



The City of Baghdad in Iraqi Fiction: Novelistic Depictions of a Spatiality of Ruin

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<p>Abstract: The Iraqi novel has contended with brutish forms of violence for the better part of the past century that have essentially reshaped the narrative experience unto space. Writers are confronted with the challenge of typifying a search for meaning in and amongst character-altering ruin. At the height of its maturity today, as various works convey spatial woundedness particularly in the city of Baghdad, there is a relationship between fiction and urban reality symbolizing an image of complexity. They play host to a fantastical blending of the real and unreal. They see through to the mediational potencies of absurdist violence, one that is acted out this performativity on the page a matter of survival. The selected works respectively depict the pre-revolutionary capital before moving into the bitter decades to follow. Many build worlds that are mired in the crippling present day engaging the normativity of the spatial wound to make sense of the nonsensical. The novels <i>Hunters in a Narrow Street</i>, <i>The Corpse Washer</i>, <i>Frankenstein in Baghdad</i> and <i>Tashari</i> and short story “The Corpse Exhibition” work towards that end. They critically ponder decrepitude and death as it joins life in the realm of the real, legitimate ruination of place as aesthetic in the liminal imaginary and create the conditions with which to imagine the spatial afterlife of destruction. The extracted articulations and thoughts around each are informed by the critical theoretical lenses of three landmark thinkers of space and place and how the latter equates to the emotionality of man.</p> <p>Keywords: Baghdad, Space and place, Literature, Fiction, Wounded identity, War, Ruination, Dystopia.</p>	<p>Review Paper</p>
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1.1. Decrepitude and Death Join Life in the Realm of the Real

The passage of time in modern Iraqi history and its coupling with savage violence reached an entirely new level, as brutal as the Mesopotamia Campaign had been between the British and Ottomans at the end of the First World War and how it wracked instability, in the twenty first century as it would don a frightfully new face. For the novelistic project, it beckoned authors, well-established or new onto the scene, to rise to quite a formidable challenge that was twofold. There was on the one hand the onset of spatial disintegration. So widespread and deep was the damage that it organically took on a repurposed role, being written into everyday urban character rather than locked out of it. More so than any other, the Baghdadi space asserts itself as the central character. All of the other pieces fall into place around it. The brokenness was always treated as a physical thing, what Fabio Caiani and Catherine Cobham (2013) saw as coinciding with “the birth of Iraq as a unified country”

thus “the early development of fiction in Iraq” (p. 1) had it as a primary component essentially normalizing the abnormal. Today though, and the second part of this challenge, the accumulative effect of the pain of old and a disastrous war has ushered in the complex handling of a wounded space. This is essentially when the fabric of space is engrained with a psychological toll, the physical migrates into the metaphysical. So a need presented itself to textually engage with the sorrow but also work with its potentiality. The objective was to be led by a duty “to inform and even to contribute to reforming society” thus it was no surprise that “texts were all very distant from the mainstream...” (p. 19). Interest in philosophical questions or navigating the human condition took a back seat to contending with the spatial wound.

The post-2003 Iraqi novel would still use characterization to drive the plot yet it markedly moved beyond the centrality of the minute analysis of human nature. Space, in its crisis of identity, would emerge as

the most pivotal element of fiction. Hence there had to be a moving away from more traditional forms of laying out a narrative. Authors have gone in a completely different direction typified by “a new trend, basically concerned with revealing the impact of the war and the new colonialism on the country” (Hamedawi, 2017). The reader will come to anticipate and even expect the thematic mainstay of ruination. Slowly but surely, Iraqi fiction would be preoccupied with a shift in its personality “capable of manipulating all narrative shapes and styles to produce different thoughts and visions far removed from pragmatic reality” as Jameel Al-Shebeby states (Al-Shebeby, 2014, as cited in Hamedawi, 2017) because nothing in said reality would suffice in trying to address the quagmire of destruction. This altered approach is what will be reflected in the chosen works. They have come upon a landscape devoid of meaning in the sense that physical woundedness stripped it bare of any semblance of it. Still there exists a golden opportunity to create it when the artistic mind finds more to it than meets the eye beginning with *Hunters in a Narrow Street* that pictures the built environment of Baghdad as beautified chaos. All eventually falls together and juxtaposed alongside it is the search for the self. Then there are *The Corpse Washer, Frankenstein in Baghdad* and the short story part of a collection “The Corpse Exhibition” that dabble in the fantastical to varying degrees. Lastly comes a handling of growing pains of the Iraqi diaspora with *Tashari* and it offers a solemn solution of sorts that can bring the exiled closer to home and family members in contact with one another. Ruin crosses boundaries and is virtualized as part and parcel of this reconciliation such that ruination in the virtual sphere becomes a key means for resurgence.

The above-mentioned texts, both thematically and in historical terms, fit squarely into and narratively channel the argument that makes of the city of Baghdad a symbol of complexity essentially mediating the arrival at an image of urbanity as phantasmagorical. They are literary sites wherein there is a playing out of a vast imaginary. Though the intermixing of the real and unreal is manifested at different levels, they foundationally share a fantastical underbelly and the plotlines are either par for the course in the direction of said flights of fancy or have it wholly actualized. This was important to establish given the pursuit of the idea of the poetics of spatial woundedness and the authors more than unsettle the boundaries between life and death. They emerge as iterations of trauma that are indistinguishable. Yet the feature quite central to the storytelling process depicting a string of debilitating wars, when the violence is so arrestingly absurd, is that reality is not so much distorted but expanded. The horrors depicted are sourced from the structural madness materializing in Baghdadi urban life so there is already a recourse to unreality within the supposedly real. In other words, everything in a

deconstructed spatiality acts and this performativity, its ephemeral nature, is implicated onto architecture before pen is put to paper. So the dynamics and mediational potentialities of *The Corpse Washer, Frankenstein in Baghdad* and the short story “The Corpse Exhibition” are all too apparent and absolutely crucial. Worldbuilding and characterizations within them pick up the mantle of absurdity from actual life which follow through to novelistic settings where that real-world chasm now has room to overflow its own temporality. To cope with it, the everyday in this unhinged state must be challenged and effectively surpassed in narrative form. There is creative license and breadth to do just that. Of their many alluring features is interrogating the human condition through fantasy set to reality.

Thus these writings connect the two realms going further to legitimate an engagement with the normativity of the spatial wound in the context of urban modernity. It is a construct foisted upon the public in reality the phenomenological essence of which priming authorial voices to penetrate in their fictional settings, characters and unfurling events the thought, emotion and action of everyday existence in destruction. Consciousness is injected into the destructed space. Essence is put back into that sort of existence. With *Hunters in a Narrow Street* comes the perspective of a non-Iraqi author who, coming to a city of degradation and strife cut off from its past still looking onward to a hopeful future, offers a fresh take just as qualified to sense the scar running through Baghdadi urbanism. He has the appropriate amount of distance for that to take place. Still the experience of the built environment through the eyes of the protagonist was such that it strained a clear binary. The novel moreover carries historical consequence capturing the subtleties of the physical space, a place of genuine beauty alongside the ugliness, before the oncoming darkness would paint it with one monotonous brush. There was then the duality of said darkness and light that is essential to take stock of before delving into the later decades that would gradually activate its unmaking. Baghdad stands in for the existential confusion of every Arab city at the time, conversing with Western culture while fixated on homegrown passions. As for *Tashari* and the exilic positionality it occupies, it illuminates a spatiality of displacement experienced by the Iraqi diaspora and how ruination is psychologically rendered. The woundedness of space is filtered through their absence from it. Interestingly, the relationship to the capital changes profoundly given this factor and warrants consideration what with the sizable number of those abroad. Urban life for them is dominated by a politics of desire looking past nuances to embrace the nostalgic.

