

Reclaiming Sense of Place in Postwar Baghdad through Polysensoriality in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*

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Abstract

This study examines *The Corpse Washer* (2013), a novel by acclaimed Iraqi writer Sinan Antoon, who portrays the altered spatiality of postwar Baghdad following the 2003 US invasion and subsequent sectarian conflicts. While critical discussions on the novel have focused mainly on themes of war trauma, violence, and identity, this study adopts a different perspective by exploring the characters' polysensorial engagement with their environment, which leads to a reimagining of postwar Baghdad. Employing Bertrand Westphal's geocriticism, particularly his concept of polysensoriality, this study analyzes how the altered urban landscape impacts the characters' perceived and lived experiences. It also examines how the characters interact with their environment beyond the visual, engaging auditory, olfactory, and tactile dimensions to mitigate alienation and re-establish a sense of belonging to the city. The findings reveal that *The Corpse Washer* not only highlights the destructive impact of the Iraq War on Baghdad's spatial configuration but also attests to the resilience of its inhabitants, who reconstruct their relationship with the city through polysensorial engagement. The significance of this study lies in its contribution to discussions on postwar urban spatiality in Antoon's novel in particular and contemporary Iraqi fiction in general, as it argues for the centrality of connecting with urban landscapes polysensorially as a means of reimagining and negotiating individuals' sense of belonging to the city. Future research may expand on this approach by examining other postwar literary narratives to further explore how war-altered cities are represented and experienced.

Keywords: Bertrand Westphal, geocriticism theory, polysensoriality, postwar Baghdad, Sinan Antoon, *The Corpse Washer*

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Introduction

The United States, the United Kingdom, and a coalition of allies invaded Iraq March 20, 2003 and toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein on April, 9, 2003. They declared that their goals were to bring peace, wealth, and democracy to the region. Despite the initial objectives, the aftermath led to significant political and military struggles, as well as persistent violence and instability within Iraq (Gordon & Trainor, 2012). The invasion divided Baghdad into “Iraqi Baghdad” and “American Baghdad,” alienating the Iraqi people within their own country and distorting their collective sense of spatial history. Furthermore, the occupation undermined the urban fabric of the city and reterritorialised the Baghdadi population based on ethnic roots rather than national identity (Scranton, 2007). The conflicts, divisions, and barriers make viewing Baghdad as a unified city and challenging people. The mapping and walling of Baghdad during the Iraq War and the subsequent sectarian conflict—characterized by clashes between Sunni and Shia Muslim groups—serve as powerful demonstrations of the assertion of effective spatial sovereignty by the ruling parties and groups (Hristova, 2018).

Amid these tumultuous changes, Iraqi writers and thinkers, who had long been hopeful for the end of decades of dictatorship, confronted a new reality. The fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime raised expectations for a democratic system and complete independence, but postwar Baghdad failed to meet these aspirations (Hanoosh, 2019). Despite having been oppressed and subdued during the dictatorship, and now grappling with the outcomes of the invasion, Baghdad continues to fuel the imagination of Iraqi writers and thinkers and remains the central theme in their writings. The war and subsequent sectarian violence not only traumatised Iraqis but also influenced their literature. This is reflected in numerous literary works recounting the war’s horrors and its impact on the Iraqi populace. Prominent Iraqi authors such as Inaam Kachachi, Ahmad Saadawi, and Burhan Alshawi, reflect on themes of violence and mortality in their works while striving to uphold their national identity within an environment dominated by conflict (Hanoosh, 2019).

Among these influential voices is Sinan Antoon, whose contributions further highlight the struggles faced by the Iraqi literary community. An Iraqi poet, novelist, scholar, and literary translator, Antoon has been one of Iraq’s most acclaimed writers since moving to the United States in 1991. Antoon’s works primarily explore the landscape of postwar Baghdad. They engage with themes such as cultural identity, the spatial characteristics of Baghdad before and after the invasion, and the impact of war and sectarian conflict on the Iraqi sense of belonging (Al-Omar, 2018). His novels also examine how the US invasion has transformed the country, particularly focusing on the occupation’s effects on space and place in Baghdad. Through his portrayals of violence and aspiration, Antoon reflects on the grim reality of his homeland while exploring ways to survive, preserve sanity, and appreciate the enduring beauty and goodness in the world (Alkriti & Janoory, 2019).

