On March 20th, 2003, the United States military invaded Iraq beginning an occupation that would last years until evolving into the Iraq Civil War (2006-2008). The continued military insurgency and the Iraq Civil War drastically altered the way which Iraqi civilians looked at their country and the ways of living that they had always known. The occupation of Iraq marked a watershed moment in the history of Iraq, and the literature I am to analyze explores a period of cultural rebirth in Iraq from the point of view of the Iraqi civilian.

I have chosen specific works published in the decade following the conflict that share a common symbol of the corpse. The corpse, a far too common sight for the average civilian during the war, is used as a device to showcase how the power imbalance created by the United States military presence within Iraq worked to bury the reality of life as an Iraqi civilian and thus transition Iraq into a new era. I will look at two novels, *The Corpse Washer* by Sinan Antoon and *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi, alongside the short story collections, *Redeployment* by Phil Klay and *The Corpse Exhibition* by Hassan Blasim, jointly they focus on the collective memories of people who were in Iraq during these years to emphasize the greater impact of war on the further development of Iraq literature and culture post-war. Together, they bring to the forefront the winner-sided narrative that comes with war by showing facets of life that have been neglected in history through the symbol of the corpse demarking a cultural rebirth in Iraq.

Throughout literature and other forms of media, the way in which wars, or really any watershed moments, are remembered is through the voice of the winner. The narrative told to the public that we see on the news is only coming forward under the discretion of those responsible for the outcome of the events who then hand select elements that are spoon fed to
the watching world. When the news of Iraq War dominated headlines globally, the narrative being told, and the facts being delivered to us in the Western sphere of influence were controlled by the American military due to the inherent power imbalance between the United States and Middle Eastern countries on the global stage. However, through the development and growth of a new literary culture within Iraq in the 2010s, the cultural representation of the Iraq War began to evolve a new perspective by way of Iraqi authors taking on the daunting task writing about the recent tragedies experienced by civilians during the 2000s. Regarding the Iraq War, there is not an end-all-be-all piece of literary fiction that adequately explores the complex nature of the Iraq War like there has been with earlier American conflicts (such as the work of Tim O’Brien wrote on Vietnam,¹ for instance). In this essay, I will explore how these examples of Iraqi literature that emerged post-war aim to reevaluate the global understanding of the conflict within Iraq by using the perspective of Iraqi civilians to deconstruct the winnersided narrative and denote a turning point in Iraqi society emphasized through the image of rebirth shown with corpses in these works.

The idea of the corpse presents itself in different ways across the books The Corpse Washer, Frankenstein in Baghdad, The Corpse Exhibition, and Redeployment, but at the core of each, the author is writing the story of the rebirth of a nation. The narratives presented through these novels and short story collections rely on the utilization of near realism to tell the story of the civilian experiences in Iraq working to connect the lives of the everyday Iraqi civilians together through their shared experiences during the reformation of Iraqi culture. The

image of the corpse is highlighted by these authors as a symbolic representation of the joint experience of Iraqi civilians in effort to depict why this period in Iraq’s history signifies the rebirth of a culture. The idea of the corpse is the physical embodiment of death as seen through the eyes of the everyday person bringing together a sense of collective identity from shared experiences that people can never relate to in the same way as another person there. The authors all made conscious decisions when writing whether to present the corpses within narratives as anonymous figures calling the reader to envision themselves in their position or to give the corpse an identity as a form of tribute to the stories that inspired their narratives. Through unifying the experiences of the audience and those the authors have used as the foundation for their writing, these works build a collective memory of life as an Iraqi civilian that is not seen in the same manner across literature and other media which is why I have specifically selected these works for this essay. In creating a collective memory this way, an environment has been formed within Iraqi literature that serves as an archetype for other Iraqis and people across the world to interpret, to understand, and to express their personal experiences with tragedy and how these changes have affected them.

The primary goal of Iraqi literature developed during the 2010s implies an attempt to reconcile and understand both the recent and modern history experienced by the civilians of Iraq. Literature, as a medium, allows authors to craft unique worlds that are derived out of how the people most impacted by the growing military influence had over the day-to-day life and culture within present-day Iraq. By integrating history through collective memory of the civilian understanding of the conflicts within Iraq into fictional recounting of this era, authors like Sinan Antoon, Hasan Blasim, and Ahmed Saadawi work to deconstruct the narrative
surrounding the occupation of Iraq that is predominately circulated throughout the western world. Through the seemingly contradictory relationship between the brutal reality of the civilian experience and the fictionalized retelling of stories collected through personal histories of Iraqis, literature allows for the creation of universalized accounts of what it means to be an Iraqi living through this period of cultural rebirth.