In Jabra Ibrahim Jabra’s semi-autobiographical *Hunters in a Narrow Street*, published in 1960 in the

wake of the creation of the Israeli state, the foul and buzzing city of Baghdad is a character onto itself embodying the reinvention of Arab postcoloniality. An artist and public intellectual, he hailed from an Orthodox Christian family and spent many of his formative years in Bethlehem before moving to Jerusalem later on in life. He finally settled upon the Iraqi capital in his quest to find work after fleeing his tragically occupied homeland. For every image that invokes the decrepit, there is in close proximity a space that fascinates and all carries on indeed in a delicate binarism. The physicalities of the streets and unknown buildings carry in their wayward form and function the political tumult and anticipation of a modernist future, the outward privileges of an oil-rich kingdom relapsing into squalor and the world of the abnormal. The Palestinian-Iraqi author introduces the narrator as Jameel Farran, a Christian Palestinian like himself, who flees Jerusalem in 1948 making his way to the Iraqi capital to work as an English teacher at the University of Baghdad. Shortly after arriving, he is acquainted with people from different echelons of the social spectrum. Though they share despite their differences a characteristic restlessness. They are bitter towards the goings-on of their lives but this feeling also comes to the fore on account of their youth. The incredibly vibrant Al-Rasheed Street is where the disoriented hunters, these troubled souls he meets looking to make sense of themselves under societal pressure, gather and an assortment of incidents, diametrically feeding off of the oddness of a lost city, play out in a landscape torn between civilization and nomadism, traditions and modernity and the authentic and the intrusive. His journey begins in the back of a cab instructing the taxi-driver “to take me to a good hotel” (Jabra, 1996) who unenthusiastically rushes him around the pre-revolutionary city. He cannot quite place its layered existence and so the novel is a lengthy attempt at discovering it.

Right away the narrative structure uncovers it as each adventurous excursion and symbolic interaction is akin to peeling back the layers, not merely divulging a dualistic material reality but superimposing disparate constructs onto one another. As the architectural differences quickly disappear into a homogenized mass, the narrator unfurls to the reader an especial state of being. Dichotomous categories come together in the eyes of the beholder. Baghdad is at once alive but the soft bricks of its great structures are decaying, bears the brunt of “internal strife, sectarian massacres, foreign oppression...” yet “all had failed to obliterate the city completely” (p. 36) and so it stands, a dilapidated place that yet fascinates. The city, like the City Hotel he chose to lodge in, “was no great edifice...constantly rattled by the heavy buses that passed underneath” (p. 18) still an edifice it did put forth, as he stepped out to the balcony, that drowned out the primal encounter with grotesque life

manifesting rapidly around every street corner. He is met with a cacophony of horns and a flood of cars honking, “what riotous masquerade...great crowds moved as though in a festival” (p. 19) as Jabra mixes the spatial mortification in with the space carved out for the variegated display of colorful commotion. Suggestive of Henri Lefebvre’s knowledge of everyday life, Jameel stands in a position that sees him engaging with that which visually repulses and attracts under the pretense of giving it a new resonance. He is in full view of the notion of opposites however like Charles Baudelaire, who wanted to extract the phantasmagorical from within nature, there is recognition that there must be an elimination of keeping them separate. So duality can exist yet he “...is mainly concerned with intensifying it until it reveals a sort of unity within its extreme and painful tensions: a confused unity – not conciliation, or synthesis” just an ambiguity that remains as such and “...where contradictions are resolved through a painful, relentless struggle...” (Lefebvre, 2014) sitting atop a foundation of ruin. This is the Baghdad of the fleeting moment, the living spirit not above or beyond but within it that energetically lives out a contradiction.

The city for Jabra is an abnormality problematizing the chasm between the conscious and the unconscious, what is on the surface alongside what festers below, dictatorship and futile liberalism, the ink-stained Tigris and the crimson blood of the slain though it suddenly heaved into life with the discovery of black gold, thriving on something so bizarre liberated from the vestiges of this physical spasm. Life necessarily emerges from the great mound of ruins. He captures, in this sense, the historiographical anxiety that met Baghdad in the pivotal forties having broken away, figuratively at best, from colonial rule. As Caecilia Pieri (2014) conjectures, it is caught in the organized madness of the search for a singular urbanity, “a sudden trend of abstract geometry of rational, functional, even Bauhaus aesthetics...at least in the external décor” (p. 2). The internal will make of itself what it will and in the context of demonstrating international modernism, the capital would inexorably mark the juxtaposition of contraries as the pivot of spatial discourse. From within a turbulent and neurotic confusion arises the composition of the urban character. The overriding of said binary through the foreseeable, the conjoining of urbanistic forces, formulated an intensity that was its own. The undulations of the exterior and interior flowing as one are not just intellectual but powerfully physical, coming together as a formless unity of sorts. When Jameel loses himself in the tone and tenor of this strange spatiality, he is witness to what is plainly a crooked existence as does his new friend Englishman Brian Flint. In his affectionate reaction, he “appeared to love everything he saw, even the dirt in Rashid Street. At least...it’s authentic. There’s no garbling of facts here. Perfection and imperfection are all there for everybody

to see. And garbage is an essential part of humanity” (Jabra, 1996). Through him, the reader accesses an acceptance of the mysterious and it ceases to be a confused dissociation, a realization that the bemused Jameel will come to when all is said and done, that this frustrating Baghdadi space springs from the unfamiliar.