The Corpse Washer (2013), originally published in Arabic in 2010 as *Wahdaha Shajarat Al-Rumman* (*The Pomegranate Alone*), portrays the atrocities following the 2003 war and subsequent sectarian violence in Iraq. The narrative follows Jawad, an Iraqi Shia artist who reluctantly becomes a corpse washer, a role that brings him into daily contact with death and the sectarian strife that tears Baghdad apart. Against the backdrop of the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s,

the Gulf War of 1991, and the US invasion of 2003, Jawad's life intertwines personal aspirations with national tragedies. Born into a Shia family known for their traditional role as corpse washers, Jawad initially rebels against his heritage and instead pursues his passion for art as a form of personal emancipation. However, the death of his father in the immediate aftermath of the US invasion compels him to return to his family's profession, which symbolizes his failed attempts to detach from the burdens of his lineage and the ongoing violence. In dealing with the daily influx of corpses, Jawad's story critiques the aftermath of the US invasion, persistent sectarian tensions, and the existential and ethical dilemmas faced by Iraqis. Caught between his artistic aspirations and his family's transgenerational role of corpse washing, Jawad embodies the struggle to maintain personal integrity, individual freedom, and dreams in a society ravaged by war and sectarianism.

In *The Corpse Washer*, Antoon explores Baghdad through the characters' direct experiences and perceptions of its fragmented urban landscapes and various spaces. The novel illustrates how the devastation from the invasion and ongoing sectarian conflict distorts the characters' interactions with space and their connection to the history of war-torn places. This dual alienation—stemming from the overwhelming sensory impacts of conflict and the altered historical ties—transforms Baghdad's urban image, obliterates its social values, and erodes its established identity.

Antoon's exploration of Baghdad in *The Corpse Washer* can be understood and framed through the principles of geocriticism, theorised by Bertrand Westphal. Defined by Westphal as a "critical exploratory practice, or set of practices... [to] engage with the spaces that make life, through lived experience and imaginary projections, meaningful" (Westphal, 2011, p. 6), geocriticism emphasizes the interaction between geographic spaces and literary expression. The depiction of sensory and historical alienation in *The Corpse Washer* echoes the geocritical emphasis on spaces imbued with historical, cultural, and personal significance. By exploring how the characters' experiences in Baghdad shape their identities and interactions, the novel aligns with geocritical views that see literary spaces not merely as settings, but as integral elements that can reshape and reimagine the spatiality and sense of belonging of individuals and communities to a specific place.

This article examines how Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* maps the spatiality of postwar Baghdad and explores the characters' efforts to reconnect with their city through multisensory experiences. Drawing on Bertrand Westphal's geocritical concept of polysensoriality, we argue that Antoon's narrative extends beyond visual representations to counter the predominantly visual narratives of urban conflict in Baghdad. These narratives, as Derek Gregory (2010) observes, have been used and co-opted by US military operations as part of a strategy that "sutures fields of vision to fields of violence" (p. 266). This co-option transforms vision into a tool of control rather than mere representation. However, acknowledging the importance of visibility in literary and urban studies, this article investigates how Antoon enriches this perspective by portraying the characters' engagement with and reclamation of their sense of place in Baghdad through auditory, olfactory, and tactile dimensions in the novel.

Literature Review

The 2003 US invasion of Iraq Baghdad altered its spatial configuration and daily life. The occupation divided Baghdad into two: the "Green Zone," a fortified hub for international agencies and the "Red Zones," where the general public faces greater threats of violence. This division also extends into "sectarian geographies," with neighbourhoods being segregated by Sunni and Shiite identities, which were further exacerbated by U.S. interventions that fueled militia violence and rigidified sectarian divides (Damluji, 2010; Rashid & Alobaydi, 2015). Moreover, the use of concrete walls and checkpoints restricts Iraqis' mobility, sense of place and daily interactions (Murrani, 2016).

This backdrop of segregation and violence profoundly influences Iraqi literary output. The post-2003 era has seen a surge in narratives that explore these new urban realities, with a significant increase in publications compared to the entire twentieth century (Mohammed, 2018). Authors like Hassan Blasim, Inaam Kachachi, Ahmed Saadawi, and Sinan Antoon, writing from a diasporic perspective, leverage their distance to critique and reinterpret the Iraqi experience. They offer fictional narratives of Iraq that challenge conventional discourses and reflect the fragmentation of their homeland.