Political scientist Larry Diamond analyzed the role of literature as a medium within the context of his studies in the greater societal change of Africa during the decolonization period. Within his research, Diamond hyper focuses on the specific importance of fiction in understanding the growth of cultures during periods of large-scale changes saying:

"The literature of a society tells us much about its culture, social structure and even politics. Indeed, the fiction of a certain country, culture or period may reveal more of its values, customs, conflicts, stresses, changes and transformations than does all the formal scholarship of historians and social scientists. In particular, fiction may give us special insights into how culture and history intersect with and reshape, or are reshaped by, the lives of people, ordinary and extraordinary. For these reasons, literature may provide a precious and indispensable window into a society, a people, and an era. But fiction is more than a passive reflection of society and history. It is also an active influence, reinforcing or refashioning values, beliefs, ideas, perceptions and aspirations. The teller of a story can become a powerful force in shaping the way a people think about their social and political order, and the nature, desirability and direction of change."²

Within this excerpt from his essay “Fiction as Political Thought,” Diamond argues that literature serves an indispensable role within cultural analysis because of the position literature holds alongside citizens of these countries being analyzed. Diamond observes the position that fiction maintains within literature highlighting how fiction has been continually developed as a method for the dissemination of cultural evolution through what he refers to as the social and political order. Applying this line of thinking presented by Diamond onto the literature that emerged during the era following the Iraq occupation and the ensuing Iraq Civil

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War of 2006, and the importance of the growing field of Iraqi fiction begins to develop a greater significance as it serves to represent the evolving mentality and socio-political order within Iraq in modern times. Through the fictionalized presentation of history within literature, authors reconstruct the narrative surrounding their society in a manner that creates universal experiences reflective of the greater social conditions of the times.

Diamond refers to how ordinary people are able be the catalyst to reshape the social values of their culture reflecting on the sentiment created through the work of Ahmed Saadawi in his novel Frankenstein in Baghdad. The novel is a tall-tale almost in the spirit of a Brother’s Grimm-esque fairy tale that blends the magical realm of fantasy within fiction alongside the visceral realism of civilian corpses lining the streets of Baghdad in a reimagining of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. As the story goes, there is a man who sits at the corner of the neighborhood coffee house telling the story of the Frankenstein who lurks the streets at night. He says the being is sewn together like that of the work of Dr. Jekyll composed of the body parts collected at end of the day of military invasion by the United States within Baghdad brought to life by the spirit of the city during the night. Through the “whatitsname?”, as the book’s characters refer to the creation, Saadawi prompts an insightful conversation about ethnic and religious division within Iraq calling for the culture of Iraqis to reunify behind the tragedy they experienced together as a people. The whatitsname was patched together with the remaining pieces of Iraqis regardless of whether they were a Christian or a Muslim, whether you were rich or poor, whether you were a Baathist extremist or not—they were still Iraqi. The

whatssitsname existed to represent Iraq and its people manifesting itself as a visual depiction of the strife of the Iraqi. It was a symbol of a new Iraq. “It was an image that had as many forms as there were people to conjure it,”⁴ Saadawi writes of the whatssitsname. The image of the whatssitsname changing through the perspective of different people in Iraq signifies the importance of developing a collective memory through literature during this period. Saadawi warps the fantasy of the classic Frankenstein story into the vicious and grotesque reality of life as an Iraq civilian bringing forth this motivational cry for the ordinary people who suffered the most to use the power Diamond believes they truly have to give way to the cultural rebirth of Iraq post-war.

Within the growing field of Iraqi fiction, there is a heavy reliance developed on near-fictional retellings of the Iraq occupation with the intention of the authors being to utilize the shared experiences undertaken during this period. Through fictionalizing first-person accounts of the war and the tragedies civilians were left witness to, there is a shared sense of unity created that works to express what it truly means to be an Iraqi. The novels that I have chosen to analyze within this context share in this attempt to establish a new Iraqi identity reshaped by the recent memories that these people still hold fresh at the fronts of their minds. Across The Corpse Washer (Sinan Antoon), The Corpse Exhibition (Hasan Blasim), and Frankenstein in Baghdad (Ahmed Saadawi) the imagery of the corpse is used to symbolically represent the rebirth of Iraq marking the US occupation as the beginning of a new era. Through the presentation of many corpses as anonymous, the authors work to deconstruct personal identity

in favor of the collective experiences of Iraqis as a people rather than individuals. The intertwining of the collective memories of Iraqi civilians living in the streets with the authors’ personal understanding of the experiences in efforts to find the silver lining that often seems lost in narrative maintained in the western world about the Iraq War. Like how Larry Diamond sees fictional literature, these Iraqi authors out of a great tragedy developed the ability to promote social changes reestablishing the values that define the Iraqi way of living.