Al-Rasheed Street, an iconic boulevard of shops and inlets onto which a range of urban complexities meet and converge, is a microcosm of the city itself and emblematic of its incongruous nature. The only servant at the hotel, Shabo, tells Jameel of its wonders, “...there is this one long street which you will want to see. It is so straight that you can’t get lost in it, and so varied that you will love it” (Jabra, 1996). But walking headfirst and farther along into the kinetic energy that whisks him away presents an experience of a fascinating imbalance, the crowd gets thinner “and the place progressively chaotic.” The street straight and snaking through the capital though “the side-streets, badly illuminated in the oncoming darkness and conspicuously dirty at the corners, were like narrow ravines which seemed to suck in or disgorge the anonymous figures” rendering the real a mixture of the seen and the unseen. An active paradox, it runs the uninitiated like the narrator into its careful merging of the common and odd, all the while jostled and tugged by this person and that. The displacement is supplanted into the shadowy individuals who lurk in the back alleys, they parade around the spatial illogicality hallucinatory in prospect but it has migrated over into the everyday, “who walked like figures in a dream, hiding in their folds a world of incommunicable secrets” (p. 22). In its fusing of dissimilar fragments, the reader encounters the street as a site of lopsidedness, animating what has long collapsed and masquerading it as actual life. Ruin is manifested within life on the narrow street. An unavoidable nuisance in its marginal spaces merges with the intensity of life and in the aftermath of that impasse is given content and meaning, even a hidden depth, subverting the traditionality of ruination. The scene of that union is a metaphysical one, what Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) would center on an experiential perspective, and in so many words is the high flights of thought, “it is a feeling of something – the lovable, the hateful...” (p. 9) reaching out beyond oneself. The conventional meaning of ruin collapses when the humanistic standpoint duly confers upon place a strange intentionality constructing an alternative presence.

Baghdad seems to have fashioned a separate plane of existence and in the titular reference to the long but tapered street a representative element of a space inspiring contradictory emotions, as argued by Tuan the use of two terms “to describe the human emotions concerning places; those stirred by a positive experience of a location and those generated by a negative association” (Sylaiou and Ziogas, 2019) and in their

coming together is not so much a relation of affection but identification. Jameel, in his many misadventures around the city, is just as disjointed and wrecked as the state of deterioration he is confronted with. He sees in the urban the equivalent of his true essence that can carry on living in a contradictory state. The topophilic is symbolic of that pristine frontage and deeper reside the pockets of topophobic materiality. But there is no shame in their survival in the Baghdadi space, the clear balancing act of two extremes that can appreciate fear and love in equal measure. Being-in-space and space unfolding in the human soul, in this context, leans on and embraces the challenge of two deviating conceptualizations of spatiality. It is a shoddy appearance where the outlines of the cracks will invariably show but such is the art of broken pieces, unity present in the symbol behind the physical thing. His years in Jerusalem passed “under the predatory shadow of police and soldiery” until it almost succeeded “but here, in this city, the contention was within: it was the act of a city groping in the dark, stumbling upon sharp edges” (Jabra, 1996). An unmitigated nightmare no doubt but packaged as marvelous confusion. There is life in these parts of a well-nurtured polarity, deliberate and frantic, never without excitement, inside of the real world, on no occasion outside of or against it. Bringing in Benjamin as a critical voice who “provides the canonical text for thinking about ruins as petrified life” alluding to wider structures of weakness, Ann Stoler (2008) indicates her preliminary agreeance “but ruins are also sites that condense alternative senses of history. Ruination is a corrosive process that weighs on the future and shapes the present” (p. 194). Formation essentially persists in the monumental leftovers of what was. Space is allocated for both as the city works through the tension to recompose.

Ruin is also a reality he leaves behind in Jerusalem that is newly captured by the Zionist regime before coming upon the layered grime of the Baghdadi space. It is most vividly represented in the lifeless body of his beloved Leila “blown to pieces in her house in Jerusalem, a harrowing vision which recurs throughout the narrative” (Allen, 2006). After an attack by a Jewish terrorist organization, Jameel rushed to her house in a panic skipping over the rubble “then I felt something soft hit my hand. I dug it up. It was a hand torn off the wrist. It was Leila’s hand, with the engagement ring buckled round the third finger. I sat down and cried” (Jabra, 1996) and in her tragic death is a direct connection. It is that her mangled corpse is emblematic of the fallen city. Yet even as it violently burns, he can make out in its image “an ideal of beauty and love” (Harb, 2004) and in this the reader can perceive the governing aesthetics of representation that Jabra employs. It further becomes the basis of his impression of Baghdad, sadness as part of spatiality but hope as well plays a role. Undeniably, “it is

this beautiful Jerusalem which has fired Jabra's imagination and become the center of his life and art" (p. 3) causing the duality overlaying the real with the fantastical to emerge as a compelling feature. Absolutely everything, good and bad, is counted in this magnificent aura of the Jerusalemite space, its landscape resplendent in majesty though robbed and the childhood recollections of the author a joy to look back on but all too often a pain.

It is then no wonder that his physical, and in fact psychological, entry into Baghdad is modeled after this fresh perspective for he has resigned himself to the contradictory two extremes that always seem to be functional. To reach such a spatial essence, it is not too far-fetched to assume that he would lose himself in a poetic reverie. Stepping foot into these chaotic spaces would likely leave such an impression. They are precisely just that, a stupefying mix of opposites, to the point that nothing but a dreamlike trance results from being in them. Much of this had to do with how Jameel, as well as Jabra himself, encountered the city as it progressed into the transformative fifties. There was always a sense of straddling a binary. Ominous side streets were content in their darkness contrasting seamlessly with the taking on of a new value system. Indeed, "the Baghdad Jabra described was in the process of being transformed by the petroleum industry, and its servitors' desire for air conditioning and clean bathrooms; a set of values which the academic refugee from Palestine came to share" (Bishop, 2020). In so many words, the narrator experiences the Baghdadi space twice. He first is enraptured by the intimacy of an alluring place igniting his imagination but then venturing deeper into it he observes repeated injustices. This very paradox draws him in, a city so broken apart yet so put together. The author would not discover this himself having passed a few short years after the Gulf War however this delineation would ultimately disappear. Over time, especially after 2003, that certain something that had enchanted resident and visitor alike faded into an arresting melancholy where the once well-lit main street took on the gloom of the alleyways. There was no mistaking it for the pure sadness that it was and the second novel follows this trajectory having been written after the descent into darkness.

Central to Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* is a similar refiguration of the experience of life such that it is permeated by the inescapability of death beyond its mere imagery, a space where the physical presence of rotting corpses arrest and torment the living. They emerge as one in a portrait of Baghdad that can no longer be claimed solely by those who draw breath. The narrative follows young Jawad Salim who hails from a traditional Shi'ite family, their livelihood the running of a washhouse where the deceased are washed and shrouded. A corpse in the Islamic tradition is washed to

cleanse the deceased and this is done no more than hours after death. As he narrates his own personal experience, the reader comes to learn of the hopes he had for himself matching his youthful exuberance dashed by the new normal of grinding wars. They would take away his singular dream of becoming a sculptor, one that was not without consequence for he sought to celebrate life in a pursuit of artistic innovation rather than tend to the stench of death. Entering the Academy of Fine Arts, he momentarily succeeds in forging his own path but historical circumstances deal him a crippling blow. The fabric of society has unraveled, poverty and destitution strike at its heart, the 2003 invasion topples what is left of it and death soon becomes a casual and fickle companion. The martyrdom of his brother, his father who had passed leaving him to tear open the bloodied envelopes and wash the piled-up corpses, his anxiety-ridden mother, "death is not content with what it takes from me in my waking hours, it insists on haunting me even in my sleep" (Antoon, 2013). Whereas he strongly desired to shape with his hands representations of life he must now grapple with death as a continuous refrain in every circumstance. He and many like him have descended into an underworld where the limits between life and death are blurred. It is a space that is neither one thing nor the other but an entirely novel amalgamation of both.

