

A Psycholinguistic Reading of Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

Submitted by

Jihan Magdy Abdel Latif Ibrahim

Supervised by

Prof. Rehab Farouk Gad

Professor of Linguistics - Faculty of Arts Mansoura University

Dr. Basma Awad Sarhan

Lecturer of Linguistics - Faculty of Arts Mansoura University

Abstract:

This study explores the intricate linguistic features of Sinan Antoon's novel, *The Corpse Washer*. Through a detailed examination of the novel's language, this study seeks to uncover how Antoon employs linguistic techniques to reflect the socio-political realities of war-torn Iraq. The analysis focuses on the linguistic style of narration, the language of dialogues, and the use of metaphor, demonstrating how Antoon's unique linguistic choices convey the emotional depth and cultural context of the protagonist's journey. By dissecting the interplay between language and meaning (according to Cutler, 2012), the paper illuminates the ways in which Antoon's prose captures the complexities of grief, loss, and resilience. The findings offer new insights into the relationship between language and identity in contemporary literary studies, contributing to a deeper understanding of the novel's thematic and stylistic significance. The paper concludes that the language in the novel is a tool for expressing trauma, cultures and cultural identity.

Keywords: Sinan Antoon; *The Corpse Washer*; Linguistic Analysis; Trauma Narratives

قراءة نفسية لغوية لرواية مغسل الجثث لسنان أنطون

المستخلص :

تستكشف هذه الورقة البحثية السمات اللغوية المعقد لرواية سنان أنطون الشهيرة، "مغسل الجثث". من خلال فحص دقيق للغة الرواية، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن كيفية استخدام أنطون للتقنيات اللغوية لتعكس الحقائق الاجتماعية والسياسية للعراق الذي مزقته الحرب. يركز التحليل على الأسلوب اللغوي للسرد، لغة الحوارات، واستخدام الاستعارة، مظهرًا كيف تعبر اختيارات أنطون اللغوية الفريدة عن العمق العاطفي والسياق الثقافي لرحلة البطل. من خلال تفكيك التفاعل بين اللغة والمعنى، تسلط الورقة الضوء على الطرق التي تلتقط بها نثرية أنطون تعقيدات الحزن، فقدان، والمرونة. تقدم النتائج رؤى جديدة حول العلاقة بين اللغة والهوية في الأدب المعاصر، مما يساهم في فهم أعمق للأهمية الموضوعية والأسلوبية للرواية. تستنتج الورقة أن اللغة في الرواية هي أداة للتعبير عن الصدمة، الثقافات والهوية الثقافية. يهدف التحليل اللغوي إلى عكس المشاعر المعقدة مثل الحزن والصراع الداخلي. تعتمد الرواية على الانتقال بين اللهجات والكلمات المحلية لتعزيز الشعور بالانتماء الثقافي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سنان أنطون؛ مغسل الجثث؛ التحليل اللغوي؛ سرديات الصدمة

A Psycholinguistic Reading of Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

Submitted by

Jihan Magdy Abdel Latif Ibrahim

Supervised by

Prof. Rehab Farouk Gad

Professor of Linguistics - Faculty of Arts Mansoura University

Dr. Basma Awad Sarhan

Lecturer of Linguistics - Faculty of Arts Mansoura University

1. Introduction

This study provides a psycho-linguistic analysis of *The Corpse Washer* by Sinan Antoon. The study emphasizes the role of language in conveying emotions, constructing identity, and addressing existential themes within the novel. It introduces psycholinguistics and its significance in literary analysis, focusing on cognitive processes, emotional resonance, and the linguistic mechanisms employed by the author. The linguistic framework explores how grief, trauma, and cultural identity are represented through language. Drawing on cognitive psychology, linguistic theory, and narrative analysis, the study establishes the theoretical foundations for examining the interplay between language, cognition, and emotion in the text.

Psycholinguistics is an interdisciplinary field that studies the relationship between language and the mind, focusing on how individuals process, understand, and use language in communication. It investigates cognitive processes underlying language comprehension and production, including acquisition, interpretation, and generation of linguistic responses. The field emerged from a convergence of psychology, linguistics, and cognitive science, aiming to understand the mental mechanisms involved in language use. This understanding is crucial for understanding how authors convey complex emotional experiences and represent characters' internal lives.

