

# Social and Cultural Repercussions of the American Invasion on Iraqi Citizens in of Sinan Antoon's Novel the Book of Collateral Damage

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## Abstract

This research deals with the social and cultural dimensions of the American invasion, as these dimensions are common to postcolonial theory, the concept of Neo-colonialism, and imperial politics. This research aims to clarify the policy of US imperialism that is compatible with the orientations of the principle of Neo-colonialism in Iraq. It also sheds light on the effects of the invasion and the methods used by America to control of Iraq. This research discusses Sinan Antoon's novel *The Book of Collateral Damage*. Several issues are discussed in each part such as, the rise of violence, sectarian conflict, war effects and the spread of terrorism in Iraqi society.

**Keywords:** Neo-colonialism, Imperialism, American invasion, Book of Collateral Damage.

## 1. Introduction

The American aggressiveness against Iraqi people, represented as an invasion and a comprehensive occupation administered by America and Britain at 2003. The invasion on the pretext of Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction led to human losses estimated at many dead, injured, and homeless people. In doing so, material losses were estimated at trillions of dollars; Iraq descended into sectarian violence that reached its peak during the two years, 2006–2007. The invasion was preceded by a massive American and British media campaign against Iraq, to warn the world of the danger of Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction. Even American television is describing the American plan to rebuild Iraq and work to develop it to resemble European countries. Majed Aladylah demonstrates that “These distorted, sensationalist depictions are myopic and fundamentally detrimental, and have been used to buttress, ideologically, both colonization and the ‘War on Terror’ ” (Aladylah, 2022, p.7). The incitement campaign continued in an attempt to win the support of the American and British peoples and world public opinion in favor of invading Iraq. Despite the declared pretext of weapons of mass destruction, various other political, economic, and social reasons remained under discussion in the global media and the corridors of international politics, and some of them became more convincing to observers based on the course of the war's events and the revelation of its causes and effects afterward. At the forefront of these reasons is the eagerness of the American and British governments to seize Iraq's vast oil wealth, for example, granting oil companies contracts, worth billions of dollars immediately after the occupation of Iraq. American Civil Administrator

in Iraq was awarded these contracts from Iraqi money, despite neglecting the most basic humanitarian needs.

This study examines the representation of the concept of Neo-colonialism in the novels of Sinan Antoon's *The Book of Collateral Damage* (2019). It will point out the consequences and repercussions of the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It links Neo-colonialism to the devastating impact and influences of the American invasion on the Iraqi people. It also illustrates a sensible image of the post-war period after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the ramifications of the war, the effects and the events that accompanied the presence of U.S. forces in Iraq.

Neo-colonialism is a critical approach proposed by many critics and theorists. Jean-Paul Sartre defines the term Neo-colonialism as 'the continuation of the colonial system at independent states, by transforming these states into colonies for forms of political, economic, social and military domination that are implemented through indirect and hidden means that do not include violence' (Sartre, 2001). Neocolonialism was established after the issuance of the United Nations Charter at the end of World War II in 1945. The charter called for the end of colonialism and to give citizens the right to self-determination and freedom. As a result, no country has the right to colonize another country and put its people under its direct or indirect rule.

The colonizing countries resorted to imposing long-term treaties and agreements on the colonized countries. Gayatri Spivak confirms Sartre's view of Neo-colonialism, saying "Within neocolonialism, they are run much more by ministries of finance" (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Personal interview, 1991). That means the nature of Neo-colonialism is economic, and its objectives are economic rather than political and social and managed by financial institutions or companies. In other words, the colonial project of the major Western colonizing countries was replaced by a new concept, which is Neo-colonialism.

The American policy aims to expand the political, economic, cultural, and social influence of the United States over Iraq. U.S. imperialism has the same features as the concept of Neo-colonialism. The meaning of imperialism is clearly explained by Noam Chomsky as he states; "The idea is to have independent states, but with weak governments that must rely on the imperial power for their survival ..." (Chomsky & Barsamian, 2005, p.45). Imperialism includes controlling areas outside the borders of the United States of America. These procedures are followed by coercive intervention when U.S. interests are threatened, or the regime is changed. U.S. imperialism is compared to a monster by Frantz Fanon, who says "two centuries ago, a former European colony took it into its head to catch up with Europe...that the United States of America has become a monster where the flaws, sickness, and inhumanity of Europe have reached frightening proportions" (Fanon, 1968, p.236-237).

