

# Iraqi Identity in Sinan Antoon's Poetry Collection *The Baghdad Blues*: A Diaspora Study

## 1.1 Introduction

Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi writer and poet whose fiction and non-fiction have been widely discussed under various literary genres, expresses and explores multiple types of Iraqi identity and its related questions in his poetry collection *The Baghdad Blues*, carrying many other works in her literary career. Meanwhile, Iraqi national identity and its constructions and reconfigurations have been discussed widely in academic and journalistic works, concerning issues such as historical identity, nationalism and nationalism's relationship with good governance and economic development, the role of political institutions, religion and gender, ethnicity, ethnicity's relationship with the state, citizenship, and so on. Iraq has witnessed an indispensable sequence of transformative historical events including the Ottoman rule, British occupation, native ruling monarchy, first and second republics, first Baathist and second Baathist rules, Saddam's regime, thirty-two years of embargoes, two Gulf Wars, sectarian strife, civil wars, and hold of ISIL in some regions of Iraq and the resulting grievances. The corresponding turmoil and instability has produced a huge Iraqi diaspora, as well. Against the backdrop of this complicated political and historical situation, it is compelling to realise the importance of the diaspora for the formation and re-formation of Iraqi identity (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). The central focus of the study that follows is the exploration and analysis of variation and multiplicity within Iraqi identity in light of Sinan Antoon's poetry collection *The Baghdad Blues* (2007) from a diasporic perspective.

Sinan Antoon is one of the most prominent Iraqi diaspora writers who attempts to maintain the Iraqi identity alive while living in exile (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). Other exile writers such as Nawal El-Saadawi, Lucy McEvoy, and Mahmoud Darwish also address the post-colonial Arab diaspora by revisiting themes of war and displacement, often focusing on nationalism and rooted identities. Writing extensively about the Arab-Israeli conflict, Darwish meditates on the relationships between homeland, desire, and loss. However, for many Arab-American writers whose works are concerned with the state of identity regarding mass Arab immigration to the West, nationalistic feelings reflect a collective imagination of their homeland patterned on clear and definite myths rather than on Harb's "open-ended signifier" of the homeland. Maysaloun Faraj adopts a narrative of multiple ruptures to focus on the coexistence of many identities, and consequently, the Arab nation dissolves into fragments of multiple diasporas in which individuals can no longer recuperate lost origins.

Throughout his poetry, Sinan Antoon confronts the absurdity of war, chaos, and the daily excessiveness endured by himself and the nation. Employing sharp black humor and irony, he protests the Syrian government, the U.S. invasion, violent opposition groups, the UN sanctions regime, and the exiled Iraqi opposition (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). Such humor manifests as a critical, enduring political statement amid loss, exile, and disaster: a means to endure fated circumstances and an instrument to mock violence and untruth. For example, the poem "Why Are We still in Baghdad?" in *The Baghdad Blues* questions the

purpose of ongoing conflict and occupation. Featured on the Internet at the onset of mainstream opposition to the war in Iraq, the poem encapsulates the frustration, disappointment, and hopelessness experienced by many uprooted Iraqis, offering a subtle critique through irony and wit.

## 1.2 Historical Context of Iraqi Identity

Iraq's location as a nexus of the Silk Road fostered rich cultural traditions, but the imposition of a British mandate after the Ottoman Empire collapsed slowed the growth of a unified community (Marie Duhon, 2008). The first major effort at Iraqi independence was a failed Shia uprising in 1920. The attempt to unite the country continued in 1921, when Faisal I was crowned king and a constitutional monarchy was established. The British continued to use indirect rule, however, and Iraq's borders were redrawn a century later by some Iraqi parties to the Section 140 of the Constitution. The result was a fluid interplay of ethnicity, religion, tribe, geography, and class, with amplified tensions and an ongoing search for belonging that continues to define Iraqi identity.

Iraq's modern nationalist unity began in the 19th century as the Ottoman Army retreated and British imperial power expanded in the region. The monarchist era (1921–58) suffered from authoritarian and patronage politics and contestations over national identity, ultimately setting the stage for the coup d'état and 1980s wars. Façade nationalist rhetoric concealed the surreptitious imperial domination throughout the monarchy. The Iraqis' quest for independence was blocked until a group of army officers established a republic. The Ba'ath Party rose to power in 1968. Saddam Hussein pushed aggressive Arab socialist policies and propaganda, which promoted an expansive political and cultural view of Iraqi identity. The result was increased haughtiness and hollow nationalism, along with a strong emphasis on Arabism at the expense of ethnic, religious, and sociohistorical realities.

