clearly holding his government accountable.

## Conclusion

In his preface to *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon writes, '[n]ovels inhabit a liminal space between the real and the imaginary' (Antoon 2013). In effect, Antoon and Powers play in that liminal space to convey the unspeakable realities in Iraq. We can fathom in these narratives on and about Iraq as no news agency. Both authors declare their protest against war and demonstrate its 'bare life' holders. They enable their readers to see and hear Iraq from within. Iraqis in these two narratives bear that 'bare life' status introduced by Agamben (1998) and Gregory (2004). They are placed outside the law as *hominne sacri* and are mistreated and murdered with no consequences under the rule of the state of exception. Even after death, they are being humiliated. In *The Corpse Washer*, instead of becoming a sculptor who celebrates life in his works, the 2003 Iraq war forced Jawad to attend to death on a daily basis. Jawad's corpse washing job made him the perfect witness and receiver of corpses, which are death's 'envelopes'. He also observed the humiliation inflicted by the American-led coalition upon his people. In effect, Jawad's profession was counter-effective to the Americans' schemes in that he provides the dead some due respect by performing cleansing rituals. In *The Yellow Birds*, Bartle passively observed and recounted the unspeakable aspects of war and the humiliation experienced by its *homines sacri*, the Iraqis.

These novels convey a strong message about the lethal, destructive and all-devouring aspect of war. Both condemn war as a greedy machine of bereavement and devastation. Wars are not justifiable in any

way and are merciless to those who have involved themselves in these events either willingly or reluctantly. The insider-outsider perspectives offered by these novels converge in the way that Iraqi civilians are given the 'bare life' status. The fragility and vulnerability of these Iraqis in the face of American intervention can be seen both in life and death as the struggles of the living to perform the necessary rituals on the deceased. However, the insider's perspective as seen in Antoon's novel clearly demonstrates the muted voices of the *homines sacri*. Unlike the reporting of casualties in most print and online media, the fictional portrayal of civilian deaths seen in *The Corpse Washer* adds the necessary human dimension to the discourse on the Iraq war beyond numbers and statistics. Antoon gives the deceased some recognition through a simple yet significant ritual of Muslim corpse washing. Perhaps with such a fictional portrayal, the world at large will begin to recognise the 'poison of indifference' that the civilians of the Iraq war have been subjected to over the past decades.

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