

Piecing the City Together: Studying Violence on the Land and the Body in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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Introduction

The term 'supernatural' entered the Western imagination primarily through Christian theology, wherein it served as a medium to designate the cosmos outside the boundaries of human understanding. Within the scholastic philosophy, the category of the supernatural was used as a boundary against which the natural could be marked and identified. In his discussion on the idea of 'nature' in the medieval ages for example, Bartlett cites the twelfth century scholastic theologian Peter Lombard who argues that while God has implanted the seminal natures in everything in the universe there are certain elements, which he refers to as *praeter naturam* (meaning 'beyond nature'), whose causes are in God alone (Bartlett 2008: 4–6).

This theological perspective of the supernatural is based on a dualistic understanding of the universe where there is a break in rationality between the natural elements and the elements which go beyond nature. The supernatural is also defined against the natural and vice versa which makes this relationship of interdependence fruitful. This dualistic understanding of nature and the supernatural is, according to C.S. Lewis, a demotion of the original sense of the word. This is because, the Greek equivalent for 'nature' which is 'phusis,' is used to denote the beginning or character of all things in the universe (Lewis 1960: 36). Thus 'phusis' or 'nature' constituted the totality of what the universe was composed of as opposed to the demoted meaning, wherein it stood only for the part of it which humans could experience. Any

element which behaved contrary to its original nature or characteristics therefore belonged to the realm of the supernatural. In the context of the urban space however, this clean, convenient division between the natural and the supernatural breaks down. The birth of the earliest cities was marked by some form of urban government, be it a hereditary ruler or an oligarchy, who controlled the administration of the locality (Lees 2015: 2). The modern city was marked by a spatial and structural reorganization of the demography around trade and commerce routes or around hubs of transport, which entailed a total detour from the traditional, agrarian pattern of human settlement around areas of fertile soil or rivers.

Moreover, the modern city, in the post-Industrial Revolution era, is situated at a developmental point in human history when there have been rapid technological changes, which have radically altered the way people experience the world. Both chronologically and spatially, therefore, the city is located beyond the limits of nature because it deviates from the characteristic order of things as they were supposed to be.¹ Baghdad, in Ahmed Sadawi's novel, brings out this supernatural quality of the city by showing how human intervention through war and violence have radically altered the spaces familiar to people. Not only has the city of Baghdad moved away from the natural order of things but it has changed the normal, sociological structures and the social habitat of its citizens by creating these spaces of fear. This paper will thus use the supernatural as a methodological tool in trying to understand how the citizens' memory interacts with the politics of violence in order to comprehend the brokenness of the city. By studying the fragmented nature of the supernatural body, brought back to life, I will try to deconstruct the divisive politics that had led to the breakdown of Baghdad in the period following the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Cultural Memory and Violence

The supernaturalism of the city of Baghdad in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) is magnified further by the divisionist politics of the U.S. government and the sectarian violence between the Shiite and the Sunnite Muslims, which interferes with the natural human relationships of the land. The supernatural in Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is more a symptom, than a cause, of the society and the community falling apart. It is also a tool used to understand the fragmentation of the city and its citizens alike. Haytham Bahooora observes that by reanimating the dismembered bodies of Iraqis the novel not only harps on the motif of a 'murderous past' haunting the present but also practices a sort of literary experimentalism (Bahooora 2015: 188). By using supernatural elements, the novel establishes that the brutal conditions which the Iraqis are subjected to cannot be represented through the lens of narrative realism; they can only be approached using the fantastical narrative of horror which permeates the text. Fred Botting too argues that war in the novel is 'a strange combination of policing and information' and is situated 'between real and imagined powers and between actual yet incomprehensible effects' (Botting 2019: 17). Whatsitsname's identity is located in this space between reality and fantasy. While it draws from the tradition of Western horror fiction going back to the nineteenth century, it also places us in the middle of the trajectory of history and the brutal realities of war. The corpse's body becomes a conduit through which these memories of horror can be accessed, and be given a tangible form so that the extent of the brutality can be gauged. In order to understand the creation of Whatsitsname — the equivalent of the Creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) — it is important to understand how the corpse's memory of violence is integrated with the city's collective memory.² As Hala Amin argues, while Shelley's novel deals with the fears about playing God by creating human life, Saadawi's novel grapples with the fear of playing God by destroying