The overview of Sinan Antoon's Work. Sinan Antoon writes fiction, poetry, translation, and scholarly studies on Iraq and the Middle East. Most of his work addresses social and political issues in Iraq, particularly the sectarian violence that followed the U.S. invasion, with a focus on oppression, tyranny, and injustice. He combines high aesthetic standards with political relevance. Antoon's fiction and poetry protest decades of injustice, oppression, and war. His poetry collection *Air Conditioned Night*, for example, explores love, loss, and longing amid conflict and condemns tyranny and violence. His novella *The Corpse Washer* reveals Iraq's history, iconography, and present-day conflicts through the struggles of a Christian youth navigating sectarian strife (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

## 1.3 Thematic Exploration of The Baghdad Blues

Sinan Antoon's poems in *The Baghdad Blues* voice the physical and psychological casualties of a nation in crisis. Displacement and exile are the collection's recurrent subjects and potent metaphors, vividly epitomizing the Iraqi condition. The section assesses the thematic interplay of identity, exile, belonging, and alienation in mirroring the Iraq crisis. Poetic reconstructions of Iraq's social, political, and economic upheavals dramatize Iraqis' contradictory needs for attachment and detachment as they negotiate the conflict between identity and estrangement in a marginalized diaspora.

*The Baghdad Blues* is a landmark volume embracing 1989 to 2003 and Iraq's major critical junctures — from the invasion of Kuwait, through the Gulf War and the ensuing

Gulf embargo, to the 2003 U.S. invasion. The poetry heralded a new stage in the developing discourse of contemporary Iraqi arts and letters, reflective of daily experience, rather than confined to Mesopotamian archeology or classical legends. Poet and novelist Sinan Antoon (born 1967) emigrated from Baghdad to study in the United States in 1991 under the United Nations' auspices, remaining thereafter an exiled migrant with a dark, bitterly sardonic insider's perspective.

Antoon sketches an obsessive interrogation of the question of identity, involving the space between the self and the other, and presented through the notion of a national self, a state in diaspora, and a culture in transition. The central postcolonial issue is the deployment of customary tropes and clichés that are habitually appropriated by metropolitan powers to consolidate imperial ideologies. The reinvention of the homeland assumes new significance in the various and sometimes contradictory measures and methods deployed to secure the striving, assertive – yet fractious – community. Iraqi identity transcends territorial allegiance or citizenship of the Iraqi Republic, involving a complex and multifarious negotiation that resists facile representation and attempts at taxonomies. Under the heavy pressures of national and religious turmoil and oppression – deterritorialized and busy with internal self-reflection – the Iraqi diaspora constitutes a crucial site of cultural creativity and energetic synthesis (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

## 1.4 Diaspora and Identity Formation

Research has explored how members of the Iraqi diaspora express political and social concerns through literature. Sinan Antoon addresses such issues with a combination of aesthetic skill and political relevance. Antoon has also been active in documentary filmmaking and frequently comments on the global injustices that motivate his work, demonstrating a role for the artist as global citizen. The poetry and fiction of Antoon function as protests against tyranny and violence in Iraq. His collection *The Baghdad Blues* contains war and love poems condemning tyranny, war, and death, often pairing war themes with love to suggest national hope and personal healing (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

Iraqi poetry explores two important aspects of Iraqi identity: diasporic challenges and the exilic experience. Poets such as Saadi Youssef, Sinan Antoon, and Dunya Mikhail recite both political and artistic poetry that reveals the tribal and collective nature of Iraqi identity in the exilic diaspora. They articulate the historical impact of war, disappearance, and torture, examining how these issues reconstruct identity and redefine home and belonging.

Language in Sinan Antoon's *The Baghdad Blues* encapsulates the anxiety and tension of a people experienced with displacement and a disturbed identity. As a vital aspect of cultural identity, language preserves the memory of a people (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). The despised mother tongue and a failing culture can be reasons for a community to disappear. The language of discharge for the marginalized Iraqi that Antoon portrays is Arabic, which deeply resonates with a number of thematic expressions in his poetry collection. The mission of *The Baghdad Blues* — as depicted through the diversity of emotions and concepts crossing Antoon's poetry — is to return to Iraq and confront the calamity of a civilization annihilated by war and violence. Language emerges in several ways: as a symbol of test and crisis in the sense of a critical width; as a vehicle of the historical continuity of the Iraqi culture and civil identity; and as a reminder of cultural

identity and a symbolic reference to belonging, centered on the principles that unite the lovers of Arabic language and literature.