2. Cognitive Processes

Cognitive processes are fundamental to language comprehension and production, involving attention, memory, perception, and brain function. Attention allows individuals to focus on relevant linguistic information while filtering distractions, crucial for effective communication. Memory, particularly working memory, supports the retention and manipulation of information for understanding complex sentences, while long-term memory stores vocabulary, grammar, and knowledge essential for language use. Perception aids in recognizing and interpreting linguistic inputs, such as phonemes and written text. Brain regions like Broca's area

and Wernicke's area play key roles in speech production and comprehension, respectively, and their collaboration is vital for fluent language use. Damage to these areas can impair language abilities, known as aphasia. Together, these processes enable authors like Sinan Antoon to convey complex ideas and readers to interpret them effectively.

2.1. Emotional Resonance

Language has a profound ability to evoke emotions, creating connections between words and the feelings they inspire in readers or listeners. Emotional resonance arises from specific words, phrases, or structures that evoke feelings and memories, shaped by cultural and personal associations. Words like "love" or "fear" carry inherent emotional weight, while terms like "home" can evoke varied responses depending on individual experiences.

Sentence structures influence emotions through rhythm, pacing, and punctuation. Short sentences can create urgency, while longer ones evoke calmness or reflection. Figurative language, such as metaphors, enhances emotional impact by creating vivid imagery, allowing readers to connect with the intensity of emotions. For example, describing grief as "a storm raging within" is more evocative than a straightforward description.

The emotional impact of language is also shaped by cognitive appraisal, where context and interpretation affect emotional responses. Authors like Sinan Antoon in *The Corpse Washer* use evocative language and imagery to convey characters' inner turmoil, fostering deep emotional connections between readers and the narrative.

2.2. Psychological Themes

The psycholinguistic analysis proposed here focuses on the novel's recurring themes such as **identity**, **relationships**, **conflict**, and **self-expression** which highlight the complex relationship between language and the human mind. Language plays a central role in shaping and expressing these psychological realities.

- **Identity:** Language helps construct and express personal, social, and cultural identities. In literature, characters' speech reveals aspects of their background and beliefs. For example, in *The Corpse Washer*, Sinan Antoon uses language to explore the protagonist's identity struggle in a war-torn society.
- **Relationships:** Language is crucial in forming and maintaining emotional bonds. The way characters communicate—through formal or informal language, terms of endearment, or empathy—reveals dynamics within relationships. Antoon's portrayal of familial and romantic relationships reflects love, longing, and tensions.

- **Conflict:** Language is a powerful medium to express both internal and external conflicts. Specific linguistic devices, such as rhetorical questions or aggressive vocabulary, highlight these tensions. In *The Corpse Washer*, the protagonist's internal and external conflicts are expressed through monologues and confrontational dialogue, shaped by war and personal loss.
- **Self-Expression:** Language serves as a means for individuals to articulate their thoughts and emotions. In psycholinguistic analysis, how characters express themselves offers insights into their mental states and coping mechanisms. Antoon's use of poetic language in *The Corpse Washer* allows the protagonist to express grief, despair, and hope, revealing his inner emotional world.

These themes underscore how language reflects and shapes psychological experiences, offering deeper insight into the human condition (Pickering, 2013).

2.3. Reader Responses

Individuals' responses to language vary significantly, influenced by factors such as **culture**, **personal experiences**, and **psychological state**. This variation highlights that language is open to interpretation and does not have a fixed meaning.

- **Cultural background** plays a key role in interpretation, as different cultures may attach distinct meanings to words or phrases, leading to different emotional reactions. For example, metaphors in *The Corpse Washer* may evoke different emotions for Middle Eastern versus Western readers due to cultural associations.
- **Personal experience** also shapes language interpretation. Readers who have experienced loss may connect more deeply with themes of grief in Antoon's work, while an individual's **psychological state**—such as feeling hopeful or anxious—can influence how impactful certain passages feel.

In psycholinguistic analysis, examining these varied responses helps to understand language's diverse emotional and cognitive effects. This perspective aligns with reader-response theory, which emphasizes the reader's role in creating the meaning of a text, making each reading experience unique.

3. The Role of Language in Psycholinguistic Analysis

3.1. Language as a Vehicle for Expression

Language is the primary tool for expressing thoughts, emotions, and intentions, acting as a bridge between the internal mind and the external world. Psycholinguistic analysis explores how language is structured and

used, examining both explicit content and subtle cues that reveal deeper psychological states.