Describing U.S. policy as a monster is an indication of the use of violence and cruelty to control the people of other countries. The United States has succeeded to a large extent in controlling and dominating Iraq in a manner consistent with its interests and objectives.

The emergence of oil in the Middle East region played a fundamental role in prompting the United States of America to pay attention to this region and enter into conflict with the major Western colonial powers. In the same vein, Edward Said asserts that idea in his book *Orientalism*

as: "No one needs to be reminded that oil, the region's greatest resource, has been totally absorbed into the United States economy" (Said, 1978, p.324).

In this context, the invasion of Iraq was not to bring democracy, or to free the Iraqi society, but to take control of Iraq's resources and to reorganize the countries of the middle east for the interest of Israel. Said supports the same idea, saying: "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient [...] and having authority over the Orient" (Said, 1978, p.3), Said explains Orientalism, as an institution for administering Arab region or possessing the authority by Western countries to control Arab countries.

According to the concept of Neo-colonialism and the efforts of the United States to control the energy resources available in Arab-Islamic countries, America and Western countries have subdued the countries that they consider sources of energy, including Iraq. Western colonial countries are introducing new methods of colonialism, using the same concepts of traditional colonialism, but with a new face developed following the charters of the United Nations. The theory of post-colonialism and the concept of Neo-colonialism are, in fact, intertwined and two faces of the same coin. Neo-colonialism can be called, more accurately, colonialism by agents.

## **2. The Social and Cultural highlights in The Book of Collateral Damage**

The novel refers to the attempt of a character whose name is Wadood, the bookseller in Al-Mutanabbi Street in the center of the capital, Baghdad. Al-Mutanabbi Street is a market specializing in selling books. Wadood attempts to collect, count, and index the damage caused by the American invasion of Iraq to preserve what remains of its cultural heritage. This census process, which the writer mentions several times, indicates a comprehensive destruction of the infrastructure in Iraq. This is what Iraq witnesses on the ground, consistent with the concept of Neo-colonialism. That process devastation represented by the destruction of Iraq's institutions such as electric power stations, communication networks, television broadcasting and petroleum refineries. Then, the process of rebuilding the destroyed institutions after the invasion is entrusted to American and European companies to exploit Iraq's wealth and put it into long-term indebtedness, tied up by work contracts. Antoon, in his novel *The Book of Collateral Damage*, explains early the general features of the suffering of the Iraqi people, by filming a documentary movie on the effects of the American war and the tragedies left behind on Iraq and Iraqis. In a clear message of the calamity and catastrophe of the war, its multiple ailments, the social and cultural dimensions.

The novel traces the effects of the devastation that befell the infrastructure of Iraq and the damage inflicted on Iraqi individuals. The novel tells of Nameer while filming a documentary movie on Iraq. Nameer meets by chance the bookseller Wadood, who wants to write archives about the invasion of Iraq. Wadood tries to record all the events from the first minute of the invasion of Iraq. The protagonist, Nameer, is an Iraqi academic, who has lived in the US since the 1990s. Nameer returns briefly to Baghdad in 2003, just after the war ended, with a camera team to produce a documentary film about Iraq after the U.S. invasion.

Iraqi society suffers from social phenomena caused by the U.S. invasion and its aftermath. The intentions of U.S. policy do not appear in the first months after the invasion, which raises many questions in Iraqi society, as dividing the regions of Iraq, Baghdad in particular on a sectarian basis. The writer shows an example of these questions in Nameer's meeting with his relatives and talking about the future of Iraq and the Americans in Iraq. During Nameer's visit to his aunt's house in Baghdad and meeting with his relatives, many questions are raised, because he lives in America and holds an American citizenship. The nature of the questions shows the concern of Iraqi society, as it "bombarded me with questions about America and life there and what would happen in Iraq in the future"(Antoon, 2019: 11). It is not curiosity that drives them to ask Nameer, but fear of the unknown future. The writer shows the split in Iraqi society over the nature of the presence of U.S. forces: "Like the people whose words I had translated on camera for the past six days, my relatives were divided over what had happened"(Antoon, 2019: 11). This cleavage indicates the existence of disputes between the sects in Iraq, which American politicians are deepening to create a real rift in Iraqi society.