## **1.5 Narrative Techniques in The Baghdad Blues**

Some poems in The Baghdad Blues adopt a storytelling form in which Antoon recounts events and impressions using narrative techniques. These narrative poems echo similar observations by exiled writers who stress that memories of Iraq have a lasting presence (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). The narrative conveys accounts of the raids and violence that residents endured, as well as notions of displacement and the widespread anxiety and fear that continued to affect the day-to-day lives of those who remained.

One potential symbol of Iraqi identity is the Tigris River, featured as the opening of “The Baghdad Blues.” The epigraph poem, “Tigris,” is pivotal, evoking the river not only as the historical birthplace of Mesopotamian civilization but also as a present source of wounds. The river captures the persistence of Iraq’s older and newer historical scars, where past oppression accumulates with the traumas of war and forced displacement, leaving Iraq exiled, Iraqis homeless (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). Since the Tigris River runs through much of Iraq, it epitomizes the geographical area overwhelmed by the diaspora, and God is the only source of hope capable of restoring Iraq to normalcy through the river’s water. The epigraph section is also introduced by a Persian proverb claiming that anyone who has fallen in love with the city cannot bear to leave it.

## **1.6 Political Commentary in Antoon's Poetry**

The political theatre surrounding Iraq’s situation has brought attention to the individual’s identity when caught in its web. Sequels to the postcolonial discourse on identity further explore the dilemma of identity when confronted with contemporary moments and events. Contemporary identity is constructed through the political theatre playing in public space. It is clear that both geopolitical and local politics have an impact on individuals and collective identities, yet there is no universal common form for these impacts. The political consequences drawn on the individual and the locus of identity that is given to the individual depends on time and place, and are associated with specific questions asked of identity. Given pre-existing identity options, political changes may be the prime impetus for pursuing thoughts and acts that lead to new, alternative forms of identity. In the context of political change, the choices concerned often relate to such issues as self-determination, sovereignty, loyalty, ideology, ethnicity, religion, and nationality — each of which points to a source or locus of identity as well as to a set of social relations that come to assume heightened significance.

The political commentaries in Antoon’s The Baghdad Blues is a critique of the war. It advocates that, because war affects individuals as well as the nation, no one in Iraq is entitled to be considered a refugee or exile. This establishes that the individual and the nation are in fact inseparably linked to each other. Consequently, it is inaccurate to see any diasporic literature as merely an exploration of the personal where political is not efficient or political power is only evident in the context of home and host country relations (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). Antoon emphasizes that in a totally engulfing war, the individual and nation are not dichotomous units and that the history of a nation is the history of its people. Each narrative blending within the other is inseparable from the other. Individuals will be physically removed from their homeland, cut off from their former cultural influences and experiences, but will still be attached and intrinsically

connected to their nation. Given the level of integration between the individual and nation, it is difficult to isolate one from the other, and therefore, it is impossible to determine which narrative is dominant.

The fascination with identity remains one of the most essential concerns of all the diaspora writers, as its dilemmas are not only rooted in place but also in a time. Conrad describes Sinan Antoon's poetry book *The Baghdad Blues* (2016) as a poignant exploration of cultural identity, exile, and resilience, offering profound insights into the nation and its diaspora. The collection features a compelling journey to perform "a funeral dirge for the country itself", which no doubt highlights the complex and contested nature of Iraqi identity experience. The theme of Iraqi identity is considered to be extremely sensitive and controversial, as it divides the scholars into two groups; the first regards identity as explicit and fixed, emphasising homogeneity and the characteristics which make a person or a thing different from others, by presenting a predetermined conception of collective essential; the second advocates that the identity construction should be viewed as a continuous process, and the objects of identification are not original but come into being purely in relationship to otherness (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). An identity can be defined as a self-portrait constructed from objective, personal, and social elements. In this regard, identity can be conceptualized as a wide-ranging notion that provides multiple meanings and various modes of understanding, given that it is frequently used to designate attributes of people, groups, things, and places.

