

The Status of Christian Women in post- 2003 in Sinan Anton's The Baghdad Eucharist

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Abstract:

This research aims to study the situation of Christian women in Iraq in post-2003 novels and to find out if Sinan Antoon was able to embody the discrimination that women are exposed to through analyzing some quotations that reflect what the female character Maha faces in Antoon's novel *The Baghdad Eucharist* (2017). The significance of this study is to understand the conditions and challenges of Christian women and reveal the factors that led to the deterioration of her status in Iraq after 2003, and for analyzing the novel *The Baghdad Eucharist* (2017). by the Iraqi writer Sinan Antoon, which is a mirror of the reality of this marginalized group in Iraqi society. The study finds that the political and social changes brought with them new trends and ideas that are alien to society, represented by extremism and rejection of the other. women of minorities face discrimination against, persecution, and marginalization in Iraqi society as well are exposed to many challenges and difficulties due to the political and social situation in post-2003, the largest, as they suffered from disapproval of their way of life or their clothing style, which made them constantly waiting for the moment of escape. These problems and challenges were documented through the novel *The Baghdad Eucharist* (2017). where a clear and detailed vision was presented about the situation of Christian women in Iraq after 2003. One of the most important findings of the research is that it is important to work to improve the status of Christian women in Iraq and to provide protection necessary for them and defend their rights in Iraqi society. In addition, these results can be used in other studies related to women's rights and discrimination in Iraq.

Keywords: Christian women, discrimination, Majority, Minority



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1. Introduction

In light of the turbulent situation that prevailed in Iraq in the post-2003 war, which cast a shadow on society in terms of the emergence of new political and religious movements and orientations, and thus their reflection on individual behavior towards others. Society is divided into a conservative majority that follows certain values and tries to impose them on everyone, and a minority that tries to preserve its values (Salloum, 2018). Iraqi literature has recently dealt with many social and cultural issues related to the situation of women in Iraqi society, as woman suffers from many challenges in the society. Many writers dealt with these issues in a different and varied way, and among these writers, the Iraqi writer Sinan Antoon in his novel *The Baghdad Eucharist* by which dealt with the issue of the situation of Christian women in Iraq after 2003 in particular. Antoon's novel touches on the sensitive tension experienced by the minority component in general, and the woman in this component in particular. Antoon describes the memories of one family and shows how the entire fabric of society is destroyed when individuals are forced to conform to the values of the majority, are killed by sectarian violence, or may simply disappear, never to be heard from again, and this causes them to lose their lives, which leads to the minority resorting to fleeing. The novel presents the story of Maha, a Christian



who lives in Baghdad and who was Attacked and psychologically abused by others after the US invasion of Iraq. In light of the conflicts that occurred after 2003, Christian women in Iraq are subjected to discrimination and persecution by the Iraqi patriarchal society. This appears clearly in the novel *The Baghdad Eucharist*, which documents this problem and focuses on the experience of the main character who suffers from many problems because of her gender and religion. The study aims to validate this hypothesis and analyze the reasons for this discrimination and its impact on the life of Christian women in Iraq and how to represent this in a narrative that includes the problems and challenges they face in Iraqi society. This research is important for understanding the conditions and challenges of Christian women in Iraq after 2003, and for analyzing the novel *The Baghdad Eucharist* by the Iraqi writer Sinan Antoon, which is a mirror of the reality of this marginalized group in Iraqi society. The research also seeks to reveal the factors that led to the deterioration of the status of Christian women in Iraq and shed light on the challenges they face.

2. Literature Review

In this part of the study, previous studies concerning themes of some Iraqi novels that tackle Iraqi situations after 2003 are addressed. Alkriti (2019) has focused





on the post-colonial impact of post-2003 Iraqi narratives on individuals in the diaspora milieu in selected translations of *The Tobacco Keeper* (2011) by Ali Badr, *The Book of Collateral Damage* (2019) and *The Baghdad Eucharist* (2017) by Sinan Antoon. The author applies the concept of double consciousness in a way that highlights a very wide range of personalities in postcolonial issues. The author believes that the dominant characteristic of Iraqi immigrants is the endless sense of dual awareness of these problematic personalities. Rached (2015) has handled the effects of Iraqi-American interpreters working for the US military in Iraq post-2003 on Iraq and Iraqi women. Highlighting how enriches and problematizes feminist translation approaches developed in post-colonial Quebec. Khammas (2018) has shown the way Televised images of tortured and violated bodies during and after 2003 altered the conceptualization of the body in Iraqi reality where contemporary Iraqi fiction establishes revolutionary and creative links between ideology and masculinity. Ali, S & Hussein (2020) has investigated women's social status in western and Arabic novels *The Infidel Woman* by Ali Bader and *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne in different cultures and centuries. They have invested an analytical method to describe women's social status in *The Infidel Woman* by Ali Bader and *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne. However,





they have reached the conclusion that women have found comfort in literature, particularly in novels, in pronouncing their life and in announcing their resolution of liberty that enables them to express most of their thoughts and feelings. Abdulridha (2020) has discussed the feminist movement and the theory that endorses it, and examine of whether there is an effect of the female role in the novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. The study has concluded that The novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* embodies the idea of such a society where no root of feminism seems to exist, The novelist has portrayed women in such a limited way showing off that he is not quite a feminist.

