

Reconstruction of Memory, Identity and History: “Thing” Narrative in *The Book of Collateral Damage**

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This paper draws from “The Material Turn” in literary criticism to explore the multi-functions of “things” in *The Book of Collateral Damage*, a semi-autobiographical novel by Sinan Antoon, analyzing their roles in carrying memories, constructing identities, and reconstructing history. Each object encountered in the novel holds the memories of a character, which are constructed and reconstructed as casualties of war’s collateral damage. Each object also reflects a character’s sense of social belonging, which is impacted by the collateral experiences of the war. Moreover, each object actively records and reflects the war narrative, rethinking and revising the official historical narrative. It is hoped that the present study might throw a new light on the vital role played by things in this novel, which are no longer just static backdrops, but rather dynamic narrative subjects that record and reflect individual and collective perceptions and emotions, as well as provide a more complex and multidimensional view of historical truth.

Keywords: *The Book of Collateral Damage*, Sinan Antoon, the “thing” narrative

Introduction

As “a country made by war”, war is an indispensable theme not merely in American political life but also in the history of American literature. For American writers, missing the war in their literature is “to miss, apparently, America” (Limon, 1994, p. 7). With the outbreak of the Iraq War, it sparked numerous American scholars to document the impacts of this conflict through their writing, resulting in a surge of works such as *The Yellow Birds*, *Redeployment*, *American Sniper*, etc. The majority of these works concentrate solely on the American perspective, depicting the psychological trauma and upheaval of life that the war inflicts on U.S. soldiers and their families. Relatively, there is a notable lack of adequate and in-depth accounts of the suffering and struggles experienced by the other side of the conflict—the situation of Iraq.

Sinan Antoon, an Iraqi-American poet, novelist, and translator, has emerged as a significant voice in the depiction of Iraqi history, warfare, and social unrest from an Iraqi perspective. Born in Baghdad, he left Iraq for the United States after the Gulf War, received a Ph.D. in Arabic literature from Harvard University in 2006, and had published three collections of poetry in Arabic as well as five novels, whose themes often revolve around the Iraq War, dissecting and demonstrating its profound impact on the local social structure and people’s lives.

The Book of Collateral Damage is Antoon’s semi-autobiographical novel, translated by Jonathan Wright and published in English-speaking countries in 2019. It was originally published in Arabic as *Fihris* in 2016,

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which refers to the “index” or “catalogue”. This novel is both a record of the devastation caused by the U.S. invasion of Iraq and a compilation of everything that are classified by America as “collateral damage” during the conflict, including not only people, but also a large number of things that tell their own stories in this war. As Alkriti and Bin Janoory (2019, p. 81) writes:

So many books have been written about the Iraq War (2003-2011) from both sides of that conflict, but Sinan Antoon’s *The Book of Collateral Damage* is unique in that it chooses to represent the human and environmental cost of that war.

There are two main storylines in the novel: the events surrounding the protagonist, Nameer, his return to Baghdad and subsequent departure for the United States; the other is Wadood’s projection, in which he hopes to document everything that has been damaged during the war. Throughout the novel, things play a prominent role, taking up almost half of the novel and constituting the core of the narration. Not only is the narrative unfolded from the perspective of a bird, a tree, a painting, a carpet, a stamp album, a tape, a piece of paper or a clay oven, but various types of food, buildings, plants, and weapons are also deployed to drive the plot.

At present, most scholars have only focused on the themes and the writing techniques of the novel based on trauma theory, eco-criticism, double consciousness, and montage. For instance, by using trauma theory, Abu-Fares and Alshetawi (2023) investigate how war narratives in Antoon’s novel present various types of war events so as to represent the experiences of Iraqi individuals during that time. Al-Kriti and Bin Janoory (2019), on the other hand, combine the theory of double consciousness with the postcolonial context to analyze the existential situation of Iraqi (domestic and foreign) immigrants in the novel and the unresolved double consciousness of the characters triggered by these issues. Detailed studies and analyses on the role of things in this novel have not yet been carried out, although some scholars have paid attention to the function of things, such as Webster (2021, p. 49), who mentions that the book, as a thing, can fill in the void of individual and collective memory through recording and documenting, thus presenting subjectivity.