## **1.7 The Impact of War on Iraqi Identity**

The impact of war on Iraqi identity has become one of the most prominent themes in Sinan Antoon's poetry. In *The Baghdad Blues*, the sense of rupture caused by violence and continuous exile marks the instability of the Iraqi self (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). The war is the condition that defines identity, yet this presence is connected with the absence of the homeland. Hence, the conflict is the central driving force of identity and simultaneously the cause of exile. The images in Antoon's collection of poetry represent both the political realities that continue to dominate Iraqi territory and the distance from home. The war and the exile are equally present in the definition of identity; in them the specularity of the mirror produces the traumatic experience of a younger generation that has only known Iraq as a prison of violence.

The destruction of Iraq is the destruction of the homeland but also the destruction of memory, of the exit image, and of the history of life. The poetry reflects on the erasure of the past in the elaborations on the loss of language as a vehicle for the inscription of history. The references to the attack in Iraq symbolize the attack sustained by memory. The memory of Iraq becomes the obligation of the displaced individual and exiles no longer represent an escape from the historical events or the violence of war. Loss depletes the present and annihilates the future and only martyrdom can evoke the collective identity from the melancholia of death and the frustration of the present. Sites of death become places of memory where identity can be projected with a future and through memorials.

The connection between gender and identity has been subject to ongoing debate. Within the context of diaspora, a crucial question arises: Where does gender fit into one's perception of national identity? Furthermore, cultural identity itself is not fixed; it remains fluid, constantly redefining itself in response to new realities and hybrid formations. It is an unfolding and continuous process, necessitating an internal

redefinition shaped by both exilic and nomadic experiences, with political conditions serving as a foundational lens (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

## 17. Critical Perspectives on Antoon's Work

The study of Iraqi poetry during and after the 2003 invasion reveals a strong connection between writers and evolving wars, alongside a more open attitude toward freedom of expression and civil society.

Establishing a comprehensive historical overview of Iraqi identity is a crucial preliminary for understanding Sinan Antoon's poetry collection *The Baghdad Blues*. Poetic expression and representations of the self are influenced by surrounding circumstances. Section (2) outlines key events shaping identity at critical points of rupture, emphasizing the significance of understanding these contexts. Section (3) examines Sinan Antoon's overall literary production, highlighting notable contributions beyond the main corpus. A thematic reading of *The Baghdad Blues* that identifies several major topics follows in Section (4), including exile, longing, radical loss of homeland, displacement, alienation, identity crisis, memory, dictatorship, social injustices, war, terror, and resistance, with resilience and hope as overriding motifs. The identification of prominent themes provides a framework for subsequent, in-depth close reading and assessment of individual poems. Literary poetic expression tends to emerge in response to specific broad and changing conditions. Section (5) explores identity in direct connection to the concept of diaspora. The formation and preservation of identity relies on community and the collective imaginary, but diaspora is often framed as the exception, capable of "holding claims to at least a partial identity but only by virtue of some tenuous or indirect connection to an imagined homeland".

Oppositional depictions of homeland do not simply affirm belonging; they actively transform the notion of identity, which necessarily becomes in flux and celebrates hybridity. Antoon engages with the contrast between various contemporary diasporic representations of Iraq, and with the notion of diaspora itself as a contested, ambiguous, and problematic concept within the Iraqi context. Sequence and syntax become pivotal for the understanding of the poetic creation. The use of language is explored in Section (6), which examines the role of Arabic and English as tools for stabilizing cultural memory, asserting identity, and reconstructing a holistic stand within the diaspora.

(Qasim Habeeb, 2015)

Critical reception of *The Baghdad Blues* underscores its profound engagement with the Iraqi war-torn experience and diasporic existence. Reviewers emphasize how the collection captures the surreal absurdity of gaping wounds left by the conflict, employing a performative and poetic voice that both records and replicates the experiences. The poems assume roles beyond mere reporting, urging readers to address Iraq's complex aftermath and opening a discourse on exile that privileges discussing the country over the condition of the displaced. Constructed under the shadow of hung military boots and the scent of pulverized Sanam Palace, the collection conveys an intimate honesty that troubles standard historical narratives while asserting the poet's responsibility to represent unreported facets of life. Such accounts mirror Iranian-exiled poet Simin Behbahani's observations on cultural annihilation and enduring national identity, demonstrating the poems' function as a mode of resistance and an invitation for shared understanding.