### 2.1. Contention point

The author brings out an important point here; "There was no consensus, even on the right term to use: occupation or liberation" (Antoon, 2019: 11). The phrase "occupation of Iraq" appears in more than one place in the study. This phrase sparks widespread controversy in international and local circles. Are the coalition forces led by the United States of America considered liberation or occupation forces? To resolve the controversy over this phrase, United Nations Resolution No. 1483 in 2003 reads "the United States of America and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland [...] these states as occupying powers under unified command" (UN, 2003, n.p). The resolution states that the United States of America and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are considered occupying forces. Antoon describes the conflicts in Iraqi society while describing that "America is the official agent of the Angel of Death" (Antoon, 2019: 11), in the same passage. A clear accusation directed at the American politicians that they are responsible for this dispute and sowing division among the Iraqi people. Nameer's relatives describe the occupation of Iraq as better than the days of the economic siege. Nameer's relatives describe the last ten years of the former regime, which preceded the American occupation as saying: "If you'd been living here with us all these years, even if the Angel of Death had come to liberate you, you would have welcomed him" (Antoon, 2019: 11). If Iraq becomes free and safe, as America promises the world through its media, then Nameer who migrated from Iraq, will think of stability and returning to Iraq better than the exile he lives in America. An Essay by Chomsky as an introduction for the book *Understanding Power*(2002) titled "A Note on the Events of September 11,2001", says "the devastation of Iraq's population by U.S.instigated sanctions throughout the past decade" (Chomsky, N., Mitchell, P. R., Schoeffel, J., & Vigil, J., 2002,p.1). Chomsky describes and supports those sanctions, which were called economic sanctions, as destructive to the Iraqi people.

After returning to Cambridge, Massachusetts, in America, Nameer decides to meet his professor, who is supervising his Ph.D. dissertation at Dartmouth University. A conversation takes place between them, and Nameer tells him that he was on a visit to Iraq. The first question that the

supervisor asks Nameer is about burning libraries, "I read that the libraries have been damaged and many manuscripts have been destroyed"(Antoon, 2019:18), describing burning libraries as a crime. In a poetic line from Muallaqa of the poet Zuhair bin Abi Salma, the supervisor describes the war in Iraq, dedicating the words to Nameer as an Iraqi citizen, "War is nothing but what you know it to be and have experienced, /What is said of it is not conjecture" (Antoon, 2019: 18). He cites politicians as stating that they do not read poetry and, if they do, they do not comprehend what is in it; thus they are uninterested in culture or whether all libraries are destroyed or not. What they are concerned with is the execution of pre-determined agendas. Also, burning the libraries is a deliberate act that conceals behind the goal of obliterating the history of Iraqi society, as happened in Iraq by bombing during the war or after the invasion.

The writer compares the social and historical depth of Baghdad to sunlight through the conversation between Wadood and Nameer in the book store; "He drew the curtain back and the fierce Baghdad sun flooded in, lighting up specks of dust that were floating upward"(Antoon, 2019: 29). Baghdad's sunlight will remove all traces of the invasion, including social sectarian segregation. An example of this is Antoon's reference to Wadood sleeping in the bookstore because of the danger of returning to his home at night, for fear of being killed or kidnapped because of his affiliation to a certain sect, as in "Wadood [...] he sometimes slept here when it was dangerous and hard to get home after sunset" (Antoon, 2019: 30).