human life (Amin 2022:215). *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) tells the story of Hadi, a junk dealer who loses his friend Nahem Abdek to a bomb blast. When Hadi goes to collect the body of his friend, he is told to collect the dismembered parts of bodies belonging to different people, since none of the bodies are intact. Suffering from the trauma of the death of his friend, Hadi decides to stitch the body together, adding fresh parts from other victims of bombings. When the body is complete, unknown to Hadi, the soul of a gate guard, Hasib Mohammed Jaffar, who dies in a bombing incident near Sadeer Novotel hotel, enters the corpse and animates it with life. Saadawi's novel differs from that of Shelley's in two significant aspects. Firstly, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) focuses on the complex relationship of Victor Frankenstein and the Creature he brings back to life using the dead body parts from a morgue. The central focus of Shelley's novel remains on Frankenstein's failure to take responsibility for the Creature, and the latter's sense of abandonment, which turns him into a monster. Saadawi's novel, on the other hand, is not just about Hadi and the corpse he stitches back to life. It is about the intertwined lives of the entire community he lives in, including the journalist Mahmoud, Faraj the real estate agent, and most importantly Elishva, the old woman waiting for her dead son Daniel to return. Interestingly, it is Elishva, with whose narrative the story begins, that Whatsitsname feels closest to. Saadawi's decision to relocate a European monster to a Middle Eastern setting highlights an overlap between the global and local political scene (Botting 2019:16). This overlap is evident in the way the novel portrays the effect of large-scale political violence on the public domain while focusing on the intimate, private moments of its citizens on a smaller scale. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* therefore explores the role that collective grief and communal suffering plays in the creation of the supernatural. Secondly, once Frankenstein's Creature comes to life it assumes a personality and individuality of its own. Whatsitsname, by contrast, is always portrayed as a composite creature who is mentally pulled in different directions by the feelings of vengeance of the people whose body parts he is made

of. The Creature's narrative in Shelley's work is marked by a feeling of abandonment he suffers from, and his longing for a companion, which shows that it has a highly developed sense of selfhood.³ In contrast, Whatsitsname is an amalgamation of multiple selfhoods which have not formed a whole. Like the torn city of Baghdad, it is fragmented and broken, even when assembled together. Therefore, it is not the reanimation of a corpse which makes it supernatural but the fact that this composite body can carry the collective memory of violence and suffering which the land and its people have gone through.

It is important to understand the issue of collective memory in Iraq with respect to the Ba'athist regime of Iraq, which finds repeated mention in Saadawi's novel.⁴ The Ba'ath party which believed in the formation of a single Arabic nation, regained power in Iraq in 1968, after which Saddam Hussein took control. Historical memory had for long been used as a political weapon in Iraq, where the state tried to instil a romanticised understanding of the past based on a Sunni Arab heritage (Davis 2005: 58). Saddam Hussein too, tried to reformulate Iraqi nationalism according to his pan-Arabic ideology, incorporating images from Mesopotamian history and imagery into Iraq's national identity (Abdi 2008: 4). In the hands of the different sectarian powers therefore, nationalistic memory becomes a tool used by those in power to manipulate the Iraqi citizen's sense of identity. However, the collective memory in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is not drawn from the politicised history of the citizens, but from their deeply personal and individualistic experience. On the body of Whatsitsname, Hadi records the memory of his friend Nahem; Elishva records the memory of her son Daniel; and the dead Hasib rewrites the memory of his life. This fragmented, cacophonous memory inscribed on his body challenges the unified, stable, nationalistic memory that different sectarian forms of power try to impose on the people's mind. Therefore, as Hasib's family mourns his death:

They all dreamed something about Hasib. Parts of one dream made up for parts missing in another. A little dream filled a gap in a big one, and the threads stitched together to recreate a dream body for Hasib, to go with his soul... (Saadawi 2013: 34).

This dream body of Hasib, which is the body stitched together by Hadi, brings together the individual narratives of all the other members of the community, and serves as a carrier for their memories of trauma.

