

Tracing the Spectral Bodies and Ghostly Landscapes in Iraqi Fiction

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ABSTRACT

*This research examines the ghostly materiality and phantasmal legacy that haunt the collective psyche of the Iraqi people, as documented through the devastation and subliminal changes in the war-torn landscape, as reflected in the chosen works of fiction. The study investigated the transformation of these places ravaged by war into ghostly records that disrupt the temporal and spatial bounds. This paper presents an investigation into the two texts, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi and *The Corpse Exhibition* by Hassan Blasim, through the lens of Jo Frances Maddern and Peter Adey's technique of mapping 'Spectro-geographies,' employing a content-based textual analysis of the chosen texts. The research particularly looked at the suffering of Iraqis within these texts and how they made sense of the constant inconsistency that emerged from the ruination and turmoil that had visited the Iraqi land, the gothic nature of the war, and its several aftermaths. Through the notion of spectro-geography, the research stressed the landscape's struggle to come to terms with its forever changed and constantly altering phantasmic character and primal reality.*

Keywords: Spectro-geographies; ghostly records; gothicism; Iraqi fiction; war-torn landscape

INTRODUCTION

Apart from the towering mountain-scape and giant waterfalls, other events of human doing make a man confront the insignificance of human existence. The classical undertones of the "Sublime" have been mostly focused on the picturesque qualities and the moodiness that emanated from the works of the Romantic Era, and were successfully inherited by the Gothic tradition. The 'sublime of war' has gained new meaning after the chaotic World Wars in the previous century. Europe's landscape was marked by irregularity, tension, and forces of terror that induced feelings of pure awe, terror, helplessness, and overall disillusionment in the minds of modern humans. Wars that followed, from the Cold War, the Vietnam War, to the economically stifling wars in the Gulf and Afghanistan, have dealt a devastating blow to the Middle Eastern landscape and its populace. Viewing it from the precipice of the local voices that have experienced and witnessed the loss becomes all the more necessary. Works of Ahmed Saadawi and Hassan Blasim extend a new and much more realistic understanding of the lives and fates of those whose blood is spilt on the desolate battlefields (Cody, 2018). The point of contention remains whether these war zones become an abode of the unruly spirits or whether they ever become peaceful again. Unresolved conflicts and unjustified killings have been the subject of many classical Gothic novels, where these unsettled spirits and apparitions come to haunt those who now inhabit the place that was once plagued by fighting and violence.

The bleak, violent wastelands of Iraq also beckon many of these paranormal forces, ghostly figures, and mysterious activities that contribute to a series of macabre episodes. It is these uncanny forces with their spectral presence and ghostly absence that pervade the atmosphere in the two texts selected for the present research: *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (Cody, 2018) and *The Corpse Exhibition* (2015). The writers, both of whom are Iraqi nationals, are concerned with the never-ending catastrophes that afflict the Iraqi heartlands. The ancient city of Baghdad serves as the setting in the former, where the readers go through details of urban decay and how it reflects the state of the collective consciousness of the people. The second book is an amalgamation of short stories that are grim in their depiction of the horrors and aftermaths of the war; with all the varied settings, one thing is common: the sense of eeriness, urgency, and panic. To put the questions that the research proposes in perspective, the researcher would consult Derrida's concept of Spectrality, a term he introduced in his book *Spectres of Marx*, and was later used to inspect the concept of ghostly geographies and sites by Blanco and Peeren. The notion found more credence after Maddern and Adey gave forth the concept of 'Spectro-geography'. These sites and spaces correspond through practices, objects, and texts (Maddern & Adey, 2008, p. 291). The research builds on the implications of bringing forth the 'uncanniness' of a place, how this spectral designation is spectralized to take hold of both the discursive paradigms and 'more-than-representational' (Lorimer, 2005, p. 84) effectuates a term that operates within and without disciplines of trauma and memory.

The research consults Derrida's phenomenon of spectrality to analyse Saadawi and Blasim's ruined wastelands and cityscapes. Spectrality has assumed a form of multidisciplinary discourse. Derrida's book *Spectres of Marx* disclosed a messianic opening that can never be sealed off. Moreover, this politics of ghosts and the non-being has been examined utilising the jargon of geography, spaces, places, and sites in *The Spectralities Reader*, penned by Blanco and Peeren, and "Spectro-geographies" by Maddern and Adey. The spectre is characterised by having the attributes of leering, lingering, and staring. Derrida sees the spectre as an entity which is imagined, thought, and projected, where one fails to observe anything; it is that which breathes beyond being.