Although a conceptualization that the layman may restrict to the imaginary, what Antoon describes of the compulsory sharing of space of the living with the departed is very much part and parcel of the real. He captures and gives a voice to the exasperation of place, its utter dread at the breaking of day with the knowledge that more of the dead and dying will tragically pepper its streets and quarters once reserved for the living and how it struggles, when night has fallen, with the notion that it is far removed from the orthodoxy of that purpose. Quite the contrary, death is now paradoxically lively and those who manage to dodge its physical manifestation are not so successful as far as the loss of their mental bearings. Ali Ali (2020), in his documentation of the lives of Baghdadis after the city turned into a site of intense conflict in the Iraq War, delivers the lived experience that saw the conflation of death with supposed life. In one account, he tells of Um Ahmed and her teenage daughter Baan who learn rapidly of the obscurity of the situation. Regularly, the young woman "saw armed men hiding in the side streets dressed in black..." and on a day when some of them suddenly boarded the bus of her all-female school attempting to take her away, "Baan also saw two corpses that had been left in the street. Baghdadis learned to leave bodies alone and to wait for the National Guard to pick them up" (p. 93). All of this amounts to a spatial reconfiguration to the extent that it crosses over into the territory of thirdspace, able to encompass the historicity of the unremitting movement between the dualism of life

and death. Edward Soja (1996) would call this moving towards “an-Other” way of understanding and acting in the space that Jawad inhabits that has effectively lost its sense of self, radically opening it “...to additional otherness, to a continuing expansion of spatial knowledge” (p. 61). Under this renegotiation, a new structure of identity, of meaning and representation, is given to Baghdad and this unrecognizable form is characterized by the formulation of an in-between character. Throughout the text, there is the employment of the language of hybridity and in the context of theorizing space it is a matter of intellectual thought catching up to a physical truth. It has and does accommodate being and non-being thus on its own, in a violent and haphazard fashion, producing a spatial reality that encourages the disruption of the linear view only accepting life and death as separate categories.

While the trauma of war and violence ravage the city, the emerging space integrating life and death negotiates and essentially plays with the margins of the two conditions. Being in the midst of this absurdism, for the living human, is particularly otherworldly when he finds that the opposing forces enjoy the same degree of presence and the scale begins to tip when death meddles with and becomes the mainstay of life. The objective of life, then, is to wait on death. In the end, “the living die or depart, and the dead always come. I had thought that life and death were two separate worlds with clearly marked boundaries. But now I know they are conjoined, sculpting each other” (Antoon, 2013). Destruction and its ability to destabilize the notion of existence brings about a politics of difference, notionally resisted yet spatially manifested. Lefebvre (1991), who stopped short of exploring ruination on its own terms, spoke to, in essence, its fixed symbiotic linkage with the production of space. Fairly consistent with his dialectical method, so too fares the inextricability of death within life. There is, in his view, an interpretation once that point is reached and surpassed which allows space to exist as part of its own incongruities. The possibility of a differential space arises, the melding of abstract and absolute space, due to these contradictions “thrown up by historical time.” Reproduction in this space obeys two tendencies, “the dissolution of old relations on the one hand and the generation of new relations on the other.” Despite its inherent negativity, the abstract Baghdadi space carries “the seeds of a new kind of space” (p. 52) accentuating a life and death unity that almost cedes to normality. Never anything accepted by the hurting public, it remains nonetheless an objective anomaly seen, heard and felt at all times.

Michael Leary emphasizes the Lefebvrian understanding of differential space as “what might be called the here-and-now contestations and bodily re-appropriation of city space” (Leary, 2014) but this

temporariness does not come to fruition in the war space. It is less of a negation however and more of an extension of this sociopolitically erected space escaping the established order that would otherwise partition life from death, perhaps a specific kind of postmodern urbanity. Time is the determinant factor in this regard and, given that so much of it has passed while Baghdad remains under the mercy of occupation, it gives way to the permanency of differential space. So what is inaugurated is a disruption of the norm not a cooptation, a nod to lasting change rather than a place leisurely acting out a point of diversality. Jawad knows it as he walks the haunting streets and his Uncle Sabri says it when he visits the family after a long period of exile, that the abnormal has become part of every transaction, “he said this was a process of erasure...now we had entered the stage of total destruction to erase Iraq once and for all” (Antoon, 2013). Life and death will forever be locked in a space of acrimonious union, according to Antoon, until that cruel geopolitical goal is met. Even the pomegranate tree in a small garden next to the washhouse, beloved by his father and eventually the narrator, veers from its allegory of vitality. It is, after all and crucially enough, watered by the run-off from the washing ceremony. Over the course of the novel, “this tree takes on the symbolic representation of death...” (Habeeb, 2015) so it must also be tainted. Yet it is incorporated into this new kind of space now coming to represent life in the wake of violent death. Blood feeds its roots that, though changing it compositionally, still affords it something of a life relatively calm on the outside but pained and scarred on the inside. Very much like the pomegranate tree, the narrator has his roots beating with death but concealed from the naked eye. No one will know of his anguish except for those who dig them up. It is the reality of each citizen, enlivened by death but broken just the same. Spatially, it is a confounding irony then again a lived experience hardly avertable and an actuality of horror where there is no possible life outside of the infiltration of death. Something of a dismal medium must be tapped into in order to carry on.

1.2 Ruination of Place as Aesthetic in the Liminal Imaginary

Antoon approaches the description of washing corpses with great delicacy, an art-making so unfounded yet legitimated for the state of beautification the dead are left in. Another created space of assuming paradox, it suspends the imagination riddled with wartime vestiges in liminality as the perpetually grotesque appears to be a thing of beauty. Life in the urgency of the real already comes across contradictory such that death heavily figures into it and the realm of the imaginary does the same as ruination is elevated to an aesthetic form. The washhouse as a final stop for the corpse before its descent into the underground facilitates the actualization of this momentary fantasy, perhaps the only place in the whole

of a complex totality of devastation where there is a reversal of the status quo. On that washing bench, the finality of death is embellished with life. The lifeless body, mangled and brutalized, is cocooned in fresh coverings which smell of lotus and camphor, cotton and soap that, at the end of the process when Jawad first observed it, “the dead man looked like a newborn in swaddling clothes” (Antoon, 2013). In this spatial configuration there is, as Florence M. Hetzler (1982) would call it, a new category of being, “the aesthetics of ruin involve a new unity...that of the work of man with the very process of nature and also with man the viewer who has sensitivities and feelings.” It is not natural or artistic beauty, “but we have a third kind of beauty: a ruin beauty” (p. 105). Beyond the brick and mortar of the washhouse, the wider city of Baghdad has taken on this immaterial connotation with a face that is exquisite still despite the ruin underneath. In Bachelardian fashion, the carving out of this unique space lends it to a poetics par excellence bringing to bear “a new poetic image” that was up until that point “lying dormant in the depths of the unconscious” (Bachelard, 1994) reverberating in the imagined conflation of life and death that makes of the body, host to the two states of being, an aesthetic object. Through this fascinating contradiction being enacted on the deceased, there is a phenomenological interrogation into an additional meaning of this space. It is a site boasting a performative poetic imagination bridging the gap of a dichotomous antagonism and leaving in the mind ruin as great beauty.