Whatsitsname and the Ethics of Revenge

The body of Whatsitsname thus functions beyond its nature, beyond its psychological limit of carrying the weight of pain and suffering, and is thus, supernatural in itself. The composite nature of this body is highlighted early in the novel, when Nahem's body becomes inseparable from the flesh of his horse after the blast (Saadawi 2013: 23). The trope of dismemberment in Saadawi's novel is, however, not just a means to evoke visceral imagery in the text, but a commentary on the mixture of identities and communalities in Iraqi society. Whatsitsname observes that the young madman thinks he is the model citizen:

Because I'm made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds — ethnicities, tribes, races and social classes — I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. I'm the first true Iraqi citizen, he thinks (Saadawi 2013: 140).

By piecing the body together, Hadi, and later the followers of Whatsitsname, try to bring the broken city of Baghdad together. But because this union is forced, random, and 'supernatural,'

the body of Whatsitsname keeps falling apart, just like his followers keep falling apart because of their ideological differences. Although his followers begin as a group with a common motive, the rift between the factions continue to grow, leading to a bloodbath in which most of them are murdered. The impossibility of piecing the city together, like the impossibility of keeping the body of Whatsitsname intact forever, shows that in order to bring back the city to its natural state of harmony, one has to modify the political mechanisms running behind these sectarian forms of violence. Rather than devising a supernatural means of forcefully bringing the city and the different ethnicities and ideologies together, it is important to devise an inclusive mode of cohabitation that acknowledges the differences, without enabling the conflict between them.

The choice of supernaturalism as a lens through which the war-torn city of Baghdad is seen — foregrounding the imagery of violent dismemberment— is therefore an effective narrative strategy to remind the readers about the intensity of violence in post-2003 Iraq. This literary strategy is suggestive of the impossibility of realistically depicting the brutality of the political conditions of Iraq, which in itself is seen as ‘monstrous and irrational’ (Bahooora 2015: 188). The ‘shocking portraits’ of dismemberment, ‘disrupt a status quo in which the horrors of violence in Iraq have been naturalised and often forgotten’ (Bahooora 2015: 188). This inability to articulate the fear and the shock of the political violence in Iraq is indicated in the process of naming the reanimated corpse by Hadi. In Shelley’s narrative the reanimated corpse is merely left nameless, and is thus referred to as the Creature. Saadawi’s narrative however, repeatedly draws attention to the namelessness of the corpse by calling it Whatsitsname. Just like the horrors of the city of Baghdad which are inarticulable, the composite creature, made up of the emotions of vengeance and anger of the victims of bombings, cannot be given a fixed identity. That is why when Saidi, the editor of al-Haqiqa magazine, changes the title of the

article on Whatsitsname to ‘Frankenstein in Baghdad,’ the narrator says that it didn’t help his interest much because ‘it had portrayed him as a figment of Hadi’s sick imagination’ (Saadawi 2013: 178). The problem with associating Whatsitsname with the fictional character of *Frankenstein* is not that it portrays him as an imaginary monster but that it naturalises the horrors, which led to his creation, as part of a fictional, adventurous narrative. The body of Whatsitsname has to be seen as a social reminder of all that has gone wrong in the city of Baghdad, and all that needs to be changed.

The idea of change however, is also problematised by the nature in which the wrongs of the victims are avenged. When Whatsitsname begins his unnatural life, it starts by killing Abu Zaidoun, who is responsible for sending Elishva’s son Daniel to war. As he continues killing the people who he thinks are responsible for the different bombings, he finally reaches Hadi. Whatsitsname considers Hadi guilty and blames him for Hasib’s death, because he was the one passing the hotel gate during the blast, for which Hasib had come out. Hadi passes the blame to the Sudanese suicide bomber, and then to the hotel management, but Whatsitsname is still unsure about the person who should be held accountable for Hasib’s death (Saadawi 2013: 124). The accountability that Whatsitsname is searching for cannot always be traced to an individual, and justice rendered in a black-and-white fashion. He fails to understand the complexity of systemic violence which makes everyone a victim equally. This realization comes to him late in the novel when he finds out that every body part he is made of eventually falls off, and he has to replace it with the parts of new victims, whose death he now has to avenge, leading to an endless list of targets that would never come to an end (Saadawi 2013: 146–147). Merely killing off the targets therefore does not help in eradicating the horrors in Iraqi society because violence is ingrained in the system. In order to break this cycle of violence

it is necessary to disband the system itself and rebuild it using a more inclusive, and humanitarian strategy.