The image of the corpse is used as the centerpiece of Sinan Antoon’s emotionally charged *The Corpse Washer* to examine the many forms violence took in Iraq during this era. The novel tells the story of a family of corpse washers who are the civilians remaining in the city to clear the human causalities accruing in the streets. “Corpses piled up like goals scored by death on behalf of rabid teams in a never-ending game.”

The narrative of time and its relationship to trauma is painted throughout Antoon’s writing as the image of the corpse haunts the minds of the civilian Iraqi characters found in his novel. An unnamed character says, “I cannot wake up from this endless nightmare of wakefulness. Some people go to work behind a desk on which papers are piled. Others operate machinery all day. My desk is the bench of death. The Angel of death is working overtime...I walk down the street and look at people’s faces and think *Who among them will end up on the bench for me to wash?* The never-ending cycle of death entraps him, and where others would seek distraction or solace, for these Iraqis, there is only more death waiting. Professor Radwa Mahmoud, of Ain Shams University,
labels *The Corpse Washer* as a “trauma novel”\(^7\) \(^8\) praising the way, “Antoon redefines the trauma of war by exposing its violent psychological and emotional consequences...experienced by the minds and hearts of the Iraqis.”\(^9\) Through an unparalleled emotionally-driven appeal, Antoon highlights the normalization of the presence of corpses within the daily lives of civilians, and attempts to reposition the corpse as a symbol of Iraqi unity rather than the death of a people and a culture. Central to the role of the corpse washer is to recognize and celebrate death as a symbol of the rebirth of oneself in the afterlife, so *The Corpse Washer* expands this job from the washing of individuals to the celebration and rebirth of Iraq as a nation in a post-war world.

Before I discussed how war creates unequal narratives that result in many perspectives and stories being lost to history, never to be heard from. With the conflict in Iraq, the perspective of the Iraqi civilian has become one of these perspectives seemingly lost to history directly because of the influence on Western media held by the United States. The narrative read in the news and seen on television holds a distinctly Western bias that prioritizes the perspective of the American military causing an imbalance in the representation of the Iraq War that skews heavily in favor of the American military’s presentation of history. The American media actively limited what was reported and the structure by which it was delivered to the masses in a manner that deliberately offered critiques of Iraq as a method to sway the

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\(^8\) “The term “trauma novel” refers to a work of fiction that conveys profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective levels (Balaev, 2008)” – definition excerpt taken from Mahmoud (2016). 51.

American audience in favor of the war\textsuperscript{10}. This process, titled War Programming by authors David Altheide and Jennifer Grimes, fundamentally altered the narrative of the Iraq War by establishing a fear-based consumption of the news contributing “to the construction of broad symbolic enemies and goals, for example Iraq.”\textsuperscript{11}

The understanding of how perspective influences narrative lays central within the Iraqi fiction that developed during the 2010s as authors like Sinan Antoon, Ahmed Saadawi, and Hassan Blasim begin to reestablish the place of the Iraqi voice in the history of the Iraq War. The conflict has on its surface an inherently Middle East versus Western conflict arise in the narrative of the war that is remembered, but to fully understand the greater perception of Iraq during this period, one must look at how these authors are differentiated from one another in order to see how this influences their writing and Iraqi fiction beyond only their writings. The difference in perspective these authors bring to their writing allows for the development of alternative points of view of the Iraqi civilian which in turn establishes a more complex dichotomy of civilian experience.