Antoon, often hailed as one of the most critically acclaimed contemporary Iraqi authors, portrays the many ways in which the US invasion and subsequent sectarian tensions have impacted and altered the physical and psychical landscapes of Iraq and its everyday people. Antoon's works explore themes including cultural identity, the transformation of Baghdad's spatial characteristics pre- and post-invasion, and the impact of war and sectarian conflict on the sense of belonging among Iraqis (Al-Omar, 2018). His novels portray how the US invasion reshaped the country and, in turn, affected spaces and places in Baghdad. Antoon portrays violence but also conveys hope that Iraq and the world might yet transcend war and experience a better future. He confronts the grim realities of his homeland while at the same time highlighting ways to endure, maintain sanity, and appreciate the enduring beauty and goodness in the world (Alkriti & Janoory, 2019).

Studies related to Antoon's *The Corpse Washer* have addressed the ways in which the novel represents a shift in narrative style in Iraqi fiction. This shift explains and informs the methods Antoon uses to address the themes of war trauma, sense of place, sectarian violence, and cultural identity. These themes relate to the sense of belonging among Iraqi and Baghdadi people and reveal the repercussions of the invasion on the community.

In her analysis of post-2003 Iraqi fiction, Hanoosh (2003) argues that wars significantly influence how Iraqi authors articulate their sense of self and place. Post-2003, according to Hanoosh, authors such as Luay Hamzah Abbas, Ali Bader, and Sinan Antoon moved away from Iraq's social realist tradition, evident in the works of Mahmoud Saeed and Abd al-Khaliq al-Rikabi towards magical realism and magical history. This shift is attributed to the style's capacity to capture the "unreal" experiences of violence—something social realism cannot (Bahoora, 2015, p.190). These narrative experimentations address the political and historical oppressions following the US invasion of Iraq. Masmoudi (2015) suggests that the recurring themes of "death, killing, madness, and loss" (p.2) in post-2003 Iraqi fiction titles reflect how individuals have endured the relentless impact of war and violence over three decades.

In response to and capturing these atrocities, contemporary Iraqi authors often employ a fragmented narrative style in their works to challenge monolithic assumptions about Baghdad's history and portray the everyday, disjointed, and partial accounts of its people. Expressed through tropes of nightmarish dreams, obfuscated real-imagined landscapes, madness, and disorientation (Sadek, 2023; Webster, 2023; Khammas, 2022), these styles capture the shared trauma of spatial loss, physical and psychological displacement, and a sense of alienation in Iraqi fiction. Such stylistic choices reflect the altered reality of Iraq, transformed by ongoing conflicts which reshape both the physical environment and the psychological landscape of those living within it.

Mohammed (2015) analyses Jawad, the protagonist in *The Corpse Washer*, through Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection. Mohammed suggests that Jawad's repeated exposure to the corpses of war victims in the washhouse embodies Kristeva's notion of abjection, where Jawad's experiences oscillate between attraction and repulsion, which instils in him fear, adrenaline, and nausea—all responses to the abject. These intense reactions not only signify Jawad's psychological breakdown but also reflect the normalisation of death and violence in post-invasion Baghdad, with daily spectacles of violence desensitising the populace and altering the city's landscapes.

Thus, as Mahmoud (2015) aptly categorises, *The Corpse Washer* could be read as a “trauma novel”. Using Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, Mahmoud analyses how the narrative captures a pervasive sense of loss and fear on both individual and collective levels. Mahmoud (2015) points out the narrator's personal trauma from washing corpses and connects it to the historical trauma shared by the nation. Mankhi et al. (2020) further explore the war trauma portrayed in *The Corpse Washer*. Their analysis, similarly grounded in Caruth's framework, discusses how Iraq's prolonged trauma depicted in the novel foregrounds both the physical and spiritual desolation and the tenacity of Iraqis who turn to art to cope with despair.

Dreams and nightmares form a central element in Antoon's works. Elimelekh (2017) argues that these elements “illustrate and underscore the characters' inner anxieties and dread” (p. 254). Read in one way, the seamless incorporation of dreams and nightmares into the text destabilises the notion of reality, compounding the sense of trauma and alienation faced by characters. But as Elimelekh (2017) argues, magical realism could potentially challenge the self-other boundaries and “revolt against truths and hierarchies that are ostensibly unassailable” (p.255).