But in the absence of this realization, the body of Whatsitsname is constantly under the pressure of tracing the accountability of crimes to individual perpetrators. As Sinéad Murphy observes,

Through the Whatsitsname's amorphous body, his ambiguous origins, and his ambivalent relationships with the human characters, the novel explores the body as itself the site of conflict, and the manner in which contemporary warfare has given rise to forms of 'living death' in Iraq (Murphy 2018: 276).

The conflict ingrained on the body of Whatsitsname however, is not just a political one but also an ethical one. As the list of his targets increase and his body parts keep falling off, there is a divide among his followers as to the source of the new parts, being used for replacing the older ones. The Magician, one of his followers, believes that every victim, whose body parts Whatsitsname uses, is in turn a criminal himself (Saadawi 2013: 151). The Sophist, on the other hand, denies the claim that Whatsitsname is mostly built of body parts from criminal parts. In his search for an innocent victim, Whatsitsname kills a harmless man, and takes out his eyes to replace his failing vision. However, once he has taken the eyes of this innocent man, Whatsitsname wonders who he should exact the revenge for the death of the man from, because he himself has killed this innocent man (Saadawi 2013: 154). This ethical dilemma forms an important part of his existence because Whatsitsname's being is borne out of the violence that troubled Iraq in the era of political disturbance. While he takes upon the responsibility of avenging the death of victims, he fails to see that he too is a part of this cycle of killing. This

moral conundrum in the text reveals how, as part of this structural system of violence, every individual and every citizen hold accountability for the horrific state of affairs in the city. Everyone is thus simultaneously a victim and an oppressor, which makes it impossible to avenge the wrongs of everyone, unless the system itself is torn down.

Supernatural Storytelling and the Narrative of Exile

The inability of Whatsitsname to hold its body together is also used as a metaphor for the way the city of Baghdad itself disintegrates under the effects of terrorism and state-sponsored violence. Behind the supernatural occurrences in the text, there is a constant narrative of exodus and exile which haunts the inhabitants of this broken city. Elishva's daughters Matilda and Hilda have long moved out of Baghdad and throughout the text, they constantly try to bring their mother with them. Although she initially refuses to leave the city, hoping that her son would return, at the end of the novel she agrees to go with her grandson, who looks like Daniel. Mahmoud, the journalist, too decides to leave Baghdad because he suspects that a civil war may break out any time, and he may be killed any moment in a car bomb incident (Saadawi 2013: 254). Similarly, Abu Anmar, the owner of Orouba Hotel, leaves the city, having sold his hotel to Faraj, realizing that '...the city had abandoned him, becoming a place of murder and gratuitous violence' (Saadawi 2013: 224). This social and economic decline of the city of Baghdad is hastened by the in-fighting between the different political groups who try to break open the city in order to claim power for themselves. Moreover, this in-fighting is indirectly supported by the U.S. government in order to justify their presence in Iraq as a force trying to control violence. Saidi even tells Mahmoud that Brigadier Majid has been employed by the American forces to lead an assassination squad so that there is an 'equilibrium of violence on the streets between the Sunni and Shiite militias' which would grant them the chance to make

political negotiations in Iraq (Saadawi 2013: 170). Brigadier Majid constantly tries to track and eliminate Whatsitsname, believing it to be the source of anxiety and panic among the people.

However, Whatsitsname is in reality a psychological projection of the uncertainty of the citizens who have been deprived of their sense of home and security in their own city. The sense of abandonment which Abu Anmar feels is shared by all the people living in Baghdad because none of the parties involved in the strife for power, have taken the individual lives of the citizens into consideration. Like the body of Whatsitsname lying in Hadi's shed before it is animated by the soul of Hasib, the city of Baghdad is separated from its inhabitants in the minds of those vying for power. By alienating the common citizens of Baghdad like Mahmoud, Elishva or Abu Anmar, the city becomes a supernatural machinery running on the fuel of gunfire and bomb blasts. It is no surprise that the moment Elishva leaves her home in Baghdad there is a terrible bomb blast in the area. Although her neighbour, Umm Salim, attributes some mystical power to Elishva which she believes had protected the neighbourhood (Saadawi 2013: 234), the blast is a final pronouncement of death on the city, which has been separated from the life of its inhabitants. When Elishva — the person who has the greatest sense of attachment to the city and her home — leaves, the city crumbles down further, almost as if devoid of its soul.