As discussed above, previous studies dealt with different issues that were addressed in the works of Iraqi novelists but did not address the status of Iraqi Christian women in post-2003 Iraqi society. Therefore, this study will focus on studying the situation of the Iraqi Christian woman through the character of Maha as a model in Antoon's *The Baghdad Eucharist*, which is the focus of the current study.



3. Feminism

Modern Feminist Theory may be marked with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's criticism the inequality between men and women. Women have the right to practice similar social, legal and intellectual rights just as men do which adopts the idea that women are distinct from men because she was born with different biological features and mannerisms (Castle, 2007). A woman could be as good as a man if she wishes to be. Millet (2016) takes a focus on the sources of power that where patriarchal in nature, which is considered the source of women's oppression. So Millett focuses on ideas contain a stand against inequality and the domination of patriarchal forces in the social and religious fields as well as all the other fields were humans are included.

Millet asserts that the ideological structure of the patriarchal system contains of a set of ideas that cause corruption and abuse of power around us and then destroying women's lives. The dominance of the patriarchal ideology of men gives them social power affecting the minds and emotions of people, including the religious institutes and the family. Millett reveals the low positions in which





females are placed by ideological authority to gain a sexual hierarchy that gives priority to the male in everything. She summarized her definition of politics in these lines:

When one group rules another, the relationship between the two is political. When such an arrangement is carried out over a long period it develops an ideology (feudalism, racism, etc.). All historical civilizations are patriarchies: their ideology is male supremacy.

Daly (1978) handles a similar viewpoint that religion authority is a 'patriarchal systems and it is rooted in male 'sado-rituals' where 'torture cross' symbol refers to women insulting. Simone de Beauvoir (1953) states that religion is used by the ideological authority as tool to oppress and control women. Religion classifies women as a second-class status with promises that the price of their obedience would be equality in heaven. El Saadawi (1980) believes that the concept of women's oppression is an issue that is not related to religion itself, but rather reflects an image of male dominance over religion. This comes because of men's interpretation of religious texts incorrectly

4. Methodology





The approach followed to analyze the data in this study is mainly a qualitative one because it involves a text analysis of some quotations which have been collected to find out the status of Iraqi Christian women after 2003.

The research methodology is to carry out an analytical study of the reality of Christian women in Iraq after 2003, using the analytical method to study the sources related to this subject. Scientific literature and previous studies published in this regard were also relied upon, in addition to studying the novel *The Baghdad Eucharist* by the Iraqi writer Sinan Antoon, which dealt with this subject in detail.

Text analysis: The novel *The Baghdad Eucharist* is analyzed by studying and analyzing the its text to search for events and characters related to Christian women after 2003, by focusing on the literary elements, characters and scenes related to Christian women in the novel. These elements and scenes are analyzed and interpreted in a detailed and accurate way to reveal the writer's vision and position on the situation of Christian women in Iraq after 2003. Emphasis was placed on the themes that appeared in the novel, which refer to the suffering and challenges of Christian women in Iraq, and the events that dealt with this subject were analyzed in detail.





Collecting sources: The necessary sources for research are collected by reading the novel and studying critical articles and previous studies published on the subject.

5. Results and Discussions

The novelist portrays the situation of Christian women in Iraqi society after the 2003 war and the subsequent social, political and security changes and disturbances that made Christian women as part of the Christian component carry an additional heavy burden that rests on their shoulders, and makes them constantly feel anxious and dangerous. Muslim majority in society does not understand the provisions and customs of the smaller Christian component, a number of problems and misunderstandings result and take a course of attack and non-acceptance (Hindy et al., 2019). The changes that occurred in society brought about a tremendous transformation on all political, social, economic, and religious levels, and affected the Iraqi individual. A significant shift in the demographics occurred in post-2003, as most of the population moved to other areas after residing in closed areas. Many were not ready to see minorities who





did not look like them or to openness to which they were not accustomed. On the contrary, the new residents who settled in areas inhabited by the minority are affected and restricted in their freedom, especially as they brought with them new religious and social currents that imposed their views and teachings by force many times (Salloum, 2018).