As Derrida's concept evolves into a theory, spectrality is employed to "conceptualise" and formulate definitions of otherness, alterity, and victimisation (Derrida, 2012, p.134). It uncovers the processes that the groups go through to 'construct' and 'engage' in a collective event of cultural trauma. The spectral speaks to the conceptual space between the past and the future, thereby spooking cognition, space knowledge, time, and history through the effects of its haunting. The term "Spectro geographies" was coined by Maddern and Adey as an alternative way to refer to Derrida's Spectro politics, and conceptualised as those spaces that manifest and communicate through practices, objects, and texts (Maddern & Adey, 2008, pp. 291-292). Thus, the research examines the spectral, the ghostly, and the haunted in urban cape and desolate battlefields in terms of architecture and landscape. The goal of this research is to examine whether these Spectro-geographies successfully store post-war trauma, and whether they morph their structures to become sites of resistance, rebellion, revenge, and/ or resolution to the population. There has been research that has touched upon the ways the Spectro-geographical brings about a change in the collective memory of the people and the circumstances that help propel the formation in which the Spectro-geographical forges a collective avenue of resolution and catharsis for the Iraqi people.

Through this research work, the researchers would realise that all domains of haunted cognition and its relation to present realities and old histories deserve investigation. This study would help the readers of English literature to comprehend the perspectives of Iraqi authors. Furthermore, their extensive insight into Iraqi sensibility would provide a better outlook on the

current realities of Baghdad. Mapping the Spectro-geographies in the Arabian heartlands is an area where little to no work has been produced. The future investigators and research enthusiasts would be prompted to explore further to enhance and facilitate their understanding regarding the ignored or scarcely researched subjects in Arabia, which have helped in shaping the new ways of understanding Arab culture and their fight to come to terms with the spectres of the past. The research forays into looking at the spectral in Saadawi's cityscape as it lies in ruination (in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*) and the ghastly events and gory short stories that are centred in several settings (*The Corpse Exhibition*). The purpose of the present study is to explore the Spectro-geographies and their utility, as a potential link to the past grievances or as a tool to interact with the macabre and dark forces to bring about the proverbial resolution.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"If ghosts are old, they are certainly not tired."

(Blanco & Peeren, 2010, p. 1)

Spectrality finds its origins in a much-contested and complex term 'hauntology' that French philosopher Jacques Derrida coined and mentioned only thrice in his seminal 1993 book, *Spectres of Marx*. Hauntology is deemed highly consequential because of the varied sets of definitions that it has come to stand for. Hauntology, as a notion, essentially disrupts a man's quest for the search of the 'Origin' and regards the time and space as disjointed, suspended in reality, eternally contributing to the science of non-beings and non-entities. Humans cannot decide or declare the culmination of an event, life, or a process, as these disembodied spirits are always backed by the already existing and continually informing set of linguistic and cognitive conditions. The question remains whether the life that has ended considers itself dead, as exemplified in Derrida's explication of Marx's ghost haunting the nations of Europe beyond its grave.

Ghosts, spectres, or apparitions have transcended their religious bearings and have dire implications in the everyday context, literary traditions, and the prospects of the future. Derrida's preoccupation with the ghost heavily focuses on the contradictory nature of these absent-present beings with a "phenomenal and carnal form of the spirit" (Derrida, 2012, p. 5). In the jargon of literature as opposed to everyday vernacular, the term 'Ghost' is not used as profusely as the terms 'Spirit' or 'Apparition', as they have the propensity to signify the soul or essence of the "physically dead" as both morally upright and depraved. The terms 'spectre', 'demon', 'phantom', 'larva', and 'vision' have gained new currency as well, as they signify the presence/ absence of "not yet dead" or "not fully alive" (Clark & Claydon, 2009, p. 6). Legends, ghost stories, parables, and witchcraft beliefs have enjoyed significant importance for a major portion of history, as they reflect the contemporary mindset and beliefs. The spectralization of space, as observed in mediums such as haunted house films, reinforces gendered hauntings and the entrapment of female figures within patriarchal systems, where figures like the Nenek Kebayan can be seen as both supernatural guardians and agents of terror (Yusof et al., 2020, p. 92). As David Hufford puts it, "we should see legends not as "texts" or as "beliefs" but as processes, as ways of naming otherwise 'uncanny' or threatening elements of social experiences... a legend is a way of territorializing a poorly defined cultural anxiety by "naming" it or reducing it to "tellable" or quantifiable form." (Hufford, 2001, p. 13). In the post-modern times, the manifestations and meanings of ghosts have been altered. Ghost tales, as of today, entail and frame intellectual history and symbolise the fragmented reality through the transgression of boundaries. As Georges Bataille once described, "Transgression does

not deny the taboo but transcends and completes it" (Bataille, 1956, p. 15) Transgression implies the crossing of the boundary and violation of rules and norms that uphold dogmas via "the return of the dead" or what Freud calls "return of the repressed" in his book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, describing it as "not dead like persons who have died in our sense, but they resemble the shades in the *Odyssey* which awaken a certain kind of life as soon as they have drunk blood [contact with the consciousness]" (Freud & Crick, 1999, p. 231). Ghosts have come to signify the revival of the long-forgotten pasts that have something to say and contribute towards the many conditions that afflict modern times.