The supernatural element in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is therefore not just a plot device to thrill the reader; rather, it is inbuilt into the very nature of the city which the author is trying to portray. It is a symptom which points to the larger political narrative of the text, wherein Baghdad is treated as a barren, lifeless site of conflict, without considering the ordinary lives of the people, whose fates are intertwined with that of the city. Zainab Saleh frames this problem of alienation and exile in the context of imperialism, observing that the United States

had supported authoritarian regimes since 1960s and had backed up the ongoing wars (Saleh 2020: 4–5). As a result, both Iraqis living in their own country and the Iraqi diasporic community has suffered from angst about their return in the post-2003 era, fearing for the lives of their relatives and friends, and expecting a disintegration of the country itself (Saleh 2020: 5). This fear of return is clearly visible in the tension-ridden relationship of Matilda and Hilda to their mothers. While they call every week to ensure about their mother's safety, they are not willing to return and stay in Baghdad because of the violent political climate. The repeated fights between her daughters, who want to take her away, and Elishva, who does not want to leave Baghdad, brings out this tussle between the concern for safety and the longing for the city inherent in Iraqi citizens. Saleh's work is also significant because it offers a critique of the U.S. politics of invasion of Iraq while giving us a very human picture of those in exile. By recording and bringing the stories of the Iraqi emigrants to the forefront, she reclaims the narrative of Iraq from the clutches of those in power and hands it to the ordinary citizens. Her narrative thus uses memory as a sociological methodology to inscribe the feeling of loss, trauma, and abandonment of those who went away onto the history of Iraq.

Saadawi similarly uses the historical power of storytelling to expose the brokenness of the city of Baghdad through the character of Hadi. The fear of the government regarding the fantastic story of Hadi, shows that the narrative of Whatsitsname not only helps him psychologically to deal with the death of Nahem, but also holds the power to subvert the authority of those in power by questioning the conditions of Baghdad in war-torn Iraq. Although they try to silence this narrative by presenting Hadi as the criminal responsible for the murders committed under the guise of Whatsitsname, the systemic suppression of Hadi's story is evident early in the text. The chapter detailing Hadi's story is curiously named 'the Liar.' which hints at the reluctance of the government to accept that Whatsitsname was created

because of the acts of violence committed on the land and its people. Hadi's narrative is full of digressions as he likes to add realistic details to his story. For example, while narrating the story about the bomb blast in front of Sadeer Novotel Hotel he talks in detail about how the guard, Hasib, stands outside the wooden booth because it did not protect him from heat or cold (Saadawi 2013: 27). While his listeners get impatient with these apparently unimportant details, these digressions make Hadi's fragmented narrative more human. His story is a living archive of the memory of his friend Nahem, of Elishva's imagined conversations with the picture of Saint George about his son, and of the pain of loss of the victims of war. Although it is soon discarded as a figment of his imagination, by making him the criminal responsible for the murders, the novel ends with an indication that Whatsitsname is real in flesh and blood.

By presenting the supernatural being as a visceral, tangible reality, the novel thus validates the authenticity of Hadi's narrative, and converts the stories of Elishva, Mahmoud and the others into historical testimonies. Shakir Mustafa, writing about Muhammad Khodayyir's idea of storytelling, in *Contemporary Iraqi Fiction: An Anthology* comments,

The storyteller's memory, he says, is a grocery store crowded with dusty cans, and his or her texts are not constructed or created, but exist in the world, packed with thoughts and images. The writer's mission lies in exorcising their potential narratives at the appropriate time and place (Khodayyir 2008: 1).