In the 21st century, literary critics have initiated a great deal of new research and reflection on “things” and their relationship with human beings, drawing attention to the “things”, which have been marginalized in literary texts for many years like “humble servants” (Freedgood, 2006, p. 1). Under the new trend of “The Material Turn”, the “thing” is no longer regarded as a static state that sets the background and creates the atmosphere for the main characters; rather, more emphasis is paid to its agentivity and vitality. Yin and Tang (2019, p. 83) indicate that the current academic community should be attentive to the interaction between “thing” narrative and the writing of gender, race, environment, history, and globalization. These narrative fields have long been committed to restoring the traumatic memories of oppressed groups, empowering them, giving them voice and equality, and presenting their unique ways of being. Taking advantage of the “thing” narrative research model provides a new perspective and contributes to a deeper exploration of these narrative fields.

In *The Book of Collateral Damage*, the author challenges the traditional human-centred narrative by imbuing things with voice and emotion, and making them the subject of the narration, so that the things in the novel are no longer just static victims of war, but carry profound meanings and connotations. Therefore, from the perspective of “thing” narrative, this paper will analyze how “things” in the novel exert their subjectivity and initiative, and show their own narrative power and significance in carrying individual and collective memory, shaping identity, and recording historical events. The paper expects to provide readers with a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of this novel, to recognize the pivotal position and role of “things” in the narrative,

and to stimulate people to re-examine the damage caused by the Iraq War and its profound impact on individual lives, social structures, and cultural memory.

Things and Memory Trigger

In the study of subject-object relations, “The Material Turn” breaks away from the traditional framework by recognizing the subject’s domination, use, and transformation of the thing, while at the same time highlighting the potential dominance of the object over the subject, and how things, which carry thoughts and feelings, can help to “preserve memories, maintain relationships, and stimulate new ideas” (Turtle, 2007, p. 3). From the perspective of “thing” narrative, a richer connotation is revealed in the relationship between things and memory. As carriers of memory, things are not only material existences, but condensations of emotions and thoughts; the agentivity of things is particularly significant in the maintenance of memory. Objects do not passively wait to be awakened by the subject, but have the ability to actively trigger memories. These memories, which may be of a particular event, person, or emotion, are reproduced through the medium of things, allowing the reader to relive the same emotion and experience of the past.

In *The Book of Collateral Damage*, Wadood’s project is not only a record of everything that experienced in the first minute of the Iraq War, but also a memory carrier that stores and preserves the complexity of history and individual experience. Through its unique narrative mode, the project transforms the losses of war—whether physical, biological, or cultural—into narrative “things”. They can hold voices and faces in the manuscripts, and tell their own tales, thus challenging the traditional human-centred narrative model. For instance, in the chapter “The Colloquy of the Tape” (Antoon, 2019, pp. 160-167), the tape, as a non-human narrator, constitutes a unique relationship with memory. It is not only a passive recorder of sound, but also an active constructor and transmitter of memory. Initially, the tape was used by his father to record Husam’s voice when he first learned to speak. However, as his parents had lost their lives in the war, the family conversations preserved on the tape became an important medium for Husam in remembrance of his loved ones. Every three years, Husam would listen to the recordings, at which point the tape gradually changed from an ordinary recording machine to a thing carrying Husam’s memories and emotions. Through its recorded voices, the tape actively establishes a connection with Husam’s memory and inspires him to reminisce about his family members. In this way, it not only records the past, but also influences the present, and shapes Husam’s personal habit—listening to the recordings every few years. Ultimately, the destruction of the tape is also not just the destruction of its physical form, but also of Husam’s memory carriers and a testimony to the brutality of war. This transformation highlights the intrinsic power and significance of the tape as a thing, not just as a static witness, but as the narrative unfolds, revealing its far-reaching impact on emotion, memory and history.