- **Thoughts** are communicated through structured language, allowing complex ideas to be shared. In *The Corpse Washer*, the protagonist's reflections on life, death, and personal experiences are expressed through language, revealing his psychological journey. Psycholinguistics explores the layers of meaning in his words, including unconscious emotional struggles.
- **Emotions** are closely tied to language, with tone and phrasing indicating emotional states. Psycholinguistic analysis uncovers these emotional undercurrents, helping readers connect with a character's feelings. In Antoon's work, characters' language reflects a wide range of emotions, from despair to moments of hope.
- **Intentions** are conveyed through language, whether to inform, persuade, comfort, or assert power. Psycholinguistic analysis examines the content and context of communication to uncover both explicit goals and hidden motivations. In *The Corpse Washer*, the characters' interactions reveal their relationships and the social dynamics shaping their behavior.

3.2. Linguistic Devices for Emotional Impact

Linguistic devices, such as metaphor and symbolism, are crucial for creating emotional resonance in communication. Authors and speakers use these rhetorical strategies to enhance the emotional impact of their messages, making them more relatable and powerful. These devices help convey complex ideas and emotions, adding depth and meaning to the message.

3.2.1. Metaphor and Symbolism

Metaphors and symbolism are key linguistic devices used to convey complex emotions and abstract ideas, enhancing emotional resonance in communication.

- **Metaphors** compare seemingly unrelated concepts to deepen understanding. In psycholinguistics, they help express complex emotions. For example, describing grief as "a heavy cloak" vividly captures its weight and suffocating nature. In *The Corpse Washer*, Sinan Antoon uses metaphors like the "corpse washer" to symbolize the protagonist's internal struggles with loss, responsibility, and identity, fostering a connection between the reader and the character's emotional state.
- **Symbolism** involves using objects, characters, or events to represent larger concepts. Symbols add layers of meaning that

resonate on personal and cultural levels. In literature, recurring symbols like water can represent life, cleansing, or rebirth. In Antoon's work, symbols represent cultural identity, trauma, and hope, allowing readers to interpret deeper meanings beyond the narrative surface. Through metaphors and symbolism, authors evoke emotional responses that foster understanding of complex human experiences, enriching the reader's engagement with the text

3.2.2. Figurative Language and Imagery

Figurative language, such as **similes** and **vivid imagery**, plays a crucial role in enhancing emotional and sensory experiences for readers, making the narrative more immersive.

- **Similes** use comparisons with "like" or "as" to convey emotions and ideas in relatable terms. For example, saying "her smile was like sunshine" evokes warmth and joy, making emotions more tangible. In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon uses similes to illustrate the protagonist's emotional struggles, particularly the weight of loss.
- **Vivid imagery** uses detailed descriptions that appeal to the senses, allowing readers to visualize scenes and feel emotions more deeply. Descriptions like "the scent of decaying flowers hung heavy in the air" evoke a visual and olfactory experience, intensifying emotional impact. In psycholinguistics, imagery strengthens the reader's connection to the narrative and enhances engagement with the emotional themes.

In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon uses imagery to highlight the contrast between beauty and decay, reflecting the protagonist's internal and external struggles with life and death. Overall, figurative language deepens the reader's emotional engagement, amplifying key moments and shaping their perception of the narrative's themes.

3.2.3. Narrative Structure and Pacing

The **narrative structure** and **pacing** of a story greatly impact emotional engagement and the reader's perception of the plot.

- **Narrative structure** refers to how a story is organized, and it can follow a linear or non-linear progression. Non-linear narratives, such as starting in the middle of a conflict and using flashbacks, can build tension and suspense. In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon's choice of structure may reflect the chaos of war and the protagonist's internal struggles with loss.
- **Pacing** controls the speed at which the narrative unfolds. Rapid pacing creates excitement and urgency, while slower pacing allows for reflection and emotional depth. Slowing down the pacing

during emotionally charged moments, with detailed descriptions or introspection, intensifies the emotional impact. In action sequences, faster pacing can increase tension.

In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon uses structure and pacing to mirror the protagonist's emotional fluctuations, guiding the reader through a range of feelings and enhancing the emotional depth of the narrative.

3.2.4. Language and Identity Construction

Language is essential in constructing and expressing **identity**, especially **cultural identity**. It acts as a powerful marker that signals an individual's belonging to specific cultural, social, or ethnic groups. By analyzing how language reflects and shapes identity, we can better understand the complex relationship between language and culture.

3.2.4.1. Linguistic Markers of Cultural Identity

Linguistic markers such as **dialect**, **vocabulary**, and **language choice** are key in expressing cultural identity, reflecting an individual's background and fostering connections to their cultural heritage.

