

Subalternity in Post-2003 Iraqi Novels: Sinan Antoon's *The Eucharist*

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Abstract

This article examines the postcolonial issue, the subaltern, in post-2003 Iraqi novels. The selected translated text is Sinan Antoon's novel (*Ya Mariam*) in 2010 which is translated into *The Eucharist*. As a postcolonial issue, the subaltern gives the idea about what is considered to be minor to the focus or center. It is related to those people who suffer from being undermined under the prevailing of other people's majority in a certain society. It is like the inferior to the elite. On the other hand, it is resembling the asylum seekers or the refugees in their host homes. Those individuals are, generally, neglected politically, socially and culturally. They, if in their colonial or postcolonial homeland, suffer the duality of being part and apart from their country. Such a controversial feeling is exemplified in the duality of the two main Christian Iraqi characters in the selected translated text *The Eucharist* in its English copy for Sinan Antoon 2012.

Keywords: The subaltern, *The Eucharist* for Sinan Antoon, the dual affiliation and consciousness

Introduction

The Eucharist or *Ya Mariam* is basically about the different ways of considering estrangement felt by two Christian characters of different ages, Youssef and Maha, inside Iraq. Iraq, as it is perceived by two opposite opinions of old and current outlooks, is what epitomizes the setting of homely estranged minor native people. Past and present attitudes are being offered by the two characters along the whole novel. Maha, the young lady and Fouad's wife, condemns the postcolonial present and disdains the past about which she has no idea. She blames her relative Mr. Youssef, the old Christian man, for being so indulged in the praiseworthy memories he preserved in his mind, "You're just living in the past, Uncle!" (p.1), then she repeats it twice. The past imagined wonderful Iraq is what makes Maha emphasizes Youssef's cut off from the horrible present, "Uncle, I know nothing about the old days! Nor do I want to know. All I want is to live with dignity and be treated like a human being!" (p. 17). Youssef's response right here is also not enough to persuade her with what he got when he says, insisting on history and the past, "Yes, that is your right. But history" (p. 17). Maha, with designation, answers, "What history, for God's sake! You're just living in the past, Uncle!" (p. 17). In her reply, Maha who endures the current postcolonial condition cannot stand being dissimilar to what is going on to her people in her country and shift to live in the past, the imaginative.

Subalternity and discrimination, such concepts are present in Maha's evaluation for her critical condition, as a Christian, inside Iraq as she asks Youssef, "I'd like to know when you think our situation was perfectly stable. When was it that there was no discrimination or racism?" (p. 17). Actually, this repeated impression of Maha can be traced within her heated discussion with Youssef all the time, as he notices that "... she doesn't believe there was a time when sectarianism didn't exist." (p. 62). It is a kind of always being on one side and having the rest, especially old people, on the other side. Again it is like a continuous contrast between past and present images of Iraq and Iraqi people, before and after 2003.

Optimism and pessimism, these two reflective feelings are dominant and clear in the exchanged opinions of the main characters. Old people or characters who have gone through many experiences are so optimistic whereas young characters who have witnessed countless dramatic terrible changes are very pessimistic;

"We'd been discussing sectarianism and our status as Christians, and before I knew it, we were arguing and the argument became very heated. but the disagreement was profound. She's very pessimistic... she thinks there's no hope left for us in this country. She just wants to get her degree and leave with her husband." (p. 61)

Maha insists on not believing of the existence of in the least unity or harmony among the different groups or sects in Iraq. She seems so pessimistic to the point that she sets herself aside from her society. In comparison to the present time, she cannot trust the past as well. She, in return, does not trust the claims of Youssef and the hopefulness he acquires from his deep-rooted memories of Iraq. Youssef, in certain moments, also starts suspecting the truths of past wonderful Iraq that he keeps on retelling all the time.