In Wadood’s project, he constructs a narrative world narrated by “things” themselves, which are destroyed and lost in the context of war. In addition to the tape, there are stories about a bird, a carpet, a tree, a catalogue, a wall, a horse, an oud, and so on. Each “thing” tells its own tale with its own unique perspective, thus constituting a multi-voice and multi-perspective narrative structure. This narrative technique not only gives things subjectivity, allowing them to “speak” and express their own feelings and experiences, but also presents readers with a multi-layered memory network of things, humans, and environments, not only documenting the direct damage of the war, but capturing the details that have been marginalized or ignored in the mainstream of narrative. In this way, Wadood’s project does not merely preserve memory, but activates it, becoming a tool to fight against forgetting,

giving a voice to things that were damaged and neglected during the war, and making their stories heard. Although these things have been destroyed during the war, their memories and voices can be preserved and passed on through this project, serving as a bridge between the past and the present, the individual and history.

In addition to Wadood's project, the ordinary household items and buildings presented in the book also reflect the agency of things as memory carriers. In the critical discourse of "The Material Turn", the location of a thing in the process of its former use or possession is also included in its study, as this constitutes the subject's "basis for thought, memory, and feeling", and by having the same thing doing the same thing, or the same thing in the same position, the subject creates "a unified and continuous scene that helps to overcome disorder and change" (Brown, 2003, pp. 77-78).

Taking Nameer's experience in Baghdad as an example, the text describes his deep memories of the house, furniture, and food in his childhood. These things are not mere physical existences, but triggers of his childhood memories, which evoke a profound emotional response in Nameer and give him a sense of belonging and peace. This feeling culminated when his aunt asked him to lie down and rest on the sofa he used to sleep on when he was a child. This action not only recreated the physical space of his childhood, but activated deeper emotions and memories, giving Nameer a feeling of warmth and comfort, where he, who previously suffered from frequent insomnia, took an hour and a half siesta, and felt a sense of comfort and tranquility that he had not felt for a long time. Such memories evoked by things and spaces make the home in Baghdad for him not just a physical space, but more of a habitat for beautiful memories and emotions. The opposite is the case for Wadood, who returned home from the psychiatric hospital to find that the house he used to live in had changed, and even been sold by a relative long ago. Thus, he lamented: "I went back but I didn't go back" (Antoon, 2019, p. 226). As Brown stresses, if the changing of possession patterns or the misuse of a thing results in an "unnatural use" due to the breaking of habits, the misplacement of things in the scene can also be "unconventional", bringing about a chaotic "spatial impact" (Brown, 2003, pp. 77-78). When Wadood returned home after many years, his mode of possession of the house had changed, as the ownership of the house had also been transferred by his uncle to another person. Therefore, the thing in the same location no longer carried past memories of Wadood, which gave rise to his inner disappointment and confusion.

It can be seen that the relationship between things and memory is a dynamic interaction, in which things are not just static stores of memory, but actively participate in the construction and reproduction of memory through their agentivity. They can play an active role in the subject's life, triggering deep emotional experiences and historical recollections. In *The Book of Collateral Damage*, whether Wadood's project that gives things rights to tell their own tales, or Nameer's reconnection with childhood things at his aunt's house, both demonstrate the centrality of things as carriers of memory, transcending their physical form to become testimonials to people's emotions and lives, connecting an individual's past and present.

Things and Identity Construction

Under the perspective of "thing" narrative, there is a dynamic interaction and integration between things and subjects. Things are not passive beings, but actively participate in the shaping of social identity and individual psychology through their intrinsic "meaning-constructing ability". James (1983, p. 279) points out that "a man's Self is the sum total of all that he Can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house...his reputation and works, his lands, and yacht and bank account", suggesting that individual identity is

not merely constituted by intrinsic attributes, but strongly influenced by the physical environment in which people live. Thus, when we have possessed something, it also gradually constitutes part of our self-identity, serving as not only an external marker of identity, but at a deeper level, contributing to the formation of the individual's psychological identification and sense of social belonging.