1. **Dialect:** Dialects, with unique pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, signal cultural identity and belonging to a particular group or region. In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon may use Iraqi dialects to ground the protagonist's cultural roots.
2. **Vocabulary:** Specific words or phrases tied to local customs, traditions, or historical events reveal cultural identity. In *The Corpse Washer*, vocabulary related to death rituals and mourning reflects the characters' cultural contexts.
3. **Language Choice:** In multilingual societies, individuals may switch between languages or dialects depending on the situation, a phenomenon called **code-switching**. This reflects the fluid nature of identity. Antoon's characters may struggle with balancing different cultural identities through their language choices.

These linguistic markers highlight how language expresses cultural identity, and in *The Corpse Washer*, they deepen the understanding of the protagonist's journey and cultural context.

3.2.4.2. Language as a Reflection of Self

Language is a powerful tool for constructing and communicating **personal identity**. Through **tone**, **style**, and **word choice**, individuals express their personality, emotional state, values, and social position. Psycholinguistic analysis examines these elements to uncover deeper aspects of identity.

1. **Tone:** Tone reflects the speaker's attitude and emotional state, influencing how relationships and contexts are perceived. In *The*

Corpse Washer, Antoon uses tonal shifts to reveal the protagonist's evolving mental state and personal struggles.

2. **Style:** The style of language, including sentence complexity and rhythm, indicates personality traits and psychological states. For example, a character's use of complex language might signal sophistication, while simple language might suggest sincerity. Antoon's narrative style in *The Corpse Washer* portrays the protagonist's internal conflicts and emotional weight.
3. **Word Choice:** The words people choose reflect their identity, values, and cultural background. Antoon's choice of language related to death and ritual in *The Corpse Washer* reveals the protagonist's emotional burden and cultural connections.

By analyzing tone, style, and word choice, psycholinguists can uncover how individuals construct and communicate their sense of self (Bruner, 1991), as seen in literary works like *The Corpse Washer*.

3.2.4.3. Narrative Coherence and Sense-Making

Narrative plays a crucial role in organizing experiences and creating coherence, particularly during challenging life events. By narrating experiences, individuals give structure and meaning to what might otherwise feel chaotic. Language helps transform events into a cohesive story, integrating them into one's broader understanding of self and the world.

Through narrative, people establish a cause-and-effect sequence to understand actions, emotions, and outcomes (Brooks, 2017). For instance, recounting a personal loss allows someone to reflect on how they coped and what they learned. In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon uses the protagonist's storytelling to explore his struggle to make sense of war and death, helping both him and the reader find meaning in conflict.

Narrative coherence is linked to psychological well-being. Research shows that those who can construct coherent narratives, especially about traumatic events, experience better emotional outcomes (Kövecses, 2015). Features like chronological sequencing, causal linkages, and evaluative language contribute to the emotional impact of a narrative. In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon's narrative style, including reflective language, helps the protagonist and reader navigate loss, tradition, and survival.

3.3. Linguistic Tools for Exploring Existential Questions

Language is a powerful tool for exploring existential questions and the meaning of life. Through metaphors, analogies, and rhetorical questions, individuals express their reflections on existence, purpose, and mortality. In *The Corpse Washer*, Sinan Antoon uses evocative language to portray

the protagonist's internal conflicts about life and death, reflecting the existential concerns that arise in the chaos of war.

Metaphors, such as the protagonist's work as a corpse washer, serve as a symbol for the human condition, bridging life and death, tradition and change. This metaphor helps articulate the struggle to find meaning in suffering. Rhetorical questions also play a key role in provoking introspection, as the protagonist questions the value of his actions in a world full of uncertainty.

The narrative style, shifting between the protagonist's thoughts and external events, enhances the exploration of existential dilemmas, allowing readers to engage intimately with the character's philosophical reflections. Psycholinguistic analysis reveals how linguistic tools like metaphors and narrative shifts help explore themes of life, death, and identity, making these abstract concepts more accessible and relatable.

3.3.1. Language and Meaning-Making

Language is key to meaning-making, helping individuals organize experiences and express abstract thoughts. Psycholinguistic analysis explores how language is used to interpret life, especially in difficult or unclear situations. This process creates coherence and understanding in the face of complexity. Narrative coherence involves using language to create a structured story that organizes life events, especially during crises or transitions. In *The Corpse Washer*, the protagonist uses storytelling to make sense of traumatic experiences and impose order on the chaos of war. Psycholinguistic analysis shows how narrative coherence helps in understanding and coping with complex events. Language also serves to explore existential questions about existence, meaning, and mortality. Metaphors, rhetorical questions, and philosophical reflections are used to articulate these concerns.

In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon uses metaphors to delve into themes like death and the search for meaning, engaging readers with these universal questions.