While past studies have articulated the centrality of trauma, the state of abjection, and its intrusion into dreams and nightmares—thereby unsettles one's sense of reality— in *The Corpse Washer*, this article expands and shifts the discussion to explore the possibilities of a reimagined postwar Baghdad in the novel. It examines the ways in which the novel's characters' sensory engagement with their surroundings informs their perceptions of the city. By specifically investigating how Jawad reconstructs his sense of place through everyday sensory experiences and spatial awareness, this article demonstrates how Jawad's polysensorial engagement not only challenges but transforms his experience of violence and loss into a potential renewal of a sense of belonging.

Theoretical Framework

This article employs Bertrand Westphal's theory of geocriticism, particularly from his seminal work, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2011), as a framework for reading Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*. Integrating insights from human and physical geography, architecture, and urban studies, geocriticism focuses on the geographic spaces in literature. It aims to bridge the gap between real and fictional spaces and explores the interactions between literary works and the real world. As Robert Tally, in his introduction to *Geocriticism*, states, Westphal intends for geocriticism to be "a critical exploratory practice, or set of practices, whereby readers, scholars, and critics engage with the spaces that make life, through lived experience and imaginary projections, meaningful" (Westphal, 2011, p. xii).

Westphal's geocriticism is informed by the theory of space and place in the works of Gaston Bachelard, Henri Lefebvre, and Yi-Fu Tuan. The theory seeks connections between places and the texts, authors, or genres under examination, allowing critics to "employ a methodology that allows the space to be seen from a new angle, an angle that resituates the entire field" (Westphal, 2011, p. 113). Westphal identifies four key elements of geocriticism—multifocalisation, stratigraphy, intertextuality, and polysensoriality—to explore and analyse the interactions between human and literary spaces, the last of which, polysensoriality, is the focus of this research.

Polysensoriality denotes the experience of the world as a result of all our senses. Westphal (2011) challenges the traditional visual hierarchy by suggesting that sight and its activation by the gaze are not the sole pivotal attributes of perception. Instead, the experience of spaces emerges from all senses, which deliver perception once they receive and analyze information through mental activities. He notes that in geography, the hierarchy of senses—which deems smell, touch, and taste as "intimate, passive, [and] bodily," in contrast to the "remote and mental" sight and hearing—emerges from the language used to describe them (Westphal, 2011, p. 133). Westphal cautions against generalisations about this distinction and advocates for a synesthetic approach that combines multiple senses to alter our representation of the environment, which he describes as "an empire of the senses" (Westphal, 2011, p. 134). Westphal's perspective aligns with Paul Rodaway's insights in *Sensuous Geography* (1994), where the latter notes, "the senses are geographical in that they contribute to orientation in space, an awareness of spatial relationships, and an appreciation of the specific qualities of different spaces" (p. 37).

In discussing the representation of space in fiction through a polysensorial lens, Westphal (2011) illuminates the ways in which synaesthesia (a combination of our senses) shapes our perception, particularly in complex environments. To illustrate this phenomenon, Westphal draws on Marc Augé's example of the city to depict this phenomenon, describing its "landscape, sky, shadows and lighting, movement; [...] smell, odours varying with the seasons and the situation, places and activities [...] This material dimension plays its role" (p. 135). Further emphasising the depth of sensory integration, Westphal (2011) references Charles Baudelaire's observation from *Les fleurs du Mal*, noting that "perfumes, colours, and sounds respond to one another," (p.315) which suggests a natural synaesthesia that enhances the perceptive field of individuals. This intersubjective synaesthesia extends beyond individual experiences, influencing collective perceptions and even the literary portrayal of environments. Such dynamic sensory interactions

are critical in literature, where space can evoke strong emotional responses in literary characters when they encounter various spaces and landscapes.

Building on this concept of sensory integration, Westphal (2011) explores how sensory landscapes—through sound, colour, and scent—shape perceptions and reveal underlying biases, noting that sensory experiences, such as soundscapes that are “melodic or disharmonious” (p. 136) and visual elements like a city’s “colour palette” (p. 136), vary widely depending on cultural representation and individual perspective. Westphal (2011) also argues that a polysensory approach could “nourish reflection on stereotypes and exoticism” (p. 136). This is evident, for instance, in portrayals of Africa by writers such as Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene, whose depiction of the continent as “more fragrant, sonorous, colourful, and rich to the touch” (Westphal, 2011, p. 136) exposes cultural biases and emphasises the subjective nature of perception. Thus, geocriticism also encourages readers to recognise the personal and collective filters that shape their understanding of place.