After moving to his new home in New Hampshire, Nameer tries to buy a car because it is very cold weather there. The competent authorities there stipulated obtaining a copy of Nameer's birth certificate, completing the car registration process, and issuing a driving license. Nameer tells the employee that his birth certificate is in Baghdad, because he was born there. The writer indicates Nameer's Iraqi affiliation and social identity, despite the passage of years since stick to immigration to America. Nameer tells the employee, that manuscripts, documents, and antiquities that are thousands of years old, were destroyed and burned by the U.S. invasion, so who would care about his birth certificate? Nameer's words carry the significance of America's deliberate obliteration and destruction of Iraq's civilization and its social features. The fact that most of the events take place in the historical Al-Rashid Street, which carries a historical, cultural, social, and political depth in Baghdad, Nameer asks the employee in the Department of Motor Vehicles if a previous driver's license was issued to him in the state of Massachusetts without the need for his birth certificate. The employee in charge of issuing driver's licenses gives him an answer, that an Arab terrorist tried to infiltrate Canada's borders two years ago to bomb Los Angeles Airport.

## 2.2. Media camouflage

Western media campaigns led by America had begun with the attribution of terrorism to the Arabs. The media campaign intensifies and reaps its fruits after attacking the World Trade Towers in New York, or what is known as the events of the 11th of September. Said states that: "In the United States the Arab world has no cultural status at all; the few images of the Arabs that circulate are essentially negative and frightening, images such as those of terrorism, fundamentalism, and so on" (Said,1994,p.208).

To put it another way, terrorism has been associated with Arabs and Muslims in Western countries, particularly in America, as a result of media incitement against Muslims. This incitement policy is a prelude to the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan and other military actions. War on Arabs and Muslims became virtual after winning the sympathy of the American community. The words of the employee who is responsible for issuing driver's licenses reflect the U.S. government's approach and its new policy aimed at imposing tutelage on Arab countries or imposing a kind of control under the pretext of fighting terrorism. Nameer failed to issue a driving license, which resulted in violations amounting to 600 dollars, which is the reason for selling the car after referring him to court due to the accumulation of violations against him. Nameer bought heavy snow boots for winter days in New Hampshire. Whenever Nameer walks in the cold while wading in the snow, he curses Osama bin Laden for his leadership of the "terrorist Al-Qaeda organization" and his sponsorship of terrorism around the world, blames U.S. President George Bush for complicating procedures for dealing with Arabs residing in America, and blames the Algerian Arab who crossed the border to bomb Los Angeles Airport. Nameer blames everyone who caused him to be deprived of owning a car that protects him from the harsh cold weather, "I would wade through the snow on my way to the office, cursing Osama bin Laden, George Bush, and the Algerian who had tried to slip across the border" (Antoon, 2019: 61). It is another indication of the complexity of the situation in the world because of terrorism and the war on terrorism, which claim the lives of many innocent citizens.

Nameer used to watch a satirical program by the actor Dave Chappelle, in which he mocks the American political system, and racist and class policies in American society. Nameer refers to racism in American society, which he presents as a model in the past pages by describing Arabs as terrorists. The American policy reflects negatively through the American soldier's behavior in Iraq with defenseless citizens. The American soldiers were dealing harshly, arrogantly, and aggressively with the Iraqis. Nameer also provides another description of American policy through another incident while watching television with his close friend Ali Hadi in Cambridge. Nameer says that he is watching the Antiques Roadshow program on PBS channel, "I settled on PBS. It was Antiques Roadshow, in which the presenter speaks to people who have brought antiques to be valued and sold" (Antoon, 2019: 66). This program is interested in presenting antiquities, old paintings, and everything about heritage. While the journalist is touring the number of antique exhibits, he sees a woman selling a cradle from the cradles of the indigenous population. The woman in her fifties inherited this cradle from her grandfather, who was an American soldier, "It belonged to my grandfather, who was a soldier. I inherited it from my father [...] I've been told it could fetch \$46,000" (Antoon, 2019: 66). Nameer links what is happening in Iraq in terms of the destruction and theft of Iraqi artifacts while U.S. military forces are present. The woman's grandfather was an American soldier, not an indigenous Indian. In this comparison, Antoon accurately describes the process of stealing Iraqi antiquities by organized groups specializing in the antiquities trade.