Youssef points to certain reasons behind the histrionic changes that happens to Iraq after 2003. Firstly, it

could be an old hidden fact among people in there, or it is all about the new comers from abroad with US troops. Youssef keeps it open with his query about it as he wonders,

Honestly, it's still a mystery to me. Has there been sectarianism all along and we simply weren't aware of it? Or is it all a result of foreign interference and this hatred for us, and all those people returning from abroad who brought all their filth with them? (p. 62)

In a very long semi-soliloquy, Maha starts over mentioning her personal daily confrontation with the social ills of the post-2003 era. She declares that "All I want is to live in a place where I'm like other people, where I can come and go as I please without anyone pointing at me or reminding me that I am different" (p. 88). She is an Iraqi, but different from other Iraqis. In her condition, having no representative voice in the social or political domain, Maha gets that feeling of duality, of being a native citizen, yet a different citizen in certain cases. She can feel it at work, at university, and even in the street as she walks in every day. Men and women catch the same reaction of disrespect seeing her not wearing a hijab. Also on Facebook, she sees posts of some people blaming Christians of cooperating with the occupation forces. She writes back replies reminding the posters that this accusation can be directed to Muslim individuals as well.

The inferior and elite contrast is present in this part of the novel within Maha's continuous criticizing of her surroundings. She accuses the current ruling elite in Iraq of conjoining the occupation. She makes it clear in her comment "Hadn't the current ruling elite come in on the heels of the occupation? Hadn't all the religious and sectarian parties and groups cooperated with the occupiers?" (p. 89). The social and political pressures push Maha and other Christians of having this double awareness and consciousness or of thinking of leaving their country. To be a minority is a problem in postcolonial societies. Besides, religious pressure in post-2003 Iraq has its impact on the co-existing of people there, "I was exhausted, because everything and everyone, with or without reason, reminded me that I was just a 'minority'" (p. 90). In the same atmosphere, Maha refers to the useless try to live in other countries as emigrants as Youssef mentioned that. She has been cautioned by him that "... emigrating to countries where the majority of people are Christian is not without its own hardships and difficulties, and it wouldn't mean that I won't also feel like a minority there" (p. 90).

Repeatedly, alienation is what keeps a minority like Christians in a state of instability. It is engraved in the minds and hearts of Christians who have almost no voice to defend them politically or socially. Maha gives it a hit when she says "... our exodus from the house in al-Dawra didn't take place all at once in the summer of 2007. Rather, it was one of an unbroken sequence of events that spanned many years" (p. 95). Together with this inward displacement, the chaos that prevails the country after 2003 comprises a language of death, godliness against irreligion, verbal threats, and handwritten messages arriving at the door of Christian homes.

"The two voices are sharply different. Youssef's tone meanders through Iraqi history, fondly touching on family photos and memories. Maha's is relentlessly, miserably present. Both look back at their country's history, but with an entirely different gaze. They see approximately the same events, but come to radically different conclusions about Iraq's past, present and future. Both Youssef and Maha are bright, critical observers. Youssef is hopeful and positive without whitewashing the crimes of the present or past" (Qualey, 2017).

"He does recall fond stories about family and friends, but he also remembers how a close friend's father had his assets frozen and property confiscated, such that they had no choice but to emigrate. Youssef remembers the moment his Jewish friend told him, "My father has registered our names under the emigration law. We're going to Israel." When Maha looks back and thinks about the exodus of Baghdad's Jews – which she is far too young to have seen first-hand – she piles this on top of all the other frightful brutalities. It also serves as an echo of what might yet happen to Baghdad's Christians" (Qualey, 2017). "Youssef sees Iraq as his country, but Maha can't imagine any place for herself. When she looks at old photos in a Facebook group called "Beautiful Iraq", she reflects on what members call the "good old days" and doesn't find a happy time among them" (Qualey, 2017). Her feeling of subalternity is deeply rooted in her mind and heart. "Maha feels that she has become a refugee in her own country. She and her husband are waiting to emigrate and escape. Hope collides with destiny and violence changes the lives of the two narrators forever" (Antoon, 2014).

Conclusion

Being a subaltern inside or outside your homeland is the same, here. The protagonists prove with their opposing ideas that the small groups are part of their society in the pre-colonial era, but they are apart from it in the postcolonial era, especially in Iraq. Their affiliation is under the impact of the political and the social reaction of people in post-2003 Iraq. The conversation is centered of a comparison of past and present, of peace and hatred, and of living in or leaving Iraq as refugee in other homelands although being a subaltern is also present there.

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