Psycholinguistics is shaped by various theoretical perspectives—cognitive, social, and cultural—that together offer a comprehensive understanding of language and its complexities. The cognitive perspective focuses on the mental processes involved in language comprehension, production, and acquisition. It examines how individuals process linguistic information, with theories like Chomsky's emphasizing the mental representation of language and its connection to brain functions.

The social perspective views language as a tool for social interaction, influenced by social contexts and relationships. Vygotsky's theories suggest that language development is closely tied to social interaction and the internalization of social norms. In *The Corpse Washer*, the protagonist's language reflects these social influences, particularly within cultural and familial settings.

The cultural perspective examines how cultural background shapes language and thought. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis posits that language influences our perception of reality, and linguistic differences can lead to distinct worldviews. In *The Corpse Washer*, the protagonist's use of language reflects his cultural identity, shaped by rituals and metaphors.

Psycholinguistics intersects with multiple disciplines, offering a more comprehensive understanding of language by incorporating cognition, social interaction, and discourse structure. This section explores these connections and proposes an integrative framework for psycholinguistic analysis.

Psycholinguistics and cognitive psychology are closely related, both exploring mental processes underlying human behavior. Cognitive psychology helps understand language processing, such as memory and perception, which are critical in comprehending complex language. In *The Corpse Washer*, cognitive processes like memory recall shape the protagonist's language, revealing the psychological impact of trauma and loss.

3.4. Theoretical Foundations

This study follows Khammas 's (2023) analysis of the novel and provides a psycholinguistic analysis of *The Corpse Washer* is grounded in cognitive, socio-cultural, and narrative theories to analyze how language conveys emotions, constructs identity, and makes sense of personal experiences.

The study uses cognitive theories like working memory and schema theory to understand how the protagonist processes and organizes past experiences, particularly trauma and grief.

Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory helps examine how language reflects and constructs social identity, especially through dialect and culturally specific expressions in the novel.

Narrative theory, especially Bruner's concept of narrative as a mode of thought, is used to explore how the protagonist creates a coherent story from fragmented experiences related to loss and identity.

3.5. Motivations for Writing *The Corpse Washer*

Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* explores the human experience in war, reflecting Antoon's personal connection to Iraq and the country's tumultuous history.

1. Impact of War on Ordinary People

Antoon aimed to convey the devastating psychological toll of war, focusing on how constant violence and loss affect individuals in Iraq.

2- Giving Voice to the Iraqi Experience

Through the character of Jawad, Antoon humanizes the Iraqi experience, illustrating the conflict between personal dreams and cultural obligations amid war.

3- Highlighting Cultural Rituals

The novel emphasizes the role of death rituals in offering comfort and continuity, showcasing their importance in maintaining identity and humanity during times of crisis.

4- Addressing Trauma and Memory

Antoon explores the complexities of trauma and memory, illustrating how individuals and societies cope with past violence, offering insights into the broader human condition and the collective Iraqi psyche.

3.6. Concluding Remarks:

The theoretical framework for the study, focused on the intersection of cognitive, socio-cultural, narrative, and reader-response theories in analyzing language in *The Corpse Washer*. It introduced psycholinguistics and its role in examining the connection between language and the mind, exploring cognitive, emotional, and psychological aspects. This study highlighted how language serves as a tool for expression, emotional impact, and identity construction. Narrative coherence theories were also discussed, showing how language helps organize and interpret experiences. Several theoretical perspectives were presented, including cognitive, social, and cultural approaches. This search proposed an integrative framework to offer a holistic view of language analysis. These theoretical foundations guide the study's exploration of how language conveys trauma, resilience, and identity, while considering diverse reader responses.

References

- Antoon, S. (2014). *The corpse washer*. New York Review Books.
- Brooks, J.A. (2017). The role of language in the experience and perception of emotion: A neuroimaging meta-analysis. *Social cognitive and affective neuroscience*. **12**(2), pp. 169-183.
- Bruner, J. (1991). *The narrative construction of reality*. Critical inquiry. **18**(1), pp. 1-21.
- Cutler, A. (2012). *Native listening: Language experience and the recognition of spoken words*. Mit Press.
- Pickering, M.J. and S. Garrod. (2013). An integrated theory of language production and comprehension. *Behavioral and brain sciences*. **36**(4), pp. 329-347.
- Khammas, L.F. (2023). *Iraq's Transhistorical and National collective Trauma: Unveiling the Overwhelming History in "The Corpse Washer" by Sinan Antoon*. Journal of Tikrit University for Humanities, **30**(12). pp. 346-366.
- Habeeb, Z.Q. (2015). *Writing trauma in Iraq: Literary representations of war and oppression in the fiction of Sinan Antoon*.