Methodology

This study analyses how the protagonist, Jawad, and other characters experience postwar Baghdad in Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer*. It focuses on the period following the 2003 invasion and subsequent sectarian conflicts and the novel’s depiction of places and the geographical features of the war-torn city. Closely reading the novel, this article explores the sensory dimensions in Antoon’s work to uncover the spatial alienation and dislocation caused by the invasion. Our analysis examines how the characters (re)define and reclaim their sense of place and belonging. To facilitate this analysis, Bertrand Westphal’s geocritical approach will be used, mainly through the concept of polysensoriality to explore the characters’ strategy of reengaging with Baghdad city and mitigating their spatial alienation.

Discussion

Spatiality of Postwar Baghdad in The Corpse Washer

In Sinan Antoon’s *The Corpse Washer*, space plays an important role in influencing the characters’ perceptions and experiences of postwar Baghdad. The novel combines rich spatial references of Baghdad and the characters’ memory and sensory experience of the city, together shaping the physical and social landscapes of its inhabitants amidst the ongoing violence in the country. Despite the themes of loss, death, and violence depicted in the novel as everyday banalities, it also presents moments where characters actively engage with their surrounding landscapes. Their resilience counters traumatic experiences and loss of belonging as they seek to reclaim a sense of place. The novel highlights the importance of polysensorial engagement in reconnecting with the city.

In *The Corpse Washer*, the spatial dimensions of Baghdad play a significant role in shaping Jawad’s identity and perceptions. One example is the novel’s portrayal of Jawad’s connection to Al-Mutanabbi Street, the heart of Baghdad’s literary life. Jawad recounts his solitary walks along the street, surrounded by booksellers who offer “a surprising wealth of great titles, all the books stacked without regard to subject or genre” (Antoon, 2013, p. 101). This historic book market, a

symbol of Baghdad's rich literary tradition, evokes a mix of nostalgia and autonomy in Jawad. As he wanders alone, Jawad observes how the wind angrily turns the pages of books and magazines, "as if it were dissatisfied with what it read and could find nothing it liked" (Antoon, 2013, pp. 101-102). This personification of the wind mirrors his own restlessness and dissatisfaction with the country's state of affairs. His depiction of natural elements interacting with the city shows his connection to and engagement with Baghdad.

Nonetheless, the street suffered from the sectarian violence that erupted after the war, and booksellers and visitors abandoned it for many years. On 5 March 2007, a car bomb explosion on Al-Mutanabbi Street in Baghdad killed more than thirty Iraqis and injured over one hundred. Jawad feels a sense of loss when he hears on the radio about a suicide bomber attacking Al-Mutanabbi Street: "I felt a pang in my heart. We had gotten used to cars and suicide bombs, but I had a soft spot for al-Mutanabbi Street" (Antoon, 2013, p. 182). His emotional response to the violence, despite being accustomed to frequent bombings, shows that the street holds significance beyond that of a physical landmark. The attack on a place where he seeks refuge and knowledge represents not only physical destruction but also a constant assault on the community's shared heritage.

The novel also critiques how the renaming of significant places in Baghdad is political and affects Baghdadis' sense of identity and place. In an exchange between Jawad's uncle and a young man from Al-Thawra City, their dialogue reveals tensions between historical identity and forced political rebranding: "Then he asked the young man where he was from. 'Al-Thawra,' he answered. I teased him, saying 'You mean al-Sadr City.' 'No, dear, al-Thawra City'" (Antoon, 2013, p. 103). The insistence on the original name of the place reflects not only a personal commitment to the past but also a communal defiance against the imposition of new political identities that erase historical and cultural legacies. The renaming of places in Baghdad symbolises ideological conflicts within Iraqi society, where names bear the weight of political affiliations and historical allegiances. The conversation between Jawad's uncle and the young man highlights the ongoing resistance to sectarian and ideological impositions and the struggle over memory and identity in a city where names are charged with political power.