It is a spectacular combination of the human and the natural beyond time, space and place, beyond the sum of them all, so much so that even in the depths of despair, there is a quiet appreciation for the object. The senses become deeply involved in the transformative experience that has dressed ruination differently. Jawad has already suffered the effects of prolonged war trauma, one of which the lamentable question of what it is to live and what it is to die. Standing in the washhouse as a youth and later on when he had to return to the profession, he is given an answer as the constructed space within its walls takes a physical corporeality and passes it through a poetic rendering. Perhaps the only escape from the clutches of life donning the mask of death is death proper, “a sentimental morbidity” worth embracing, “the Romantic view of death and dying” as a permanently available way “of responding to a permanent evil” (Fry, 1986). To die, therefore, is to achieve a sense of liberation. It may be unbeknownst to him given his wrecked mental state but as Jawad looks upon the shrouded bodies laid down in the coffins, he likely feels in that spatiality their incommunicable happiness. They have left a lifeless existence and, objectively tragic as it is, moved on to a flourishing death, one of peace unattainable for the living. Though ephemeral, the impossibility is normalized in his imagination with even the text itself rejecting the designation of one singular

category having it dominant during the washing ceremony. It is both life and death, entity and nonentity, the poetic image resonating from the physicality of ruin in a poetic space and the realization by the reader of the narrative recalibrating death. All is portrayed in this space sculpting beauty from the abject hence disrupting and poeticizing the life-and-death binary.

Commenting on his own upbringing as far as the sanctity of space and place shaping his novelistic writing, Antoon communicates its primacy that he did not carry around and leave behind “rather it is the one who carried us inside it, lightly, and it travels, as it pleases.” He observed and internalized as a young man, which would go on to affect the spatial ruminations of his works, the contradictions of space for “the aesthetics of difference and diversity were within the same language, in its spoken form, and between different languages, present in the environment in which I grew up” though they coalesced in his receiving consciousness then as the differences falling into place within the inimitability of life. They were those memories of his first place filled with boyish innocence, parlance of the Christian community “who trace their origins to the areas of the Nineveh Plains” to the east or the richness of the homes on his neighborhood street primarily “...inhabited by middle class families” before adjacent areas were divided attracting new arrivals to that Baghdadi hamlet “with lower incomes, generally” (Ben Hamza, 2021). Much like his tormented character, post-1991 Iraq would greatly disrupt the fixity of his spatiotemporal categorizations that never had a reason to venture beyond life. It was a space for the living however he had to contend with the breaching of a once impenetrable border separating life and death and begin to present the possibility of a new understanding. For Antoon and Jawad alike, this is not merely the insistence to resist death and create life but reckon with the fact that his only departure from the former is crucially through it. In the winter of 2003, the narrator, having gone through many similar brushes with death in the past, deliberates with his parents whether or not to stay in Baghdad but having this be a mainstay occurrence was hardly new. Growing restless is a legitimate human concern when violence is threatening to take place and it was never absent from the Baghdadi psyche as a perfectly plausible reaction “but we got ready for wars as if we were welcoming a visitor we knew very well, hoping to make his stay a pleasant one” (Antoon, 2013). It happened so often that it was strangely like a social call. The only option left, albeit a surrealist one, is surrendering oneself to death as common and to the underworld of spatial ambiguity. In that bottomless pit, there is nothing for the constructs of death in life, ruins and the destructed space but to piece together a fragmentary version of existence. The text manages in this way to enunciate and give rise to a particularized beauty with a clear change in the structure

of unity but unity persists nonetheless. This wounded city has its own kind of unity informed by the fragment and is quite pointedly the theme of the third novel seeking out new meaning in the disconnected.

For Ahmed Saadawi and his illustration of the war-torn city, metaphoric fragmentation is rendered quite literal in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* when a monstrous creature comes to life but closer inspection of his full human body will see it made up of the remnants of death. It is a clear satire of the utter grief perhaps making for a more bearable read that would otherwise be far more overwhelming if it was merely the grimness of violence. Here it is taken to a fantastical level. Set during the American occupation, the novel follows the eccentric and foolhardy junk dealer Hadi Al-Attag who devises the half-baked art creation meant to be handed over to the forensics department “in order to gain respect for the vast number of victims who were denied a proper burial or even proper acknowledgement” (Teggart, 2019). Only a nose left to complete his effigy which he pulls off of a victim of the most recent terrorist attack, having taken some fingers from another here, bits of flesh that are quickly sewn together there, he is pleased with the final result. He calls it Whatsitsname and once alive, the creature sets out to bring righteousness long absent in Baghdad and his method is vigilante killing. Factional tensions are more deeply felt as he becomes the *carte blanche* that each group projects its biases and fears on to justify their resort to aggression.

A wave of mysterious murders soon enough begins to sweep the capital and in his desperation he laments to his maker that “...people have been giving me a bad reputation. They’re accusing me of committing crimes, but what they don’t understand is that I’m the only justice there is in this country...” (Saadawi, 2018) and in this conviction, speculative yet nightmarish, dystopian yet very much a reflection of reality, is the mirroring of a space and spatiality just as complex. Not unlike the animated corpse, the city is wild, disorderly, multiethnic and multireligious but retains its allure despite everything. Every bloodied fragment is a terrible reminder of unending chaos still in its entirety, an indefinite something, not quite but virtually artistic and a new aesthetic of horror, is created and sustained. Qasem Sabeeh (2019) views it as “a utopian revival” (p. 85) able to make it paradoxically possible for the monster to exact justice. Moreover though, there is something to be said of the sacredness of this ghastly being in spite of the obscurities given that it is comprised of innocent losses. Their bodies, though ripped apart, are sanctified. His, then, is not an upsetting hybrid but a formation that is registered in the imaginary as a signification of completeness. The reader accepts him as a construction of aesthetic significance and something more than the

parts making up the sum in the same way that the Baghdadi space is accepted as whole in its exteriority.