Tying many of these differing perspectives together is their image of violence and how it has impacted the lives of those within Iraq through the symbolism found in lifeless corpses. The ideas of death and dying is often associated with the religious symbolism of the afterlife whether this be in the form of the Christian heaven, Hindu reincarnation, or the Islamic Akhirah to name a few common examples. The integration of death into spirituality is a global phenomenon that creates shared elements spanning across religious traditions. Through their


\textsuperscript{11} Altheide & Grimes
depictions of death and the symbolic rebirth of Iraq, authors like Sinan Antoon, Hassan Blasim, and Phil Klay are able to incorporate their religious traditions into the narrative of the Iraq War. By doing this, these writers express their unique disposition that they approach the idea of death during the war from when writing. Antoon is heralded as one of the most accomplished Iraqi authors of the modern day, but what is often neglected when evaluating his writing: Antoon is a Christian. Antoon’s Christianity is a rarity amongst Iraqi as the country was reported to be 97% Muslim as of 2019. Because of this, Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer* presents a very different view of the civilian experience in Baghdad that is representative of a religious minority in the country. This leads Antoon to present Christian undertones within his writing similar to that of American author Phil Klay—a former Catholic Marine deployed in Iraq.

Oppositely, Hassan Blasim, author of *The Corpse Exhibition*, writes from the perspective of a Muslim Iraqi which when contrasted to Antoon’s perspective highlights the importance of religious afterlife in the understanding of civilians experiencing the death and destruction first-hand.

In the short story collection *The Corpse Exhibition*, by Hassan Blasim, is a story titled “The Iraqi Christ.” The story of “The Iraqi Christ” goes as follows:

A unit of Iraqi soldiers were camped out in an abandoned girls’ school. Amongst the unit were all Muslim soldiers except for one man named Daniel who was a Christian. Daniel would always chew gum, and it drove the other soldiers mad leading them to eventually nickname Daniel Chewgum Christ. Daniel was an expert in radar systems becoming known amongst the unit for his almost inhumane ability to detect incoming strikes. Daniel lived by the saying, “Humans are the best radar receivers, compared with other animals. You just need to practice making your spirit leave your body and then bring it back, like exhaling and inhaling,” (Blasim, 94). The unit placed their full faith in Daniel’s ability to determine where strikes would land following him all across the country during their service, so much so that the narrator of his story claimed, “All that we had left was our faith in God, and the powers of Daniel the Christian,” (Blasim, 95). Eventually, Daniel decides his time serving the dictatorship in Iraqi is finished and returns to his

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civillian life caring for his elderly mother. Daniel would go on to die at the hands of a suicide bomber in a restaurant while feeding his mother.¹³

At this point, the story transitions to a depiction of the afterlife. Here, we learn the narrator of the story had been executed during his time serving, and now exists within the afterlife when he encounters Daniel for the first time since Daniel had left the military. Daniel reveals the ending to his story telling the narrator that the suicide bomber offered to save Daniel’s mother if Daniel takes the bomb and detonates it himself.

What is significant about this story? Why does one of countless suicide bombings stand out amongst the countless deaths that occurred in Iraq? Through Blasim’s depiction of Christian soldiers serving in the same unit of the Iraqi military, the complexities of religious values and how these impacted the actions of Iraqi’s begins to emerge. Daniel throughout this story is not referred to by his given name, but rather as “Christ” establishing the comparison between the actions of Daniel as a martyr to the spiritual motivations these soldiers hold deep within. This short story is being told from the perspective of a Muslim Iraqi soldier who is also in the afterlife, and it is worth noting that the narrator exists within the same afterlife as Daniel the Christian. This shared afterlife crosses beyond the boundaries of religion building upon the idea that the Iraq War redefined what it means to be Iraqi moving beyond the divisions that had traditional split the population. Being an Iraqi before the war came with a certain way of living that had evolved over generations into the modern Iraqi culture that the authors experienced, but following the events of the war, the ideas of an Iraqi life had changed. The civilians living within cities like Baghdad were left picking up the pieces as they attempt to start

a new beginning in the rebirth of Iraq. The shared afterlife from the short story “The Iraqi Christ” parallels the new beginning of the nation of Iraq being experienced by the Iraqi people. This shared afterlife Blasim creates doesn’t differentiate on the basis of religion, but instead harkens on the ideals of joint unity between Iraqis as they are left undergoing cultural change together.