And since fictional literature is one of the tools through which the novelist reflects the different aspects of society, Antoon, in his novel *The Baghdad Eucharist* (2017), seeks to highlight the personality of the Christian woman who has her share of suffering and feeling rejected after the 2003 war, which resulted in security and social problems that make her see that her current situation is not exactly like her situation before 2003, and things have become irreversible. “you are just living in the past” (p.1). The novel begins with these words of the female character, Maha, the Christian girl who believes that she has become a minority in the majority dismissive of her. The text refers to Maha's deep concern about the abuses Christians are subjected to. The text here discusses the cultural and religious tension that can lead to different interpretations of the same reality, while Maha considers the current situation disastrous and lives in a state of fear and isolation. This is evident from the words of Youssef, one of the Maha's family members: “I know, but the disagreement was profound. She's very





pessimistic. She thinks there's no hope left for us in this country”(p.61). Maha feels lost and non-belonging. In this conversation, she appears resentful of what is happening. Sinan Antoon presents the character of Maha in the Baghdad Eucharist as a symbol of Christian women and the pressures that Christian women endured in the midst of lawlessness, political chaos and insecurity, and how this affected the woman's personality and made her in fear, constant anticipation, and constant thinking of escape from this reality. In her words, Maha expresses that her present existence has become unimportant and that her state of feeling safe or being accepted by others has become a part of the past. This matter represents a struggle experienced by Maha, a woman who lived through the war, the deterioration of political and social issues, and the division of society into new trends that reject each other.

Another image of not understanding the other and looking at him as if he is different is embodied by Antoon (2017) in his novel:

One time, I had taken a bag of klaicha to school with me and when I took them out to eat them before the lecture, one of the other students who knew I was a Christian expressed surprise “ you guys also eat klaicha “ he asked.. I was so annoyed I couldn't hide it (p.89).

Through the female character Maha, the reader can imagine the extent of suffering and the social and psychological pressure that Christian women





are subjected to in the midst of a society that looks at them strangely. The novelist embodies this through the question of Maha's colleague in the study, who asks her: Do you eat kleijeh like us? This indicates that the Muslim majority does not know the details of the life of the Christian community and looks at it as if it is completely separate and does not resemble them in terms of customs or culture. It is interpreted as a kind of ignorance and religious and cultural intolerance, and reflects the society's need to promote peaceful coexistence and understanding between cultures and religions.

Antoon (2017) explains the great gap that the Christian female character, Maha touches between the two components, which increases her suffering as a woman from the other component, and makes her feel a deep sense of non-belonging or acceptance from the other. Maha compares what she feels when she is facing rejection from others with what her Christian relative, Youssif, sees or feels. She clarifies in her words how she, as a Christian woman, is exposed to what a Christian man has not been exposed to, and therefore he does not feel what she is going through:





He doesn't hear the things I hear or see what I see every day. He can't imagine what it's like for a woman to be looked at the way they look at me. It feels as if they are looking through me, as if they are X-raying me to determine the extent of my disease, of my defilement, just because I am not like them and don't belong to them. And it's not just men who look at me that way but also women; they stare and make me feel I am a whore for not wearing a hijab (p.89).

Here, Antoon (2017) sheds light on a large and complex part regarding Christian women and their feeling as a strange being in the midst of a large conservative component. Through the words of the female character, Maha, who sees that Youssef does not feel what she feels as a woman when she walks in the middle of the street. No one looks at him with astonishment and checks his clothes, whether he is modest or not, does not look at his body, does not look at his with astonishment and disapproval because he did not wear the hijab.

A stark feeling is transmitted to us, which Maha touched through her expression of her desire not to feel that she is the minority that opposes the majority. Emphasis should be placed on the heroine's discourse, which sends a clear message that the Christian woman's suffering in facing the conservative other is different from what women face in general. She is seen as a woman who is rebellious against collective customs and contrary to the majority's orientation.

“I held out for two years, but then I caved in and started covering my head, using





the scarf that I wear to church. I wear it everywhere now just so people stop looking at me in that way”(p.89).

The author presents a model for a woman besieged by the armies of harsh rule, and a society that views women as subordinate and obligated to abide by the rules of the majority. Trying hard not to draw attention to her, she puts a prayer scarf on her head in church. It is the means by which the female character attempts to feel accepted by others.

It is a struggle resulting from the majority's lack of understanding of her affiliation with another component that may differ in its teachings, rulings, and in some details from others:

“your father’s name is George? That’s a foreign name, isn’t it?

“No, it’s not foreign, its Iraqi,” I told him

“Oh, really? George isn’t foreign? You know, like George Bush?”

“No, like George Wassouf, And George Qurdahi.”(p.89).