Many of Baghdad's devastated buildings and monuments mirror the disintegration of Jawad's dreams as an aspiring artist and sculptor. Inspired by the Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti, Jawad's deep artistic inclinations are nurtured by his art teacher, who emphasises Baghdad's rich artistic heritage and its historical role as a cradle of civilisation: "He said that our ancestors in Mesopotamia were the first to pose all these questions in their myths and in the epic of Gilgamesh, and that Iraq was the first and biggest art workshop in the world" (Antoon, 2013, p. 41). This remembrance of Baghdad's historic role and rich artistic legacy serves as a reminder of what has been lost, yet also what continues to define the city's spirit despite its current devastations. Reminders of Baghdad's grandeur persist in places like the Liberty Monument. Neglected and in disrepair, the monument is "a bit dirty, because of all the pollution and negligence. It looked like it desperately needed maintenance and restoration, but it still had that aura" (Antoon, 2013, p. 106). This blend of loss and hope suggests that even in ruins, Iraqis still hold hope for possible renewal and reconnection with their city.

Reclaiming Sense of Place through Polysensoriality

The polysensorial approach to literary works considers the ways fictional characters employ and engage with their surroundings to map their sense of place. *The Corpse Washer* is rich in polysensorial engagement with places through the senses of smell, sound, and textures of postwar Baghdad. From the outset, *The Corpse Washer* presents Baghdad primarily through the spatial violence inflicted upon the city. This includes violence in residential areas and streets that target civilians and innocent lives. Additionally, it portrays the psychological toll that Iraqis have to endure due to the atrocities around them.

The Corpse Washer introduces the Maghaysel, a washhouse for Muslim corpses, as a central spatial concept. Here, Jawad confronts the personal trauma of death firsthand after his brother Ammourey's demise during the Iraq-Iran War of the 1980s. Jawad's description of Maghaysel conjures up the theme of death to portray the environment of the washhouse:

The yellowish paint on the wall was peeling away because of the humidity from the washing. Father was sitting in the left corner of the side room on a wooden chair, listening to the radio. Death's traces—its scents and memories—were present in every inch of that place as if death were the real owner and Father merely an employee working for it and not for God, as he liked to think. (Antoon, 2013, p. 20)

This depiction highlights the polysensorial nature of Maghaysel, where the visual deterioration of the paint and the olfactory presence of death converge to create an atmosphere of decay. The auditory detail of the radio in the background adds a layer of normalcy against the omnipresence of death, which juxtaposes Jawad's father's everyday mundane activities with that of mortality. Jawad's reflection positions death not just as a physical occurrence but as a force that dominates the space, shapes his father's existence within it and challenges the spiritual convictions that aim to provide comfort and meaning. This "living" among the dead, which Jawad eventually, albeit reluctantly, accepts as his profession, reiterates death's pervasiveness in his everyday life.

According to geocriticism, smell, touch, and taste are intimate bodily senses that contribute to the structuring and definition of space. Maghaysel's peculiar smells evoke various feelings and memories within Jawad. His initial encounter with the place is punctuated by his olfactory sense: "It was a bit smaller than I had imagined. The scents of lotus and camphor wafted through the air, and I felt the humidity seeping into my skin" (Antoon, 2013, p. 23). The environment personalises Maghaysel for Jawad: the scents connect to his cultural and religious roots, while the mention of humidity in contact with his skin foreshadows his sensory immersion and eventual absorption into his family's profession.

Unlike the Maghaysel, dominated by constant reminders of mortality, art offers Jawad a sense of immortality and a creative escape. He views art as "intimately linked with immortality: a challenge to death and time, a celebration of life" (Antoon, 2013, p. 41). This belief fuels his hope to fill Baghdad's streets with his sculptures, where he dreams of his city being beautified by art rather than defaced by violence. However, as the American occupation and sectarian violence intensify, the distinction between public places like the cityscape and private spaces like the Maghaysel blurs. The Maghaysel, overwhelmed by the influx of bodies, mirrors Baghdad's overwhelming death, described by Jawad as "a colossal grave, except for a faint ray of light

filtering in from the tiny window” (Antoon, 2013, p. 77). Jawad’s aspirations for life-affirming art must contend with the decay and despair that surround him.

Jawad flees to Jordan temporarily to escape the familial career of washing corpses and pursue a new life as a visual artist. However, establishing himself as a sculptor proves challenging. Eventually, he returns home, finding no viable means to support himself and his mother other than corpse washing. Upon his return to the Maghaysel after a long absence, Jawad is struck again by its familiar scent. Jawad notes how the scent overpowers him and wonders how “some places can retain the same smell for decades” (Antoon, 2013, p. 142). The smell, a mixture of humidity, camphor, and lotus, revives the memory of his late father and his family’s profession, and the responsibility of carrying on his family’s legacy as a corpse washer.

