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Reflection of Reality in Dreams

In “The Corpse Washer,” Sinan Antoon describes the tragedies that have taken place since the American occupation of Iraq. In this paper, I will argue that Jawad’s dreams symbolize his struggles in reality, which results from war and chaos.

When every family is broken, only tragedies are real. This is especially true for Jawad. He has experienced the loss of his brother Ammoury, the sudden death of his father, and the separation with Reem due to her breast cancer – probably caused by the American depletion of uranium. The war has ruined his heart to become “an abandoned house whose windows are shattered and doors unhinged,” and his fear for separation with his loved ones keeps haunting him even in his sleep (Chapter 1). In the beginning, Jawad dreams of seeing Reem again, but he was soon forced away from her by armed men. His nightmare sets a tone of grief and despair caused by the war in Iraq.

Moreover, Jawad doesn’t know himself whether he’ll be alive for another day, and this panic is also reflected in his dreams. He imagines a huge explosion triggered by a suicide bomber while getting his passport. Jawad even feels the blood and body parts in his dream, and the liveliness of the horror implies that he has thought of the scene several times.

In Jawad’s incessant nightmares, it wasn't the corpses that distressed him the most; instead, it was his constant anxiety of living up to the expectations of his family and the society. Jawad often dreamt about either being executed by unknown men because he wasn't religious enough or seeing the corpses climb up and wash themselves since he “can’t focus and keep thinking of silly shit” (Chapter 38). Faith should be an individual choice. Nonetheless, fanatic sectionalism forces everyone to take a side and ignites the hatred between two sides. Jawad doesn't see himself to fit into either side entirely; he was incessantly troubled by his choice and worried that he would be punished by the extremists.

Jawad’s dreams help visualize war as a defining factor for the lives of Iraqis. They are an epitome of the despondency Jawad has to undergo when he’s awake. With the occupation Imperialism shatters the peace, and Jawad’s distress is illustrated clearly through his sorrowful dreams.