The creation, use and maintenance of fragmented totality is part and parcel of the form of social space which, according to Lefebvre, constitutes “encounter, assembly, simultaneity” able to account for the spatially compromised because all of space, wherever it stands on the spectrum between preservation and ruin, is naturally constitutive of elements of the fragmentary. It is the business of “natural space” to juxtapose and disperse. Whatsitsname, although not concretized onto the physicality of space but a full-fledged being, plays into and instigates a concrete Lefebvrian abstraction, still representative of space and “has an affinity with logical forms.” In its ghostly appearance associating life with death, it includes “everything that there is in space” be it by nature or society, through their “co-operation” or their “conflicts” (Lefebvre, 1991). His namelessness is indicative of the predilection towards maximum inclusivity. The creature particularizes precisely by performing the role of a representation of multivalent space. So Saadawi chose not to name him to avoid undermining that potentiality. Otherwise, he would not have deemed himself the first true Iraqi citizen. Significantly, as was the intention with the paradoxical linking of conflicting perspectives into a quasi-human of sorts, he heightens and interrogates the possibility of accumulation. He is the social space demonstrating an ontological precariousness of the human condition, that this precarity can yet imply actual or potential assembly. The dialectics of his condition are a political statement, drawing attention to the possibility of place-making through successive deconstruction, that coveted right to the city, not quite the “...right to change ourselves by changing the city” (Harvey, 2008) however changing the city by changing ourselves. The wounded space embracing ruin as part of its spatial fabric, as represented by the monstrosity, is set up as an exemplar for the rest of society. Didacticism as a purpose at the very core of this creature amplifies the state of his being that is imagined and poeticized beyond the unjustness of the existing world. Hence, it is brought to life in the mind as an esoteric yet elevated other and as it materializes in the figure of a poetic image, fully aestheticized, the imagination separates it “from the past as well as from reality; it faces the future.” He brings a “function of unreality” (Bachelard, 1994) as he scavenges the streets of Baghdad that suffered enough from reality thus far. With the fourth novel the aestheticism of death as art is expanded and taken to its full gruesome extent.

The reworking of ruination in the short story “The Corpse Exhibition” by Hassan Blasim features a surrealist curve especially troubled and macabre as it chronicles relentless violence in and around the city and country yet unfailingly leads with the presentation of it

as an art form. The short stories in the collection are grotesque in their imagery and unapologetically so, disturbing in their needlessness but all too well aware of it and written in a style that matches the atrocity and abruptness of torture. They are not communicated with a language that is graceful or waxing poetic. Nonetheless, beyond this confronting exterior is an interiority that thrives on the horrifically creative. It is in fact the instruction central to the narrative of the titular account, given to a prospective employee during an interview for an institutional position as he is cautioned that “every corpse you create is a work of art that awaits your final touch.” There is an acknowledgement, an assertive knowability, that occupying this space will mean unadulterated engagement with the abject and, as can be gleaned from the rhetoric of the interviewer, seeking out the creation of great art. Immediately disrupting what this is thought to be, Blasim qualifies ruin as beauty and in his pursuit of a differentiated understanding flirts with the fantastical. Clearly, he had known the reader would struggle with the crude content, the unimaginable horror so, preemptively through the self-assured interviewer, he retorts to “calm yourself, breathe deeply” for he can see in their eyes “...that confused look” (Blasim, 2015). Interviewee and reader alike must see through to sublime beauty. Spatially, the text characterizes the destitute place, the Baghdadi space but also many others up and down the Iraqi nation given his geographic ambiguity, where the mutilated body doubles as a canvas as defiance incarnate. He gives way to a classification of spatiality as a deeply existentialist will-to-power emerging from the depths of a deep pain.

The gruesome artwork being packaged and presented, with the interviewer going on to give examples of some of the most prolific to the interviewee, must appear as an affront to the senses rivaling the very strangeness of death, “to look at the world that looks at you, but without any sign...as if you and the world are united by blindness” (p. 74). Rebellion as a mode of operation has historically been preserved throughout modern Iraqi history. As the Iraqi Haifa Zangana (2007) states, “peaceful political resistance was common in the first two years of the occupation, despite the limited public space” (p. 129). More broadly, she speaks of how decades of grief have targeted and directly threatened Iraqi culture, “their history, collective memory, values, modes of expression, and ways of life” such that cultural resistance is now “an essential element” in overall resistance implying “a striving to continue their own strands of creativity and imagination...” (p. 139) and this, for Blasim, is the championing of dissident art. It is the broad-based acceptance of it as a creative activity because, and not in spite of, the violence inherent to its make-up. In the same way, the desensitized city, as it begins to live with the reality of carnage and gives form to urban constructs created anew from the pain of that

experience, acquires an individuality of its own. Not unlike the house that Gaston Bachelard makes the focus of his study, the group of occult assassins in the short story inhabit a space where the “...virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues...it braces itself to receive the downpour, it girds its loins. When forced to do so, it bends with the blast, confident that it will right itself again in time, while continuing to deny any temporary defeats” (Bachelard, 1994). Blasim adopts and follows through with a Nietzschean self-affirmation as he turns to a spatiality of shocking realism, the pageantry of horror and ultimately an aestheticism that lifts the inflection of death onto art to a place of normalcy. The fine art of physical torment is not meant to substitute life. It is life itself appearing to lack a visible past thus outside the bounds of contextualization and frightfully nothing more but a futureless art piece.

The city in the text is littered with many a performative display, rendered a space distorted into instances of the same gritty conceptualism used in the disturbing installations. It is not a passive vessel for the erasure of limitations on originality instead instrumental and operational in the creation of the conditions of the grotesque. This is achieved through the Lefebvrian reconciliation of perception with physical and social space. It is through “...thinking about the dialectical character of their interaction” (Merrifield, 1993) or how they come together as a conflictual process of creation. War and what it engenders of violence as the sublime, as Blasim sees it, merges with this elemental understanding of space as a productive social product to create a new social reality. Additionally, the very nature of a wounded space suggests a characteristic of porosity conducive to the emergence of a grim spatiality. What the abstract space is hence constitutive of are gaping holes porous to ideas, to interaction with the abject as a marker of identity and to transposing into everyday life new visual synergies. The surreality of wartime Iraq has wrecked in perpetuity the chasm between life and death devolving its space into an urban informality where anything goes. There is no conceptual border to the infliction of pain, the agent Devil’s Knife hence criticized “for he believes that severing the limbs of the customer and hanging them on electrical wires in poor neighborhoods is the end of creativity and innovation” (Blasim, 2015) when he has free rein when the sanctity of the body dissipates. The electrical wires, as objects within the destructed space, are tools actively participating in the repurposing of torture after they themselves have abandoned their original purpose. War has, in its incongruity, displaced the spatial predilection to order so that urbanity symbolizes a clear breaking away from it and in its place is a free fall into the degenerate so fixed that space has the aesthetic autonomy to normalize it.