Khodayyir's idea of storytelling, seen in the context of Saadawi's text, makes Hadi's narrative not just a fabricated reality fashioned out of his imagination but a testimony that gives voice to the injustice suffered by the citizens of Iraq. Although Mahmoud too does not fully believe in the story of Whatsitsname, by recording his narrative he gives voice to the thousands of people

who have been a victim of political violence. When Brigadier Majid's men start to enquire about Hadi's story, his friend Aziz warns him to keep quiet, as his tale about Whatsitsname could get him into trouble (Saadawi 2013: 81). But Hadi's story is not mistimed as Aziz believes it to be. Rather it has written itself at the appropriate time and place, serving as a witness to the moral decay of the city of Baghdad. Whatsitsname is thus at the end a symbolic embodiment of the unspeakable horrors of the city, which had hitherto not found any representation. Although Hadi tries to establish himself as his father who had created him, Whatsitsname calls him a mere 'conduit' who had assisted in bringing to life what the circumstances had already designed (Saadawi 2013: 123). The story therefore becomes larger than the storyteller, expanding beyond his control to subsume all within its chaotic, narrative tornado. It is no longer the singular story of Hadi, the junk dealer, but a story of the way the lives of the different people have intersected and overlapped with each other in this city. Within this narrative, the supernatural is not seen as something external to the regular lives of the people but an intrinsic part of the landscape and the society of Baghdad. For example, when there is a report of dozens of people being trampled to death on Imams Bridge because of a rumour about a suicide bomber, one of the officers mentions that there were ghostly figures hovering over the bridge, who lived in other people's bodies (Saadawi 2013: 107). The site which is suspected to be the location for a mass scale violence is also the site where the ghosts, aptly termed 'familiar of fear' linger (Saadawi 2013: 108). These supernatural entities who have almost become naturalised as part of the city, represent the permanent state of disruption brought about by the wars between the different stakeholders of the society.

This association of the supernatural with the landscape of the city is found even in the place where Whatsitsname lives. He says that he is living in an unfinished building in a war zone where the Iraqi National Guard and the American army, and the Sunni and Shiite militias

are fighting for power. This area is a No Man's Land as it is not under the full control of any of the groups and thus, he claims is the right place for him (Saadawi 2013: 138). The war zone is a suitable place for Whatsitsname because in many ways he is a product of this political conflict ravaging the land. Even the senior astrologer tells Brigadier Majid that they are responsible for the creation of this creature (Saadawi 2013: 209). In the absence of any accountability for the horrors taking place in the city, Whatsitsname serves as the site where society's fear, anger, and the impulse for retribution are transferred. But he is not just an extension of the city's psychological landscape; he is also a material embodiment of the city which is in ruins and the people in it because he is made up of the body parts of the inhabitants, who walked on the streets of Baghdad. Once again therefore we find that the author emphasises on the element of supernaturalism in all its physicality rather than as a mere expression of the citizens' psyche. The destruction of the city's landscape, symbolised by the disintegrating body of Whatsitsname, is an issue which runs throughout the text in the background. In the explosion which takes place in Lane 7, most of the old houses built in the 1930s are blown away. Elishva's house which Faraj had repeatedly tried to take over and failed, also gets demolished (Saadawi 2013: 239).

But the most important outcome of the explosion is that a part of the wall of Abbasid Baghdad emerges in the crater formed as a result of the blast. Although the wall formed a significant discovery in Islamic archaeology in Baghdad, the city authorities decide to fill up the crater and bury the wall once again (Saadawi 2013: 257). The destruction of the old houses in the blast, and the casual burying of an archaeological structure, hints at the total disregard for cultural memory on the part of the government. By burying this architectural discovery without any concern for its contribution to the study of Islamic history, the authorities erase those aspects of Baghdad's antiquity which could have helped its citizens have a sense of