The process of stealing Iraq's antiquities and selling them on the market is embodied in the description of the woman, who estimates the price of the Indian cradle at \$46,000. If the American forces had no hand in stealing Iraqi antiquities directly, then they had a hand in the spread of chaos that led to the theft of Iraqi heritage. Chomsky confirms looting scenes saying:

“The losses at these sites dwarfed even the massive looting of the National Museum shortly after U.S. troops arrived, in which at least 15,000 of the 20,000 looted pieces disappeared, probably forever” (Chomsky, 2008, p.30). The fact that American forces deliberately protected the areas of their presence and left the other regions of Iraq to be ravaged by chaos. Albert Memmi supports the idea that “the Baghdad national museum, which contained precious artifacts for understanding the heritage of humanity, was pillaged and vandalized. There was an uproar of accusation by the Iraqis, which was broadly circulated in the European press: the Americans had orchestrated the calamity” (Memmi, 2006, p.66), targeting the Iraqi civilization within the American plans. Many satellite channels have documented the thefts, and those video clips are still available on YouTube channels and websites. Nameer adds that this cradle turned into a cultural document, only without the existence of the cradle itself, it lost its historical value after it was sold in the antiques market. Nameer cites the words of the philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, “I told you, there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Antoon, 2019: 66). This civilizational document is barbaric, referring to the extermination of the indigenous people of America, who are American Indians, in an ugly and barbaric way. The repetition of the American policy of aiming to destroy ancient societies that have historical depth is a refined approach, so the case of Iraq is not a coincidence.

In a lecture in the Department of Political Science talking about U.S. policy and the war in Iraq, Nameer is invited as a guest. Nameer condemns the years of economic blockade that Iraqis endured during the former Iraqi regime's control. Far from analogies to American democracy, Nameer criticizes war rhetoric and strategic intentions. Then he talks about the rising bloodshed and escalating violence in Iraq as a result of the U.S. occupation and the need to halt it and hand over Iraq to the United Nations. The other opinion is from the perspective of the second guest, an Iraqi student who received a Fulbright scholarship named Rahim. Fulbright is a scholarship program to study at American universities based on the principle of competition among applicants. In the context of Rahim's speech, he criticizes Iraq's policy under the rule of the former regime, which executed one of his brothers. Rahim thanks the American forces that liberated Iraq from the oppression and tyranny of the former regime. Rahim is surprised, criticizing Nameer's words and describing the Iraqis as having been deprived of their freedom for thirty years. The audience in the hall, numbering about seventy students, applauds. Antoon refers to two contradictory opinions in this passage, which represent the state of division that Iraqis experienced after the U.S. invasion between supporters and opponents of the occupation. Nameer points out that Rahim looks at him victoriously after the audience warmly applauds, “He looked at me and smiled, elated by his triumph” (Antoon, 2019: 68). That reflects the victory of the opinion in favor of the American occupation, or as Rahim says, the American liberation of Iraq.

### 2.3. Unfulfilled wishes

The last section of the novel, entitled *The End of the Novel... and It's Beginning*, is the realistic end. Wadood Abdul Karim's *Fihris* project has not been successful, nor has Nameer Al-Baghdadi's *Fihris*, which has only one page written about it so far. In the early morning of one of Nameer's days, he is listening to his favorite local radio station, WYNC, which broadcasts