Antoon (2017) presents another siege faced by the female character, Maha. She faces a denunciation of her father's name, which is not similar to the common names, and she finds herself in the position of justifying the meaning of her father's name and that it is a familiar and colloquial name (such as George Wassouf and George Qirdahi). But she feels that the gap becomes deeper this





time, as her father's name, according to others, is (a foreigner) (similar to George Bush's name).

This is an important point that the writer is very clever to refer to in order to clarify the scale of the problem that is rampant within society, which made Maha (a foreigner) first as a different woman from others within the majority, and secondly, as a woman belonging to the minority that has become alienated, marginalized and reprehensible because she does not resemble others even in her father's name: "Why don't you people go and find ourselves some good Arabic names? There's no shorter of names is there?"(p.88).

The majority's refusal comes in the form of denouncing to Maha. "No Araibic or shorter of names are there?". This makes Maha feel that she is in a big prison that is putting pressure on her from every side, and she wishes that she could be freed from it. The text also explains the challenges facing Christians, which are represented in facing religious and cultural discrimination in society. Accordingly, the society is in need to accept difference, cultural diversity and religion, and the prohibition of discrimination due to external phenomena such as clothing or names. All of the aforementioned causes Maha to live in a constant spiral of hope that she will live in an environment that accepts her as she is: "All I want is to live in a place where I am 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). Maha faces this kind of rejection from the majority that looks at it as violating customs and public provisions. Seeing her as strange and not like the others puts her in conflict with herself. This discrimination that she is subjected to because of her Christian faith and her difference from the society around her reflects her burning desire to live in a place where she will be like everyone else, without anyone telling her that she is different.

Her suffering is exposed to appear through the discrimination she faces in society, as Christians, in general, are subjected to discrimination in Iraq, especially after the US invasion in 2003. This is due to the historical religious and political tensions in Iraq (Hindy et al., 2019). Christian women express their strong desire to live in a place similar to others, as they want to be part of Iraqi society without discrimination against them because of their Christian religion. This desire reflects the need for equality and coexistence between different religions and cultures, and the desire to obtain the same opportunities and benefits as members of society who do not differ religiously.

It can be said that the text expresses the suffering resulting from religious and cultural discrimination in society, and the desire for equality and coexistence. The text also reflects the need to change inherited customs and traditions that





cause discrimination and disagreement among members of society, and to achieve justice and equality among all people: "I want to live freely, and wear whatever I please around my neck, whatever length of dress I choose..... I won't also feel like a minority there"(p.88). These words give the reader a clear picture of the suffering of minority women in a society ravaged by chaos and political and security instability, making them easy prey for those who reject the existence of the other or misunderstand the other. Her words reflect her desire to have the freedom to choose and act in life without fear of discrimination and persecution. Maha desires to live in freedom and dignity and to enjoy the rights of citizenship, regardless of her religious or cultural affiliation. Her talk about the lack of fear of wearing short clothes or not wearing the veil reflects the challenges of Iraqi society in dealing with cultural and religious diversity, especially with regard to women and their access to equality.

6. Conclusion

In this study, the case of women's oppression was presented twice in the selected novel, once as an individual belonging to a minority, and the other as a female who has her own values and concepts but is forced to adhere to the teachings of the majority. The topic of focusing on the suffering of Christian women in the





midst of the political and social deterioration that occurred in the post-2003 society takes great care by Antoon, who presents the female character of Maha as a model for the struggle experienced by Christian women in that period. As this suffering is not limited to Maha's character only, Antoon presented her as a model in his narration. Maha as a woman faces a double burden of discrimination, rejection, attack, and lack of understanding of others; Because of her ideological difference because she belongs to the minority, and again because she is a woman who does not abide by the rulings and rules of the majority, who consider Maha's failure to adhere to the hijab as a rebellion against their reality. Maha suffers from a great painful internal conflict, and she is destined to live in the heart of society, but she believes that everything Change is possible and society has become rebellious against and against its component, as a woman belonging to a minority. Maha is forced to disguise herself at home by wearing a headscarf or hiding any sign of being a Christian to regain the little security she lacks. Maha is still fascinated by the ideas of the moment of salvation and liberation and believes that the security of the past will not return. She has no other option but to consider escaping to a place where she will be free and safe. The research concluded that Christian women in Iraq suffer from discrimination and marginalization in Iraqi society, and are exposed to many





challenges and difficulties due to the political and social situation in Iraq in post-2003. These problems and challenges were documented through the novel The Baghdad Eucharist where a clear and detailed vision was presented about the situation of Christian women in Iraq after 2003. One of the most important findings of the research is that it is important to work to improve the status of Christian women in Iraq and to provide protection necessary for them and defend their rights in Iraqi society. In addition, these results can be used in other studies related to women's rights and discrimination in Iraq

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