Approaching the religious undertones presented during the conflict from the Western perspective, Phil Klay explores the nature of death through the lens of a Catholic Marine veteran presenting an interesting counter perspective to that of the Iraqi authors I have discussed prior. Klay has received critical acclaim for his writing, and in 2014 was awarded the National Book Award for fiction for his collection of short stories about the war in Iraq, Redeployment. Within this collection, Klay’s upbringing as a Catholic serving on the side of the American Marines provides a grim examination of the brutality and violence conducted by the American military taking a stance that aligns more with the Iraqi authors rather than other Americans. Klay published a short story entitled, “Prayer in the Furnace”14 which analyzed the extreme measures undertaken by the United States military in Iraq from the perspective of a Catholic priest within the Marine Corp. Klay explores the violence of war with an implicit Catholic guilt highlighting the conflicting emotions within the experiences Klay uses as inspiration. In “Prayer in the Furnace,” a soldier by the name of Rodriguez approaches the units in house priest with the intention of undergoing the Catholic rite of confession. The story unfolds through the eyes of the priest as he listens to the soldier Rodriguez talk about their recently fallen compatriot exploring the narrative that surrounds death from the perspective of

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the United States Marines. During their dialogue Rodriguez states grimly, “If you killed somebody that means you’re going to hell,”\textsuperscript{15} accepting the destiny he believes awaits him. Rodriguez continues clarifying his acceptance of fate saying, “somebody you’re not supposed to […] I mean, not Marines. I mean, out in the city. And, if other people did it, too, when you’re out there, and you don’t stop them. Do you go to?”\textsuperscript{16} The character Rodriguez poses one of the starkest questions one can ask in war. How do you live with yourself when you know what you are doing is not justifiable? Klay’s Catholic upbringing shows through as he questions the actions of the military through the lens of a Christian belief in justifying one’s actions by focusing on the large scale of death that is overtaking the streets of Iraq. The interconnected nature of the military and religious conflicts taking hold of Iraq are shown through the Western military point of view by Klay as he stands against the actions on occurring in Iraq due to his religious beliefs. The heavy dependence on faith and religious undertones presented by Klay parallels how the Muslim authors like Blasim and Saadawi utilize their religious identity as a focal point to evaluate the experiences of civilians within Iraq.

The Iraq War saw the mass devastation of an entire nation with the goal to destroy the way of life that once defined Iraqi living. The occupation of Iraq resulted in cities being leveled, and lives by taken in countless numbers as their bodies formed piles in the street. Attempting to overcome this level of tragedy as a nation plagued with division can be nearly impossible, but what the post-war era allowed was the development of a new symbolic rebirth of Iraqi culture in the 2010s rooted in the collective history of the Iraq people. The redevelopment and

\textsuperscript{15} “Payer in the Furnace” \textit{Redeployment}. 139.
\textsuperscript{16} “Payer in the Furnace” \textit{Redeployment}. 139.
establishment of a new cultural heritage for the country to rebuild on the back of created a foundation that Iraqis across the world can use as inspiration. The works created out of the trauma shared by thousands across Iraq aim to unite the country together behind a shared experience as a way of progressing beyond what once was.

Iraqi authors emerged in the years following the war, both in Iraq and across the world, with their own unique perspectives surrounding the history of the Iraq War. These works challenged the common narratives of the war that had been circulated by the Western world as a result of the inherent winner-sided bias that exists within modern media and news. During an interview with the Ruya Foundation, Ahmed Saadawi, author of Frankenstein in Baghdad, said on this topic, “What is being said in the media is real, and what isn’t being said doesn’t exists.”

This belief that the stories of Iraq are being silenced or repressed serves a driving influence behind the growth of Iraqi writers as they sought to express the multitude of unique perspectives within Iraq. Sinan Antoon discussed his motivations when writing The Corpse Washer with The Christian Muslim Studies Network, going on to say, “I wanted to show that there are two people who are living in the same house and experiencing the exact same events but of course they have totally different perspective because of their age, their gender, their lived experience.”

The importance of perspective lies at the heart of Antoon’s writing, and through the symbolic representation of the corpse and the esteem he presents death with,

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Antoon tries to recreate the narrative surrounding Iraq to show the deeply-rooted heritage upheld by the people suffering the most during the Iraq War.

Through the positioning of an author’s own identity within their writing, their message has been able to evolve beyond words on a page into a guide from which a people can live. The writing of these Iraq authors took the darkness of death, and through the reimagining of history in a near-fictional narrative, the novels created a model for the evolution of a new Iraq in an era of rebirth. The ability to find the light within the dark shown through the Iraqi perspective is a powerful example to follow for other countries suffering turmoil at the hands of outside oppression globally to as we continue to see Iraq evolving through the growth of Iraqi-written literature.
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