The messianic time or the disjointedness of time allows the ghosts, revenants, regrets, and traumas of the past to engage and inform the "politics of memory, inheritance, and of generations" (Derrida, 1999, p. 7). The arrival of materialities and immaterialities causes the spectralization of the place and turns it into a site infused with memories, *zeitgeists*, or *poltergeists*, which have been evading the laws of linearity since forever. Derrida defines spectrality as a passing through of spectres through ages, spatial and temporal bounds, that keep on initiating, ending and repeating the old realities, unsaid and ignored truths continually until such a time that they come to be addressed and engaged with by accepting their "spectral logic" (Merle, 2010, p. 1). A ghost or its various forms offer a remarkable potential for deconstruction and call for a revision of history and metanarratives by calling into question essentialist oppositional biases. "One does not know whether it (the ghost) is living or if it is dead" (Derrida, 2012, p. 6), thereby affording the ability of being a figure of liminality that is continually present or absent. In the book *Spectral Metaphors*, Peeren coined the term "Living ghosts" (Peeren, 2014, p. 14) that refers to the oppression and subjugation of disavowed or marginalised groups, whose absence of voice in the dominant narratives has rendered them spectral. As Derrida stated in his book *Force of Law*, "Justice in itself, if such a thing exists, outside or beyond law, is not deconstructable. No more than deconstruction itself, if such a thing exists. Deconstruction is justice." (Derrida, 2016, p. 15) Ghostly bodies run on the principles of ambiguity and fluidity, and as creatures that are neither time-bound nor space-bound, they effectuate "ethical resistance" against the existing social, patriarchal, and cognitive frameworks. According to Emmanuel Levinas, the "presence of infinity" is evidenced by this "ethical resistance" (Levinas, 1978, p. 27).

Spectrality renders the so-called dead ideas, events, and lives with atemporality, and because of this temporal and ontological disjunction, the spirits roam free and therefore, "a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and come back" (Derrida, 2012, p. 123). The early years of the 90s saw a renewed life breathed into the term "Ghostly". This ghostliness, otherness, and spectrality were viewed outside of the Gothicized and Romantic realm; as a return of the unspeakable, repressed, and unsuccessfully removed histories, that called for attention and justice with a sense of urgency. The psychological or postcolonial theorization of the ghostly has casted it in the role of "unstable interstitial figures" and an inert non-entity that is inspired every time it "disrupts both oppositional thinking and the linearity of historical chronology" (Weinstock, 2013, pp. 62-63) The ghost achieves it through its definition of temporality that is a complex interaction of past, present and future translating simultaneously into "reversibility and irreversibility of time" as it stores a "transhistorical imagination" (Gaylard, 2008, p. 1).

The privilege of the presence over the absence, or as Derrida puts it, the 'hierarchizing teleology', makes the lost futures and forgotten realities more repressed. Spectres or ghosts occur halfway between this binary of presence and absence, locating themselves in the "space of visible invisibility" (Derrida, 2012, p. 157). The time, is therefore, "out of joint" (Shakespeare, 1991, Act 1, Scene 5) and comes to form a hollowed-out space without any end in sight, a messianic and

subliminal opening that enables the specters to invade all space and it welcomes the “margins, ghosts, memories, phantasms and disordering” (qtd. in Merle, 2010) as it warps the conventional narrative and goes beyond the scope of linearity. This spectralization of space allows for the conjuration within a landscape and turns the place into a Spectro-geographical site, making it “spectral” (Matless, 2008, p. 463) and therefore comes to resonate “the held or stored emotions, memories or even consciousness” (Holloway & Kneale, 2008, p. 298).

This space of fluidity where a spectre practices its mobility, hybridity and liminality is described by Foucault as “a floating piece of space, a place without a place” that is folded and “closed in on itself and at the same time is given to the infinity” (Foucault, 1986, p. 27). It also has a similar ring to Augé’s ideas of “non-places” that are fraught with all things “fleeting, temporary, and ephemeral,” and offer a setting to experience transience (Augé, 1995, p. 110). Roberts (2013) has traced ghostly aspects in the visual medium (such as the artistic, photographic and moving images), labelling them spectral for their precarity as they float between binary classification of “material and immaterial, real and virtual [...] dead and alive, representation and presentation” (p. 386) and for their ephemeral existence where they harbor materiality at one juncture, yet evade being defined and resort to encompass their disembodied status.