In the context of the Iraq War, Wadood's project, acting as a memory container, documenting individual and collective losses from the war, actively shapes and reflects his own personal identity. Collecting and collating the stories of these animals, plants, and inanimate things represent Wadood's critique of the dominant narratives and his concern for the vulnerable and marginalized groups. At the same time, this project also actively constructs Wadood's personal identity. Just like the things in the project that are overlooked during the war, Wadood is also rejected and excluded by the society and people around him. After returning from the war, he suffered from a deep emotional trauma, which made it difficult for him to communicate with others and even led him to be sent to a mental hospital. After being discharged, his situation did not improve. Eventually, Wadood chose to live in a closed space full of manuscripts and books, simply to be with things. In the process, these things gradually became an acting agent, providing him with spiritual solace, yet also further isolating him from people.

As Tischleder (2014, pp. 260-261) points out, things by their own power "construct a composite self that includes subjective consciousness and inanimate things". Wadood also forms a composite self with the manuscripts he writes in the project, explaining that, "We are all books. Yes. But we also have different histories, different genres of writing..." (Antoon, 2019, p. 101), suggesting that the book is no longer a static thing but a living subject with its own tale. It becomes an important symbol of the fusion between the subject and thing, making the manuscript not only Wadood's "synecdoche presence" (Brown, 2003, pp. 115-116), but also revealing his identity as a marginalized person, a victim of war. In addition, the conduct of his project and the collection of numerous rare Arabic books demonstrate Wadood's dedication to cultural preservation and historical authenticity, further reinforcing his image as an independent thinker and guardian of culture.

Thus, Wadood's project and books, as witnesses to the cruelty of war and the transmission of Iraqi culture, not only carry historical memories, but play a crucial role in Wadood's identity and self-expression, serving as his medium of communication with the world and reflecting his inner world and his understanding of external realities. In this process, things are no longer passive recorders, but dynamic forces that actively participate and influence the way Wadood perceives the world around him and expresses himself.

Food in *The Book of Collateral Damage* is an important cultural symbol that shapes the identity of the main character, Nameer, rather than just a basic element to satisfy physical needs. As Ye and Han (2021, p. 100) emphasize, "Diet is not mere a biological behaviour to satisfy the needs of survival, but a set of 'communication systems', status symbols with agreed-upon social and even moral significance, and symbols with multiple symbolic meanings encoded by language, rituals, etc.".

For instance, when Nameer returned to Baghdad, foods presented in the text, such as the Iraqi-style clotted cream, the hot sammun bread, traditional grilled fish, and the dolma (a meal of stuffed grape leaves) made by his aunt, not only evoked sweet memories of his hometown and a deep nostalgia for his childhood, but on a deeper level, reinforced his sense of identity and belonging to Iraq. When living in the U.S., he also preferred Iraqi food, such as having a partiality for the orange-flavored milk in glass bottles, which brought him back to Baghdad in the middle of the seventies and reminded him of beautiful childhood memories. Meanwhile, when going to his girlfriend's house for dinner, he enjoyed the okra, which was also an important dish in Iraq. Eating the American

bagel also reminded him of a traditional Iraqi food, the simit. As a child, Nameer and his classmates were punished by their teachers for climbing over the wall to eat a simit outside of school, and now as an adult, Nameer said he would also be willing to “put up with that pain again for the sake of a single simit” (Antoon, 2019, p. 282). In addition, when dining with friends in a restaurant, Nameer was inclined to choose arak, a drink common in Iraq, rather than wine, which is more prevalent in Western culture. From these examples, it can be seen that the foods mentioned in the text do not merely serve as a backdrop, but rather influence the protagonist’s choices. Compared to Western foods, these Iraqi ones exert a powerful “temptation” over Nameer, repeatedly “enticing” him to choose them, in the process of which Nameer’s Iraqi roots are continually strengthened. This, in turn, fosters a profound sense of identity and belonging towards his Iraqi heritage.

It is a significant focus in the critical discourse of “The Material Turn” to see how things exert their charm through their “thingness” to stabilize and construct a subject’s identity (Han, 2017, p. 95). In the novel, food not only serves as a symbol of culture and emotion, connecting Nameer with his own past and the cultural heritage of his hometown, but also actively “enchants” the subject through its “thingness”, helping the protagonist feel a sense of belonging in a foreign land and strengthening his identity with Iraq.