1.3. The Spatial Afterlife of Destruction

The piecemeal body of the creature is a final truth in many respects, the only solution to be able to contend with a space that is mired in and nourishes a cycle of destruction. Life after death amounts to a new signification of gothic horror. It is given a thoughtful voice, never a sarcastic attempt, with which to bring about justice and this mantra makes of it a truism. As he prowls around with the souls of a ruined city inside of him, he represents the savior thrust into that position by virtue of his multifacetedness at once personifying and implicitly questioning, according to Saadawi, the “conception of salvation.” Whereas it was “achieved at the hands of a single person” (Najjar, 2014) thought to embody the complexities and grievances of the Iraqi people, the novel retaliates against and redefines this mock image of recovery. It becomes the artificiality liberating the post-war space from a flawed definition. In the afterlife of the Frankenstein-esque Baghdadi space, ruin is at a point of elevation no longer a part of the structural dichotomy of madness and sanity. The monster as geographic space is inseparable from not only the materiality and historicity of debris, bloodied limbs in his case, but its reinvention and reinterpretation. Should damage occur disfiguring the homeland, as Tuan (1977) argues, people will be demoralized yet “human beings have strong recuperative powers...with the destruction of one center of the world, another can be built next to it, or in another location altogether, and it in turn becomes the center of the world” (p. 150). Ultimately, the wounded space subscribes to a regenerative poetics, a mythic thought above and beyond mere physicality, hence the centrality of the prism of art within death. Whatsitsname, as a result, is bestowed with an independent social existence and the reader picks up on a pattern that has less to do with romanticized ruin. It was always related to its spatial reversal, the material showcasing of that ruin of wartime violence into a certain something with resistive potentiality.

Saadawi fixes the rubble strewn across Baghdad with meaningful purpose thus delivering it from liminality and it materializes as place where it has been hindered by the abstraction of space beforehand. In essence, it is the making of place in the non-place urban sphere. It is an eternal life marked by the return to ruin, respecting its incompleteness. The city, perpetual oeuvre and act, “is transformed not only because of relatively continuous global processes...” but also in relation to “...that which concerns historical processes and discontinuities” (Lefebvre, 1996). The vengeful corpse sits comfortably in that paradox of continuity-discontinuity as he terrorizes the capital, characterizing an evident paradox of the generation of difference, and as it is repeatedly produced in social space it reenters the construct of linear time, of the everyday. The syncopated rhythms of his violence, consequently, are embraced as commonplace, as a corrective to the narrative of its

demonization. In this wounded space and key to the afterlife he seeks, the monster refuses to skirt his own reproduction of woundedness and disqualify it as the only route to justice. His particular brand of moral pollution is an orchestration, almost passing off as a symphony, against the loud disruptive violence he himself is made out of. He is given a raised positionality because “Hadi believes in the humanity of Shesma...” and though his very sustenance depends on more killing, “ideas that all people are half criminal inside and that they are killing one another randomly, which makes it hard to distinguish the victim from the criminal, start to creep into Shesma’s mind” (Abdalkafor, 2018). He cannot accept that criminality is intrinsic to his bodily make-up. Yet his ability to reason is ultimately reconciled with lawful aggression as Saadawi intimates a complex entanglement. The homo sacer in due course traverses existence into a post-human state. Baghdad is now a place that reimagines and particularizes its violent acts, questioning its ethical borders and finding in its ambiguity a redeeming quality, such that this new interpretation in bare Iraqi life is dragged kicking and screaming into the postmodern age that has utterly flipped the script. This is similarly the final outcome of the fourth novel where the refashioning of death into an art form is meant to replace the plainness of its gory presentation and essentially give it purpose.

Making sense of destruction for Blasim amounts to a complete poetics, an unwitting acceptance of it and, drawing from his own experience in the Baghdadi space, he acknowledges the tragedy of that regressive transcendence. In it, life is a mixture of the real and the unreal “because in Iraq it has been like a chain, or a circle. For a long time people waited for the war to just finish, for the violence to finish, and they asked what’s the solution? But it kept going in the same way. So it’s maybe the rhythm of what we’ve gone through in Iraq – this nightmare, this circle” (Heath, 2012) with no choice but to be swept up in its cyclic movements, the eternity and timelessness of the pattern of pain. This new landscape of horror, in his mind, has buried within it an aesthetic trend and the opportunity of soul-making in a time of catastrophe. To reach this vessel of individuation, deconstruction and total obliteration, present in the dismembering violence of his writing, take center stage brought to life by the imagination. He gives expression to this pathos of fruitful destruction as it sits at a crossroads between the phenomenal and noumenal. The pathology of the Baghdadi, and ultimately Iraqi, street is reflective of “Edmund Burke’s treaty on the sublime and the beautiful...” in connection with a revival of the gothic in which the Irish philosopher “...discusses how the sublime combines delight and horror, pleasure and terror” (Masmoudi, 2019). In his writing about the wartime experience, however graphic and with full knowledge that it will largely be met with shock and awe,

Blasim commits to the romantic ideals and aestheticized particularities of destruction. He knows that there exists an opportunity to reason with the ghastly spatial forms it has produced. As they have been banal and desensitizing, he is well aware of the need to poetically navigate anxieties that have shattered the physical-metaphysical binary.

The afterlife of the Baghdadi space in his interpretative framework stands firmly on the shoulders of a nullification of the bizarre, the creation of an architecture of nightmares. In his quest for upsetting the senses, he creates a spatial oddity meant to surpass the greatest of limits and rival the abject bloodshed of the real world so pervasive that it has crept into the territory of the imaginary. It is thus dominated with the uncanny, a strategic employment of gothic horror meant to elicit disgust and communicating to the reader a melodramatic violence. Yet despite the hallucinatory state and madness of this unreality, the interview is conducted in accordance with the ordinariness of any other, laced with the usual niceties, running through responsibilities, expectations and the expected salary, with the interviewer even invoking a tone of assurance telling him to “please rest assured that we will not give up on dealing with you even if your first mission fails” (Blasim, 2015). The key is to downplay his unspoken fear. There is no place in the narrative, and the place of work for that matter, for the visceral trepidation of interviewee and reader who must come to terms with the new normal. Striking ever the positive tone hence undermining objective repulsion at the unmistakably grotesque, the borderline tragicomic assassin conveys that “I am confident in your ability to continue the work and have fun with it” (p. 70) illuminating decidedly the headspace of the authorial voice. Destruction in post-war Baghdad is staged and performed, a personification of a creative activity part of a wider ontological structure. It is molded into that image when phenomenological access is secured in an effort to resolve a philosophical problem, what happens according to Bachelard (1994) “when we apply a glimmer of consciousness” (p. 67) to the previously inanimate, thereby bringing into being a new impression. The art of the corpse, then, is an embrace of an aesthetics of performativity when space is too far along in its own process of mortification. To ensure some semblance of sustenance, it opts to continue the journey into the heart of its monstrosity coming out the other end having assigned a definition to the seemingly undefinable. It becomes complementary to life. The foregrounding of ghoulish illusions becomes identical to a spatiality of sought-after agency perhaps farcical to the passing reader yet a narrative of horrific enlightenment that implicates and stimulates him to accept a poetics of ruination. This is the strategy adopted by the fifth novel as it looks to bring creative sense to the

nonsensical though from the distinct vantage point of exilic torture that many citizens had to contend with.