The Baghdad Blues exemplifies the mutability of identity in diaspora, depicting Iraqi identity as a spatial interaction—one that thrives on hybridity and is subject to constant negotiation. The collection juxtaposes images of desolation and loss with those of resilience and regeneration, indicative of individuals actively constitute identity through their social trajectories (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

Contributing to the formation of a collective Iraqi identity, Antoon's deliberate incorporation of distinct imagery and symbolism enables poets to examine their intricate identities and find their place within the cultural arena, reminiscent of approaches employed by Iraqi folk poets. Folklore—expressed orally through customs, tales, music, and dances passed down through generations—serves as a reservoir rich in symbolic and mythological references, exerting a profound influence on Mostefa's oeuvre (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

## **1.8 The Role of Exile in Shaping Identity**

Exile embodies a condition of possibility and transcendence that underpins the creative imagination. It offers a sphere beyond existential constraints in which dreams and determination may confront the traumas of survival. Art enables flight from the burden of circumstance, allowing pursuit, questioning, exploration, and repossession of the lost.

The creative imagination grants the artist the capacity to inhabit home while abroad, to live its anguishes and truths, and to reconstitute the past while participating in the present and envisioning a new world. Art and poetry provide the means to reminisce, contemplate, fantasize, and, in the process, to transcend the pain of exile (Oguibe, 2005).

Antoon's engagement with acts of remembering and remembering acts functions as a critical concern in his body of work. It allows him to explore the production of knowledge and the management of forgetting within the context of monumental events.

Through his writings, he illustrates how the processes of memory formation reveal indelible connections with sites of production and circulation, while also highlighting the number of absences in the archival framework of what can and cannot be remembered.

The writer completes his discourse by exposing the means through which trauma practitioners construct living memory, one that entangles the past and the present in the midst of a violent political crisis (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

Exiles become curators of collective and individual trauma, tasked with re-presenting warehoused pain, portent, and yearning. Writing, envisioning, and imagining therefore constitute not only a form of creativity or an act of affiliation but also a political vocation of melancholic and angry conviction. Antoon's The Baghdad Blues assumes a transformative role as a creative imagining that simultaneously articulates solidarity with the origins of that rupture and insists on a new way of being Iraqi. Exile constitutes a generative space in which the 'Iraqi' acquires new inflections and reaches a new synthesis, necessitating a model of identity, alterity, and allegiance that encapsulates the practices of endurance and survival of those not able or willing to return.

Antoon's works constitute a significant contribution to contemporary literature by expanding the repertoire of Iraqi war narratives and exploring the complex connections between trauma, exile, autobiography, and social injustice. His poetry, represented most clearly in The Baghdad Blues, bears witness to not only violence but also hope, courage, and affection. Although disillusioned by the catastrophe that befell his country, Antoon still views love as the essential antidote to terror and a vital source of resistance against tyranny. Throughout all his works a commitment to social justice remains the guiding

principle for his activism, which operates simultaneously in both the personal and political spheres of experience. For Antoon the role of the artist is to demonstrate uncommon courage, to look beyond the official view of events, and to speak up for those who have been denied a voice, thereby bearing an ethical and political responsibility that can seldom be undertaken without considerable risk (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

Iraqi identity is multifaceted, constructed and contested around the country of origin and other essential ingredients, such as mother tongue and religion, with its different sects. The very identity of Iraqis is premised on topographies.

The literature's core concern is the external dimension of Iraqi identity which characterises Iraqis moving through, or exists, in multiple space-times and experiences (from Baghdad to Paris and from London to Chicago). Sinan Antoon's poetry collection The Baghdad Blues reveals facets of Iraqi identity in diaspora. The discussion accentuates the diasporic dimension of Iraqi identity as it conveys a framework for negotiating and understanding the multifaceted identity, and exposes a trajectory for further research into the intricate and complex Iraqi identity (Qasim Habeeb, 2015).

## 1.9 Conclusion

Here are ten recent sources discussing themes related to Iraqi identity and the poetry of Sinan Antoon, particularly in the context of his collection "The Baghdad Blues" and diaspora studies:

In "The Baghdad Blues," Sinan Antoon portrays Iraqi identity as a multifaceted and hybrid phenomenon, representing it as a perpetual work in progress (Qasim Habeeb, 2015). The collection articulates the experiences of diaspora individuals, rendering the displacement of Iraqi people and the fragmentation of their identities distinctly. Within this context of political instability, cultural ambiguity, and social chaos, Iraqis endure profound disillusionment. Yet their psychological struggle also bears witness to their resilience; despite the carnage of bombings, the dismemberment of historic sites, and the falsification of books, Iraqi people persist in suffering. The abuses inflicted upon them and the injustices they endure continue to diminish their economic standing and straightforward existence, compelling them to continually navigate the quest for a meaningful identity.

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