In summary, under the perspective of the “thing” narrative, the relationship between things and individual identity construction is characterized by a dynamic and interactive fusion. Things, through their inherent capacity for meaning construction, actively engage in shaping individuals’ social identities and psyches. In *The Book of Collateral Damage*, whether it is Wadood’s project or Nameer’s beloved Iraqi foods, the things exhibit a form of agency that not only bears memories and culture but also profoundly influences individuals’ self-identity and sense of belonging to society. Wadood’s project, as a carrier of war memories, not only documents losses but also reflects his identity as a spokesperson for marginalized groups. Meanwhile, Nameer’s preference for Iraqi food constantly reinforces his identification with the Iraqi identity. In their interactions with individuals, these things become active participants in the construction of identity, demonstrating the complex and profound connection between things and subjects.

Things and Historical Reconstruction

In contemporary material culture studies, things are examined as cultural indicators within specific historical contexts, and the historical morphologies and cultural structures of particular historical periods are analyzed through them (Han, 2015, p. 93). In *The Material Unconscious*, Brown (2003, pp. 13-26) calls for attention to the ontological status of things, arguing that things themselves are “historical texts”. From the perspective of thing narrative, the relationship between things and history is interwoven. Things are not only witnesses to historical events but also participants in the historical process. Through their own existence and changes, they actively record and reflect the evolution of history.

The things mentioned in *The Book of Collateral Damage*, whether they are those displayed in Wadood’s project that suffered damage during the war, such as the Christ’s thorn tree that grew with generations perished in the flames of war, the tape that once recorded family voices now falls silent, the stamp album filled with friendship and affection reduced to ashes, the wall and Oud that witnessed their owners disappearing in the war, or the American tanks and armored vehicles lurking on the streets of Baghdad, and the graffiti “U.S. Army Go Home” (Antoon, 2019, p. 12) written in red paint on a wall, all serve as witnesses to the Iraq War and its history. Furthermore, the al-Mutanabbi street depicted in the book is actually a renowned street of booksellers in Baghdad, named after the 10th-century Abbasid poet al-Mutanabbi (Webster, 2021, p. 44). This street is not only a venue

for book transactions but also a hub for cultural and academic activities, reflecting the cultural prosperity of Baghdad during the Islamic Golden Age. In recent years, this street has also gained recognition, albeit tragic, for an event. In March 2007, a suicide bombing occurred here, resulting in the deaths of over 30 people and causing extensive damage to the surrounding bookstalls. This attack not only resulted in numerous fatalities but also devastated this cultural landmark, eliciting strong condemnation from all ethnic groups and political factions across Iraq. In the text, Antoon also mentions the looting of al-Mutanabbi street following the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. During this period, Baghdad's libraries and cultural institutions suffered severe losses, with numerous places, including the National Library and Archives of Iraq, being burned and raided, resulting in the permanent loss of vast historical documents, records, and precious books. Thus, the role of al-Mutanabbi street in the novel extends beyond merely being the "backdrop and embellishment" for characters and plots; rather, it stands as a microcosm of Iraqi culture and history. It encapsulates Iraq's illustrious achievements in literature and academia while also serving as a testament to the suffering and losses endured during modern conflicts.

In addition, as pointed out by Han (2015, p. 80), things, akin to humans, serve as "actors" within social networks. They not only exhibit "interactivity and complementarity" with humans but also exist within a network of relationships, collaborating with humans to construct the meaning of this relational network. Conversely, it is within this network that meaning is constructed, and it is through this process that things, too, are shaped by specific power relations, while simultaneously actively shaping these relations in return. In the preamble of Wadood's project, he cites a fable about lions, incorporating a well-known African proverb: "Until lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter" (Antoon, 2019, p. 20). It underscores the notion that history is often penned by the victorious, and in their historical narratives, the true experiences and perspectives of the conquered or the victims are frequently ignored or distorted.