Within *Tashari* by Inaam Kachachi, the one-word title lifted from the Iraqi Arabic vernacular referring to buckshot when fired from a hunting rifle preceding to head in different directions, space is produced along a precarious spectrum. On one end, life uncomfortably settles into the intransience of displacement and death, on the other, is where every ruptured piece can finally come together again. Wardiya Iskandar, the protagonist of the novel, is a Christian doctor who in her youth had defied societal odds moving to Baghdad from her native Mosul to study. She would eventually move to the southern city of Al-Diwaniya, working in the countryside in an Iraq of a bygone era. As she gets on in years, and when she is introduced to the reader, the defiance that had kept her in the country she loved dearly began to collapse made all the more fragile by the absence of her three children. They had immigrated long before she finally agreed to but even as that fateful day came upon her, she chased the idea away from her mind deciding that “I should like to die and be buried here and not be unstable” (Kachachi, 2013). But she is forced to seek asylum, traveling to France at the end of her days having witnessed her family members scatter to the four corners of the earth. She feels a sense of alienation in her enforced exile, longing to see her eldest daughter also a doctor working in a remote region of Canada, utterly alone and culture-shocked, content with the captivating Paris “but I do not want to die here and get buried in France” (p. 92). She longs to return home, to all she ever knew and be next to her deceased husband. One of her grandchildren steps in trying to console this irreparable pain. He puts together a virtual cemetery electronically reuniting “...the dead Iraqis who were scattered all over the countries and continents...with the accompaniment of music and decoration of flowers” (Taher, 2019). It is a community for the dispersed and an abstract space where a physical one is impossible. Indefinitely out of sight to the refugee, the spatial hereafter of the city is tainted by unknowability preserved only in the remnants of history and memory. The elegiac individual has no one but himself to eulogize as he is obligated to form a new identity. Life after the torment of being extracted from the warmth of belonging also makes the far-off wounded space incapable of moving forward, all having succumbed to an irregular temporality. It has been suspended and so must the whole of urbanity constructed to suit the yearning and wild flights of the imagination of those who left it.

For Lefebvre, the emergence of digital networks is a forging of a spatiality of resistance “produced in interstices of prevailing spaces” (Zamani, 2014) circumventing an urbanistic hold on the social

production of and interaction with space. Technology is able to generate the urban. As Wardiya gazes at the computer screen, it appears as nothing more than a “new illusion” added on to the many websites “that Iraqis rush to so that they may construct a country on the internet.” Yet in the muddled flow of information is a place to come back to, though a patchwork of meaning, however divorced from the dearly held dream of an unbroken existence. In it, “...Iraq will emerge a mighty genie from the lantern of One Thousand and One Nights. Enthusiastic men with youthful hairdos appear, their fathers the efendis precede them who wear the sidara...” (Kachachi, 2013) and though a gross abstraction of the real, this third space presents some solace in its hybridity. This is in line with the Lefebvrian assertion maintaining that alongside the destructive property of spatial production, space “...also serves as a tool of thought and of action...it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power.” The sociopolitical forces that created it “now seek, but fail, to master it completely” and so those who can “make use of it” (Lefebvre, 1991) imbuing it with a resistive element. Kachachi fashions an appropriated space in which a model of the city lives and breathes, the site of both unending cruelty as the exiled nostalgically look back on better times and liberation the moment they are reconnected with home though in fragments. The online phenomenon comes to affect the lived space. It means nothing but everything as well. Destruction is equally dualistic in its involvement, the impetus for the reform of this modern alternative however reckoned with in the digital sphere that it is briefly forgotten in the rush of that euphoric prospect of creating a structure out of a pile of rubble that the real world is still a place of remains.

A tragic transnationalism intervenes into the conceptualization of the Iraqi diasporic condition ultimately creating a twofold imagining of the future of space, abstract and lived, with the even bigger tragedy being that they can never be reconciled. Working past physical ruin in the Baghdadi space and evolving it into a poetics of sorts while the individual is there, in close proximity and able to engage with the phenomenological processes, allows for a settlement that creates a singular spatial reality. But the nagging ill of exile, increasingly separating him from the physicality of the urban environment and what persists in his head, dismantles any attempt at continuity and two distinct spaces develop. Marwa Alkhairo (2008) speaks to these complexities “...of self-representations and narratives that have changed and been reformulated, and that have taken on transnational elements and influences through physical space between two distinct lands, as well as an intellectual space of reconciling one’s self through the passage of time, changing global contexts, and current events” (p. 37). In the space that Kachachi has formulated, the myth of return has effectively

disintegrated and her narration of uprootedness drowns in the topophilic, that unconditional love difficult to put into words. As Tuan (1974) claims, “to be forcibly evicted from one’s home and neighborhood is to be stripped of a sheathing...” and when the mind transports the immigrant back to it, they recall the stolen familiarity that had been a protection “...from the bewilderments of the outside world” (p. 99). Consequently, there is an anticipated compartmentalization of the sentiments of love and fear of place. Though Baghdad empirically houses both, it is almost exclusively a space of nostalgic reverie for the exilic who has nothing but symbolic interaction to recreate that coveted connection. Topophobia is all that carries on outside of it, the sense of frustration felt having left so unceremoniously and having to indefinitely oscillate between public identity and private heritage. Perhaps the most painful part, Kachachi and Wardiya cannot help but be engrossed with self-criticism knowing full well that there is nothing they individually could have done but all the same tormented that they should have gone away.

When all is said and done, these novels and the wider landscape of fictional works set in a Baghdad that has sunk to a dystopian reality have nowhere to go to manifest the cruelties of war but towards the fantastical. Complex allegories must be summoned to reflect and do justice to an equally complex spatiality of ruin and perhaps in that reimagining is a new kind of life. Ironically, the nation was freed of dictatorial ruthlessness but soon began the creeping in of a culture of violence at once complicating the writing process and encouraging it. They would no doubt wonder just how to translate this madness into narrative form. Indeed, something new was on the tip of their pens and these authors likely knew it as they sat down to unravel the chaos. As Iraqi novelist Haitham Al-Shewaili attests, “all novels were more close to the truth than fiction, but the truth became a kind of fiction in the Kingdom of Hell” (Mohammed, 2018) and so they would spearhead something of an original formula. One might say it is a paradox of truthful fiction. It begins decades prior to the disastrous Iraq War, in the city of contradictions and wretched social conditions that Jabra illustrates, before the coming cycles of doom gradually weaken it. Jameel is still able to communicate some levity to the reader. Nothing of the sort though is afforded Antoon, Saadawi, Blasim and Kachachi who are burdened with the one-dimensional representation of a traumatic neurosis. Their precarious positionalities must not be forgotten. They are on the other end of unimaginable loss and carnage, absolutely no nuance gleaned from the muddled sense of life and death and resigning oneself to fragmentation. There is no escape yet these and many literary voices like them cleverly do not run away from the graphic depiction of pain. It, in fact, figures heavily into and refreshingly disrupts all literary conventions. The Baghdadi space brings the two

together and there is critical acceptance of it. Novelistic language in its poeticity and iconicity, used quite liberally and purposefully, is still getting across the full view of violence. Above all, it must be both remembered and appreciated that these writings deliver the rawness of this death and destruction while also charting a course for the way forward. This powerlessness is crippling down to the very core of every character, spatial and human, nevertheless between the lines is the authorial visualization of life in spite of death. Each written offering is defined by the centrality of this irony and in them are clues to how the capital today carries on despite so much hurt.

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