Technological and medical advancements fell prey to the excess of corporate media and political games of the world's strongest superpower. The military occupation of these superpowers is deep-rooted and has resulted in debates around the fissures and fractures that have appeared in an ordinary civilian's psyche and society at large as they scream in pain to exact justice. The chimaeras, remnants of the past and revenants of today, can either reshape history or else it's a “universal social collapse” (Wells, 2005, p. 51) just as H.G. Wells prophesied in his novel *The War in the Air*, a hundred years ago. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and *The Corpse Exhibition* offer a textual interrogation of this new world (dis)order, where the destruction of cities is being carried out on an unprecedented scale, and the otherized groups of people have been dispensed with. Two hundred years ago Mary Shelley's *Modern Prometheus* decried the disillusionment that was on the rise after industrialization and the French Revolution and in the similar vein Hassan Blasim and Ahmed Saadawi locate their monsters into the psyches of the people and landscape of a country and “cities ravaged by global geopolitical forces in the last three decades and refract them through newer iterations of monstrosity that attempt to grasp and interrogate the shadowy, pervasive and transnational reverberations of power, war and fear.” (Botting, 2019, p. 12) The terms “shock and awe” or even “terrorism” fall short to encapsulate the atrocity and collective shock for the use of extreme and all-pervasive violence, as Adriana Cavarero notes (in a book that details two accounts of the havoc of the bombings carried out in Iraq). Instead of “terrorism,” she proposes the term “horrorism” to describe all-consuming events of destruction that take away the security of boundaries or laws, without a single care about the conscience of thousands of individuals, whether it is stained with guilt or is innocent. With the most basic ideas of human corporeal integrity blurred and humanity’s uniqueness and dignity marred, Cavarero finds “Horrorism” as the most accurate term to describe “a body that blows itself up to rip other bodies apart,” demolishing the individuality of living being with a swift and direct thump on “ontological dignity” (Cavarero, 2009, p. 44). The researcher links this suicide bombing to murdering one's uniqueness, and it can be shown as a powerful depiction of the nascent destruction in the making. Jacqueline Rose has coined the concept of “unbearable intimacy” as an illustration of the acts which see the killer and victim in unison, fatally joined and torn apart in the aftermath; a disastrous epilogue of so many lived experiences; an “intimacy of bodies that explode together and become mingled” (Rose, 2004, p. 22).

The imperial monstrosity of these Empires is very much like a Vampire being, whose spectral power reigns supreme as it goes on to rob people of any semblance of recognition, human dignity, esteem, and status. This abstract yet all dynamic figure of control “feeds off the living energy of the diverse commonwealth of living bodies called multitude.” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 62). They are rendered disposable in economic and symbolic schemes, and pushed further down the ladder with a new label stamped on their backs that of “garbage humans” (Balibar, 1998, p. 15). This illustrates the uneven and disturbing instantiations of global practices, which are many and multifaceted.

METHODOLOGY

Apart from the textual content analysis of Ahmed Saadawi and Hassan Blasim’s work, this research is qualitative. Through the close reading of the novel and the short story, the plight of the Iraqi people with their ever-changing and traumatic realities would be explored. The theory of application is based on the hauntological model of locating the Spectres, haunting figures, and primarily the formation and constant transformation of these “Spectro geographies” as sites of post-war consciousness development and psychic processes through which trauma is being absorbed. This theoretical framework of “Spectro-geographies” would be applied to two texts: Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Hassan Blasim’s *The Corpse Exhibition* by applying the concept of Spectro-geographies as laid out by Jo Frances Maddern and Peter Adey. The works of chief critics like Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren in their book, *The Spectralities Reader* would be used to develop an understanding about the spectrality of the texts (by in-depth study of their plots, along with the linguistic features) in the works of writers writing about the post war traumas and legacy of the war times. Articles and books have been carefully selected to undertake the thorough research required in this much-overlooked area of Gothic studies.

Jacques Derrida’s concept of “hauntology” probes how spectral presences disrupt within conventional histories and geographies, stressing the ideas of absence and memory (Derrida, 2012). Spectrogeography’s interpretation of landscapes and geographies that are marred and marked by historical trauma and ghostly residues unmasks suppressed narratives. Derrida’s framework highlights how “spectres” make a home in spaces of absence, alluding to the haunting presence of past tensions in present-day landscapes and providing a much-needed stimulation for a critical re-reading of geographical spaces influenced by the uncanny (Peters, 2011).