BBC news. The heartbreaking news for Nameer is “A suicide bomber blows himself up at a shopping mall in Baghdad close to al-Mutanabbi Street, killing at least thirty people” (Antoon, 2019: 203). Many suicide explosions hit different areas of Baghdad daily, causing great material and human losses. The suicide bombings led by the “terrorist Al-Qaeda organization” for years in Iraq caused material and human losses parallel to those caused by the U.S. invasion of Iraq. It seems that the explosion this time is on the portion of Al-Mutanabbi Street carrying the latest news about Wadood. Nameer calls his cousin Midhat, asking him to go to the location of the explosion on Al-Mutanabbi Street to inquire about Wadood’s condition. Midhat calls Nameer two hours after the explosion to tell him “My condolences [...] Wadood was twenty-seventh on the list of thirty people killed in al-Mutanabbi Street” (Antoon, 2019: 204). Wadood is killed in this explosion. If the study assumes that Wadood’s character is fictional, then the explosion is real. Most of the local and international media reported the explosion, which occurred on March 5, 2007, in the historical Al-Mutanabbi Street in the center of Baghdad. Audrey Azoulay, director-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, visited the site of the explosion on March 5, 2023, expressing her grief and saying: “It’s the culture, the education, that were deliberately destroyed, attacked, in a country with a thousand-year-old history” (France 24, 2023). So, destroying the civilizational depth of Iraq, by attacking historical and cultural areas such as Al-Mutanabbi Street, which was targeted by American bombing or then by booby-trapped vehicles, is evidence of the occupier’s determination and the groups work in their favor. According to Nameer, the death of Wadood means the death of the documentation project that is important for Iraq. This explosion, which killed thirty people, is a sample of the large number of explosions that Iraq has witnessed. Wadood’s martyrdom marks the end of the Fihris project, and at the same time, it is the beginning of writing this novel, or Nameer’s Fihris.

Homi Bhabha in his introduction for the book *Territories & Trajectories. Cultures in Circulation* (2018) titled “On Disciplines and Destinations” explains the importance of national institutions concerning documentation saying: “There are sound historical and economic reasons that “nation-based” institutions exist—national universities, national museums, national archives—even as they frequently project a composite image of cultural heritage, territorial integrity, and civic identity” (Bhabha, 2018, p.1). Bhabha considers museums, universities, and national archives to represent the history, heritage, and identity of society. There is a great importance in documenting the events of the invasion and its effects on Iraq in all political, economic, and social fields to prevent the truth from being lost or falsified.

### 3. Conclusion

This research has aimed to emphasize how the concept of Neo-colonialism has targeted the colonized peoples’ culture, present, and future by aiming to impose conditions that serve the colonialists’ future interests.

Sinan Antoon has focused on the historical and cultural dimensions of Al-Rashid Street, which includes many historical museums. In other words, targeting Al-Rasheed Street with direct



bombing, stealing or destroying its historical and cultural monuments is an attempt to hide some evidence of Baghdad's social depth.

The writer has focused on the efforts of the U.S. Army to impose control over the cities of Iraq by violence, which represent an explicit occupation.

Antoon has tried to warn about the existence of an approach followed by some Western countries to distort the Islam, by accusing the Islam of terrorism to justify any future interventions in the Arab region. Antoon has referred to the mistreatment of Muslims in America after the bombing of the World Trade Center in New York.

Antoon has tried to warn of the ugliness of the war, it's devastating effects, and the danger of terrorism, in addition to the fact that the *The Book Collateral Damage* has depicts the scenes or effects of the American invasion of Iraq.

The author has used figurative language, the most prominent of which is the allusions, to focus on fundamental events that constituted a turning point in the events of the novel. For instance, Antoon's allusion to the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who heavily opposes the British occupation of his country and confirms the participation of many Western countries in implementing the Neo-colonial plans. In another example, the allusion to the Iraqi poet Al-Jawahiri, who was exiled outside Iraq because of his opposition to the former Iraqi regime, which confirms the dominance of dictatorship and the absence of democracy by forcibly expelling opponents of the former Iraqi regime.

Antoon has blamed the administration of the U.S. government, for taking decisions, that the author has described as wrong and which cause great harm to the Iraqi people. Antoon doubted the reason for the United States' invasion of Iraq because Iraq poses a threat to the world due to its possession of weapons of mass destruction.

Antoon has referred to the disagreements between the Republican and Democratic parties in America over the policy towards Iraq. US administration was splitted about the use of force against Iraq, that indicates the lack of consensus between the two major forces in America, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party.

I hope that further studies on the influence of the American invasion on Iraq and its devastating consequences would be conducted to illuminate more issues regarding social and cultural repercussions and traumas.

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