During the Iraq War, the U.S. military often categorized numerous casualties in Iraq as "collateral damage", which is defined in the United States *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (2001, amended 2004, p. 93) as "unintentional or incidental injury or damage to persons or things that would not be lawful military targets in the circumstances ruling at the time". This terminology not only attempts to provide official and legal recognition for the indirect harm caused by military action, enabling the US military to evade responsibility, but also categorizes civilian casualties and the destruction of non-combat facilities in war as acceptable side effects, thereby diminishing external attention to the severity of such harm. During the war in Iraq, the United States military conducted numerous air strikes on areas including cities, civilian areas and infrastructure, resulting in a large number of civilian casualties. However, under the cover of the term "collateral damage", these destructions and casualties are often downplayed or even ignored. Therefore, Wadood's motivation and purpose in writing this project are to give voice to the "prey" and victims who have been neglected and marginalized in history, and to document their stories so as to counter the monolithic perspective of the dominant historical narrative.

In this way, Wadood's project transcends being merely a documentation of the losses incurred during the Iraq War; it serves as a revision and a recollection of war history, unveiling the full truth of the conflict, and bringing to light the individuality, memories, and lives of those people and things that have been overlooked or reduced to mere statistics in official historical accounts. As Railey (2007, p. 69) notes, "Things within stories do not narrate on their own; their significance becomes apparent only when connected to the world they inhabit". In Wadood's project, those individuals and things overlooked during the war have raised their own voices, contributing to the documentation of Iraq War. This is not merely a reconstruction of Iraqi history, but also an

affirmation of the things' initiative. They are no longer passive victims but actively play a role in historical narratives, serving as both witnesses and active participants, as well as shapers, of history.

Conclusion

This paper examines the multidimensional role of "thing" narrative in Sinan Antoon's *The Book of Collateral Damage*, unveiling the unique power of things in bearing memory, constructing identity, and reconstructing history. Through the analysis, we recognize that "things" are not merely static backgrounds or inanimate objects, but narrative subjects with agency and vitality, capable of recording, reflecting, and influencing individual and collective thoughts, perceptions, and emotions.

At the level of memory, things act as a condensation of emotions and thoughts, actively triggering memories through their agency, bridging an individual's past and present. Wadood's project and Nameer's reconnection with childhood things exemplify the centrality of things as carriers of memory, transcending their physical form to become testimonies of emotions and life experiences. In terms of identity construction, things engage in dynamic interactions with an individuals' self-identity and sense of social belonging through their inherent capacity to construct meaning. Wadood's fascination with books and Nameer's preference for Iraqi cuisine exemplify the proactive role of things, which not only carry cultures and memories, but profoundly shape and influence individuals' self-identities at a deeper level. With regard to the reconstruction of history, things serve as both witnesses and participants, recording and reflecting the evolution of historical events. The vicissitudes of al-Mutanabbi Street, and those groups that have been overlooked in the midst of the fighting, are given voices through Wadood's project, which not only documents the deep losses of the Iraq war, but also serves as an insightful reflection and a necessary complement to the official historical narrative. The narratives of these things contribute to the polyphonic recording of history, facilitating an understanding of the full picture of the war, providing space for marginalized voices to express themselves, and thus contributing to a complete presentation of the truth about the war.

Therefore, through the new perspective of "The Material Turn" in literary criticism, this paper explores the "thing" narrative in *The Book of Collateral Damage*, with the expectation that it will facilitate readers' deeper understanding of the roles played by things, as well as the core themes and emotional depths they contain. By probing how things serve as carriers of memory, tools of identity construction, and bearers of historical testimony, this paper not only enriches the theoretical understanding of the role of things in literary criticism, but also broadens our comprehensive grasp of the impact of war. In *The Book of Collateral Damage*, the "thing" narrative challenges the traditional human-centered one, emphasizing that in large-scale conflicts such as war, things also endure losses, possess social vitality, and expressive power, and are also capable of presenting and revealing the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups, thereby providing us with a more complex and multidimensional understanding of the historical truth. Hence, laying emphasis on the agency and subjectivity of things prompts us to re-examine the far-reaching impact of war on individual lives, social structures, and cultural memory, thereby offering a novel research pathway in the fields of literature and history.

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