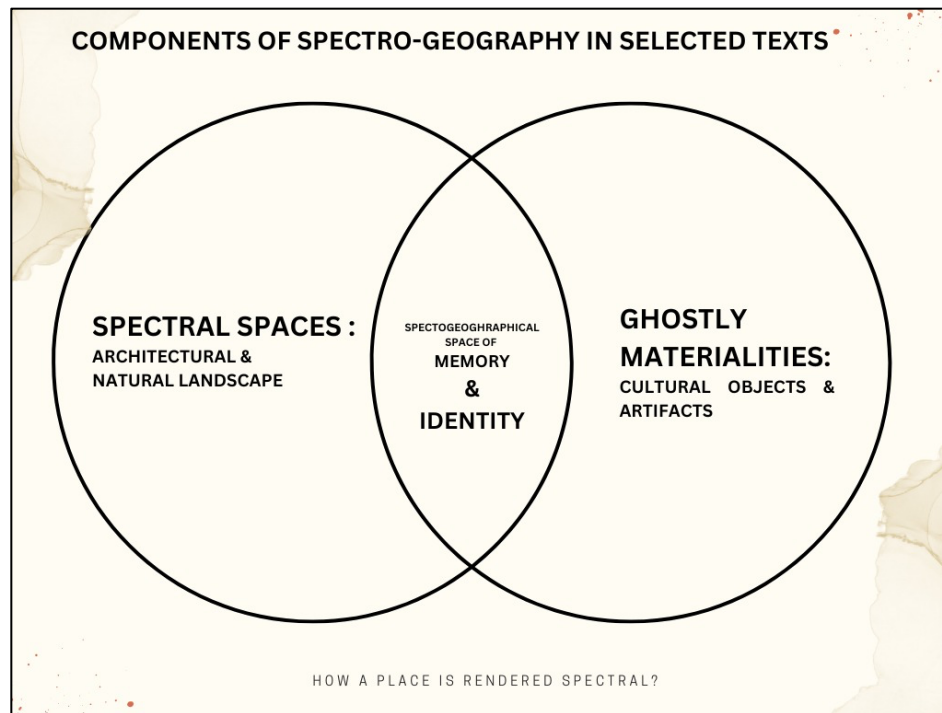


FIGURE 1. Components of Spectrogeography

Underpinned by theories of these critics of Spectro-geographies, the research decodes symbols, images, metaphors, literary devices, and themes in Saadawi and Blasim's books, and explores the underlying subliminal meanings and connotations of events. It explicates how these symbols and themes reflect the establishment of Spectro-geographies such as landscapes, architectural ruins, and material objects, and how these spaces offer ultimate resolution to the Iraqi cultural conflict. The research expands on the fragmented consciousness and the aftereffects of psychological turmoil by excavating these spaces through the power of analysis. Albeit the limited access to pertinent scholarly articles, along with the shortage of criticism available on Iraqi war literature and spectral theory, posed certain limitations to this research. This theoretical layout has multiple offshoots and distinctly defines a set of important terms, rationalising and appropriating the theory to fulfil the criteria of an acceptable theoretical framework for this present research proved to be problematic.

DATA ANALYSIS

The two novels, namely *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) and *The Corpse Exhibition* (2015), would be subjected to scrutiny in this section to reveal the common yet distinct sonorous tones in these novels that haunt the Iraqi landscape, which is portrayed as a dystopian wasteland, and the individual (fragmented) site. Post-war and post-occupation Baghdad is embedded with anathemas and unresolved traumas of the past and present, which would continue to inform the country's political osmosis and social relations until the end of time.

SPECTRAL MATERIALITY IN *FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD*

Saadawi uses *Frankenstein in Baghdad* to portray a city that is still reeling from the aftereffects of invasion and essentially paints the everyday reality and mundanity that is ostensibly disturbed. Embracing death, fear, anxiety, and misery, the novel emanates an unpredictability, an important feature of spectral materiality, and gives it an "excessive resonance" (Holloway & Kneale, 2008, p. 306). As shown in the specific depictions that Saadawi explores, mundane materiality gets overtaken by spectrality.

Both central characters are engaged in an atmosphere steeped in ghostly resonance and spectral materiality. In one passage, as Hadi is assembling the creature, he describes the surreal experience of adding new parts to the corpse: "The rest of the shed was dominated by a massive corpse... [Hadi] positioned it in the black hole in the corpse's face. It was a perfect fit as if the corpse had its nose back" (Saadawi & Wright, 2014, p. 26). This eerie combination of mundane and spectral is reflected in Hadi's act of reconstruction, which renders a body that is simultaneously familiar and otherworldly. Later, the creature labelled and known as the Whatsitsname reflects on its transient and spectral existence, ruminating, "My face changes all the time... I kill to keep going. This was his only justification" (Saadawi, 2013, p. 267). This line elucidates spectral persistence within Baghdad's never-ending, cyclic violence, where death and survival overlap in unsettling ways. Derrida (2012) explained how these scenarios are based on real-life contexts, as random objects get stimulated in a reality infused with elements of horror, breathing a *pneuma* or *psyche* into it (p.192). The desolate, macabre, and violent streets of Baghdad appear very Gothic; a city full of spatial disruptions, resulting from materiality's convulsion into immateriality (the ghost). According to Saadawi, the *Frankenstein*-esque atmosphere of horror was strongly prevalent in Iraq during the duration covered by the novel (N. Al Mustafa, Iraqi Author, Ahmed Saadawi, March 26, 2014). This novel is riddled with suicide bombings. A land where suicide bombings, pyromania, and committing arson have taken on a shape of regularity; cyclic violence emerges with these ever-new configurations of spectral materiality in unpredictable ways. Spectral immaterialities show their presence through "place and objects" by enlivening them. The city of Baghdad, therefore, permits these spectres to resonate by occupying bodies to "hold or store emotions, memories, or even consciousness" (Holloway & Kneale, 2008, p. 298).