belongingness to this rapidly crumbling city. The erasure of these cultural memories, like the denial of Hadi's narrative, is not however a random administrative decision but a calculated move that further alienates young Iraqis from their historical and national identities.⁵ Nada Shabout, observes how the 'cultural patrimony' of Iraq is under constant threat as the integrity of the historical evidence contained in its archaeological sites are damaged by military operations, or by looters who have no regard for their rich antiquity (Shabout 2021). This blocks Iraqis from accessing their own past and thus leads to a loss of their collective memories, and increases the divide that has been implanted within them from above on sectarian or ethnic basis. John Warren similarly, identifies the role of U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 in destroying its cultural heritage, by showing how there was a loss of 2% of the half a million items in Iraq Museum, in the absence of any protection to objects or sites of historical importance (Warren 2005: 816). Moreover, as Warren notes, in many cases the museum staff themselves had to resort to arms to protect valuable national property (816). The blatant covering up of the archaeological wall in the novel therefore is an open denial of the 'urban continuity' of Baghdad, as Warren terms it (817). This deliberate separation of the city's rich history and its origins from its current state bears a parallel to the separation of the body of Hasib from his soul, making it supernatural in nature. Just like Hasib's soul cannot find his dead body after the blast, causing it to enter Whatsitsname's body, so also the city, without its connections to its cultural genealogy, becomes a supernatural city. In both the case of Baghdad and Whatsitsname the lack of continuity between a stable past and the present existence leads to a fragmented, ghost-like presence.

Conclusion

Baghdad as a supernatural city in Saadawi's novel continues to haunt its citizens with the buried memory of its cultural past, that collides with the lived experience of its inhabitants in the present. Hadi's transfer of the trauma and pain he suffers from the death of Nahem to the body of Whatsitsname becomes symbolic of the failure of the systems of language and administration in the Iraqi society. Within this failed political setup, Whatsitsname grows larger than its creator, acting as a mechanism for avenging the death of the victims. While the body of the victims of the blast who walked the streets of Baghdad makes him a part of the city, he is simultaneously outcast as a horrific killing machine. At the end of the novel, making Hadi the face of Whatsitsname helps the government to temporarily quell the fears of the citizens about this vengeful murderer. But what they fail to understand is that Whatsitsname will live on as a supernatural presence as long as the mindless violence continues to rattle the city of Baghdad. The natural and the supernatural therefore continue to exist within the same city as a mark of its moral decay rather than being conveniently separated into two, self-contained realms. Saadawi therefore uses the fragmented nature of Whatsitsname's body to highlight the way the city of Baghdad was crumbling under state-sponsored violence and terrorism. The supernatural elements in the story do not take away from the realistic concerns of the narrative but rather emphasises the pain of exile and loss which troubles the inhabitants of the city. Mahmoud's recording of Whatsitsname's story therefore gives a structure and form to the pain and violence which many inhabitants of the city have suffered through. Within such a fragmented society, storytelling, as practised by people like Hadi, becomes a way of reconstituting one's own identity and reclaiming power from the government. It is through this element of storytelling that the city of Baghdad continues to survive in this novel, despite its brokenness.

Endnotes

1. Joseph Rykwert observes that although town planners try to integrate elements from nature while designing the city, ‘...the town is not really like a natural phenomenon. It is an artefact—an artefact of a curious kind, compounded of willed and random elements, imperfectly controlled’ (Rykwert 1964: 24). Rykwert’s analysis thus reinforces the city as a space separate from nature, that functions according to its own laws.
2. The association of the reanimated corpse with the supernaturalism of the city is significant when seen in the context of the city’s origin. Lee Mumford, while tracing the earliest evidence of human settlement observes that the dead were the first to have a permanent settlement, and that any visitor to a Greek or a Roman city would face the tombs and graves that lined the city while entering it. The ritualistic burying of dead, which Hasib and Nahem do not receive, thus formed an important part in the formation of the urban space.
3. In Saadawi’s novel this abandonment is not just felt by Whatsitsname but also by characters like Elishva and Hadi who live near the fringes of the society.
4. Abu Zaidoun for example is said to have been part of the Ba’athist regime, who had forcefully recruited people who did not want to join military training. Interestingly, Zaidoun is one of the first victims of Whatsitsname’s wrath. His death serves both as an emotional cleansing for people like Elishva who had suffered because of him, and as a political cleansing, which forms a part of the de-Baathification which was going on in Iraq at the time.
5. Nabil Al-Tikriti, borrowing Keith Watenpaugh’s analysis of the loss of such elements of cultural heritage, refers to this erasure as ‘mnemocide.’ The issue of erasing cultural memories as Tikriti and Watenpaugh show, are tied to larger systems of oppression that suppress local knowledge and history.

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