The Baghdad in this novel is at the nexus of these haunted objects as it is "...a troubled city where the demons had broken out of their dungeons and come to the surface all at once" (Saadawi & Wright, 2014, p. 64). Baghdad has "...fear, death, anxiety, criminals in the street, everyone watching as you walk past. Even when you're asleep, it's nightmares and jumping in fright all the time" (p. 207). Iraq itself is described as "a country in flames all around you" (p. 97). These distorted spaces and sense of unfamiliarity and uncertainty of daily life seep into the cultural attitudes of the people, and "gothic fiction in Iraq uses the grotesque to articulate the inescapable horror embedded in everyday life, shaped by war and memory" (Khammas, 2021, p. 45).

There is yet another prevailing and sinister presence roaming in the milieu of Baghdad. It is a text that centres around "the justice the American occupation aimed to deliver" and "looks more like a dystopian wasteland". The ever-present existence of US soldiers in Iraq, at various security checkpoints or embroiled in nocturnal bullet exchanges, provides for a surreal backdrop. US intelligence agents oversee the Iraqi security committees, operating above the law and overruling any or all ethnic pressures or regional influence. Their presence, though unreal and invisible to the eye, influences the trajectory of Iraqi lives from a background of a novel in which never for once a US army character or American injunction is voiced. Nevertheless, much like the characters in the novel, Saadawi's readers are very much aware of this threatening and palpable

aura of the "Enemy," whose shadow looms large and covers the vast expanse of Iraqi hinterland and the splinters of its civilisation. One of the many characters in the novel, Faraj, an estate agent with ill-intentions, wavering business ethics and a sense of ambition that targets all, is reduced to a state of crippling anxiety as he is "frightened of Americans" who "operated with considerable independence and no one could hold them to accounts for what they did" (Saadawi, 2013, p. 66). The irrational and unsettling omnipresence, in a cityscape where bombs and gunfire inflict damage, is the fear that US forces engender. The novel explores the Baghdad of 2005, which was vibrating from the undercurrents of this imperial fear, trauma, and anxiety.

The multiple narratives of Saadawi's character are conjoined, and the text takes the shape of a hungry monster, which is both a singular and a collective entity. Hadi's monster, too, is a creature that symbolises this dichotomy: it is one and multiple, singular but collective, interconnected, distinct, and festering as its composition withers away. Composed of the different parts, and different victims of suicide bombing and killing, its composition alters daily: decomposed parts of its grotesque anatomy fall off and are replaced by parts which are then stitched. Each body part carries the singular imprint of the one who died. Each body part is replaced when its original owner gets the retribution its spirit seeks. Saadawi's Frankenstein is singularly multiple; distinctly monstrous, and exists in an unending yet fragmentary flux. This "Frankenstein" is an amalgamation of the losses and traumas, with their source in the "inconstative constancy" of terror and violence, assimilated not only from mutilated anatomical parts of several bomb victims but from the trauma, agony, grief, broken dreams and unfulfilled prayers of friends and family, all clamoring for the reconciliation with the unimaginable horror experienced. Frankenstein becomes the tool to bring about reparation, justice, or revenge.

IRAQ: A PLACE OF TORRENTIAL TERROR IN *THE CORPSE EXHIBITION*

The very first story in the collection, this titular story uncovers the dark reality of those who do covert operations, the militias, and are responsible for maiming and terrorising ordinary citizens, on a day-to-day basis. It's a story that navigates a space full of violence and reverberates with those violent experiences. Bahoora states that Iraqi literature post-2003 contains a unique postcolonial Gothic that intersects horror, bodily violence, and haunting, addressing Iraq's fraught history and memory (Bahoora, 2021). Blasim sketches the scene in one of his interviews as "at once nightmarish, horrifying and unreal. In Iraq, violence has been practised over the past fifty years with severity and savagery; it has been a chain of painful and peculiar nightmares" (qtd. in Hamed, 2020, p.102). Blasim introduces a setting that vibrates with the miseries of Iraq. The story of *The Corpse Exhibition* goes over seven pages and unravels the sheer lawlessness through destructive images of violence that are piled with incidents of bloodletting, bloodshedding, and blood witnessing. According to Karen Grumberg, *Spectral modernities in Middle Eastern Gothic* exhibit how haunted landscapes and ghostly figures show socio-political dislocation (Grumberg, 2022)

The onset of the story is an irregularity in itself. A trainer is interviewing the narrator (the prodigy) trainer is interviewing the narrator (the prodigy) for a job of dubious nature. The trainer prides himself on extending his services to an organisation responsible for killing civilians and artfully exhibiting their bodies in public. Post-war Iraq is a space replete with spectres, and events of an unexpected nature are a regular occurrence. Day-to-day occurrence of such atrocious acts leaves "a kind of psychic record maybe imprinted on a location" as a certain sort of "violence or strong emotion generated there" (Holloway & Kneale, 2008, p. 299). The job involves the murder of subjects and creatively displaying their bodies in public spaces for consumption. Trainer

professes that they require artistic sensibility and ability in showcasing the beauty of dead victims. The trainer emphasises the originality of the idea, its immaculate execution, and demands a submission of a proposal to ascertain if the visual of the overall macabre scene would be in line with the exacting standards the organisation has laid out. The trainee is given examples of various failed and successful agents who work for this group and go by pseudonyms like Agent Deaf, Satan's Knife, and the Nail, and their *modus operandi* involves maiming civilians (in cold blood) and parading their bodies in public.

The trainee outlines the various conditions for the recruit's participation, and the boss makes it a point to show his distaste for tried and tested, "classical methods" of killing and parading bodies. The lack of initiative on any recruit's part to show their creative imagination could prove to be punishable by death, as a lack of creativity in fiction shows no promise and leads to failure. Blasim deliberately uses al-Rusafi's iconic portrayal of the breastfeeding woman and her infant as a symbol of Iraq as a national corpse, a symbolic manifestation and metaphor communicating the image of slain Iraqi people. It is as if the viciousness, ubiquitous brutality, and perversity of the hatred have transformed the poetic painting of the anatomy of the mother (the nation) and her babe (the people) into sanitised corpses. Blasim draws upon this symbolic, poignant, albeit tragic image of a babe suckling at its mother's bosom, from al-Rusafi's poem, as a lamentation to bemoan the national corpse and to establish a sense of order and meaning on the mutilated body parts littering the streets and piling up in the morgues of Iraq. According to the trainer, turning a brutally disfigured, bloody body into the corpse is a high art that is cultivated on standards such as "concision, simplicity, and the striking image" (Blasim, 2014, p. 5) This grotesque and cynical celebration of the remains tries to create an order whose logic is as incongruous as the daily reality of a war-torn Iraq. Blasim depends on this outrageous absurdity to drive his message home for the readers and offers a front-seat view of the abominable legacies of shocking display of numbing violence and the prevalence of the corpse.

The trainer inserts a caveat and narrates a story involving a certain agent Nill, who fails to accomplish his mission as he resorts to a shortcut by visiting the morgue to procure a dead body and deigns to exempt himself from the deplorable act of killing. Mortician catches him and kills him, as he happens to be a part of this organisation too. The trainee, with an air of casualness about him, gives grisly details about the victims of the bombing; their mutilated bodies and remains. The story ends with the trainee being stabbed by the trainer because he senses his hesitation and perceives his weakness, hence finishing him off for his inability to be a "genius."

"When I tell you some of the details, I see that puzzled look in your eyes. Calm down, breathe deep, listen to the rhythm of your secret spirit calmly and patiently [...] Perhaps I have told you too much, but let me tell you frankly that I'm worried about you."

(Blasim, 2014, pp. 5-7)

This quote is evidence of the persuasive force of the trainer's tirade as the terror sets in the physical and mental faculties, bludgeoning and unveiling itself and in the behaviour and body language of the recruit, giving shape to the "puzzled look," "the misapprehensions," and the perplexity etched on his face. The trainers proclaim and then proceed to finish off the recruit, who ends the story with the following lines: "Then he thrust the knife into my stomach and said: 'You are shaking'" (Blasim, 2014, p.10).

"What does terror want?" Robert Young was posed these questions, and he responded,

The Corpse Exhibition embodies these effects of terror: a story is polluted with a stifling air of terror that shows how “fiction has the unique ability not only to mediate terror through narration, but also to produce it.” Not only does the boss’s spiel give instances of “creative killings” that flaunt the corpse and make us face the abject reality of the banality of life in a warzone. It multiplies and restages terror as the readers ponder over its effects that proliferate the recruiter’s and recruit’s conversation in the story, culminating with his sudden death. Confronted with an overpowering feeling, the narrator lets the terror roam his face and lays down his arms in front of its annihilating power. The final words of the trainer have a damning impact as they aptly convey the same horror as Young’s definition of terror concerning its multiple effects:

“Terror is nothing if it does not produce effects: it’s designed to create them [...] terror comprises nothing but its effects. Terror effects are self-generating, uncontrollable, proliferating.”

(Young, 2011, p. 307)

The “art of the corpse” represents the obduracy of the place, which echoes through Blasim’s narrative. It is meant to unsettle cognition and to shock the nerves, preventing them from descending into a lethargic condition, so that the cultural identity is not divorced from itself and could move on to the next stage of identity formation by incorporating existing fractures and fissures.

The story, in essence, talks about a total dissolution of Iraq and a slow, albeit complete, annihilation of everything Iraq stands for: its people, values, and most importantly, its landscape. This story operates as a subtle representation of the chaotic existence in the Iraqi streets post the American invasion. The mentalities and actions are still involved in processes that render it impossible to polish the past or to obliterate it. The lawlessness and senselessness of violence have pushed Iraq into the madness of instability, an unstable political climate which presents one of the rare opportunities for a group of killers to prosper and create a topography of haunting-ness. The group’s goal is to transform the landscape of death by flaunting their bounties and trophies of human flesh. The trainer describes, “everybody you finish off is a work of art waiting for you to add the final touch, so that you can shine like a precious jewel amid the wreckage of this country” (Blasim, 2014, p. 5). In addition to notoriety, such acts allow the opportunity to boost creativity. The motivations for such killings remain shrouded throughout the story, but it does give away an eerie sense of a ghostly atmosphere that is stuck in a loop and is not able to progress.

The Spectro-geography and the politics of the land make the humans indistinguishable from one another, and groups hunt them to create a profitable bounty out of their bodies. Such groups infringe on the dignity of the people, as the laws of the jungle have been implemented. This newly formed “spatial politics” has several realities and non-realities that are “complex, uneven and multifaceted” (Maddern & Adey, 2008, p. 292). This multi-layered brutality appears seamless and regular, as showcased in the trainee’s indifferent attitude towards it. Landscape that was once a land of memories, home, and the familiar, has precipitated a war culture where ghostliness and chaos thrive. The story unfolds the new reality that the previous Iraq has lost its old bearings, markings, and distinctiveness. Iraq is no longer a homeland, as things that were unshakeable before now lie in splinters; enveloped by a Pythian darkness, that beckons old and new ghosts to rebuild, transmute old and broken identities, out of the incomprehensible, transgressive, and impossible realities being experienced and lived by the populace.

CONCLUSION

Studying the Spectro-geographical in Ahmed Saadawi and Hassan Blasim's works reveals the hidden manoeuvres that underpin the Iraqi-Arab landscape. In the era of globalisation, spectres of war and tragedy are everywhere. Their amorphous beings, insidious and yet welcoming in nature, talk to us and about us. Furthermore, by participating in discursive practices, these ghostly bodies surreptitiously absorb into spaces and exert their agency, which has been silent till now. Obliterated histories are unearthed as both of these writers focus more and more on the ethical question of cohabiting with these ghosts of war and the political ramifications of chaos on the war-torn grounds. By looking at the disparate representations of the ghostly in post-war Iraq and literary works on the politics of trauma, resistance, and memory, this thesis has contributed to the emerging discourse on the ethical and narrative potential of the uncanny.

In both of the works studied in this research, landscapes are imbued with multiple time-spaces being curated, which continuously implore their surroundings and their inhabitants to interact and engage to bring about the inevitable interference. This research reveals people's relations with the haunted landscape and usually delves into the politics around class, gender, age, religion, and ethnicity. These ghosts bring the dispossession to the forefront and invoke a multitude of emotions and senses, ranging from hope, withdrawal, slowing, deadening, and vulnerability. Once the absent-presences have been unveiled and observed, a space is produced for the resolution of the spectral that comes with an onset of challenges, as the indecisiveness of the ghostly nature keeps evolving their meaning to bring into effect empowering associations of the Other. The Spectro-geographical in these texts endeavours to create a space for exploring the arrival of spectres, and ultimately carves an atmosphere of co-existing where a catharsis becomes eventuality. The subject that tries to uphold the difference between self and other is forced to dissuade the certainty of binary opposition, and configure a new way of relating to different forms of alterities, under the monopoly of ghosts. Iraqis witnessing the transformation of their familiar places begin to accept the otherness of contesting bodies, halting outsider from laying siege and inflicting violence in their space. The space is rendered unexorcised, and remains so forever as the spectres are not removed and the varying landscape is acquiesced by the people.

This research contributes to the burgeoning academia that ruminates on war literature centred on the East and emerging from the Orient. Arabic literature remains under-researched. Arab Spring, Iraq War, conflicts in Syria, Libya, and famines in Yemen have shaped the Contemporary Arab literary canon and unmask the truths about abstract concepts such as war, race, justice, identity, migration, and human rights. Moreover, the spectral infiltration has become a ground reality amid the proliferation of narratives about fifth-generation warfare.

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