Another important place for Jawad in the novel is Lake Sawa, a small lake in Southern Iraq. When Jawad visits with his friend Basim, he is struck by the lake’s serene beauty and the unique natural formations along its shores:

The road we were walking on was sloped, and I could see the calm surface of the lake. We stood at the edge... The lake’s beauty was gripping... Its shore was covered with calcifications that looked like cauliflowers with cavities carved by the salts that filled the lake’s waters, forming a wall on all sides. (Antoon, 2013, p. 69)

This visual appreciation is complemented by a tactile moment, where Jawad touches the cold water, drawing a parallel to his work as a corpse washer: “I extended my hand to dip it in the water. It was as cold as the water I applied now to the body of this man who looked like Basim’s twin” (Antoon, 2013, p. 69). The polysensorial ways in which Jawad engages with Lake Sawa provide a counterpoint to the violence and decay depicted in Baghdad. The lake offers Jawad emotional and existential reflection and sensory reprieve. This scene illustrates the continuity between life and death, rather than a binary opposition, through nature’s cycle—from the shore’s calcifications to Jawad’s tactile association of the lake with the maghaysel. These elements serve as intermediaries in Jawad’s efforts to (re)gain his sense of place.

Sawa Lake is a unique body of water in Iraq, notable for its lack of river access. Its only source is subterranean water. As Basim describes it poetically: “It was the same spring from which water had burst forth when the flood covered the earth in Noah’s time. Then the water receded, and what was left became Sawa” (Antoon, 2013, p. 68). Locally known as the Pearl of the South, the salty Sawa Lake is reputed for its mineral-rich waters used for medicinal purposes. For some Shiites, the drying up of the lake is seen as a sign of the imminent appearance of Imam al-Mahdi, a descendant of Prophet Mohammad, prophesied to emerge after centuries of absence to fill the world with justice. This has led people to believe the lake’s dryness is a matter of faith (Abu Zeed, 2022). The discussion of Sawa Lake ties into ancient stories and current religious beliefs, much like the mention of Mesopotamia by Jawad’s art teacher, which links Jawad’s artistic journey to Iraq’s historical significance as a center of ancient civilisation. Both instances use historical and mythological references to frame contemporary experiences, which position Jawad as an individual and Iraqis at a communal level in a continual and connective relationship with their past and present.

Sacred Iraqi cities play a vital role in *The Corpse Washer*, particularly highlighted through Jawad's memories of visiting places such as Baghdad, Samarra, Karbala, and Najaf. In particular, the golden shrine of Imam Hassan Askari in Samarra, north of Baghdad, provokes a polysensorial response and memory in Jawad. This shrine is considered sacred for Shiite Muslims in Iraq. Jawad recalls accompanying his mother on visits to the shrines. Jawad's experiences at the shrine of Imam Hassan Askari in Samarra exemplify how sacred places inform individual senses and emotions, alleviate feelings of alienation and reconnect people with their cultural and spiritual roots. His repeated visits to the shrine, a place of significant religious importance where Imam Mahdi is believed to have entered occultation, evoke a complex mix of awe, sadness, and comfort. As Jawad describes, "I had felt awe and sadness when I was inside it and could still see my mother crying as she held on to the golden window surrounding the mausoleum" (Antoon, 2013, p. 150). These visits, particularly in his youth, enrich his personal connection to the place and reinforce his sense of belonging to a community bound by shared faith and history.

The tactile experience of the cold window pressing against his cheek as he stays close to his mother amidst the crowds adds a physical dimension to his emotional memories (Antoon, 2013, p. 150). This experience aligns with Bernard Westphal's concept of haptic geographies in geocriticism. Westphal (2007) suggests that "haptic geographies might emerge from the tactile impressions of a person struck blind like Oedipus, or they might be erotic, as with hands touching the lover in the dark like Psyche" (p. 135). For Jawad, the touch of the cold window merges sensory perception with emotional resonance, accentuating the shrine not only as a religious site but also as a space of personal and collective mourning and reverence. Moreover, Jawad recalls the place as filled with "oceans of healthy people, people on crutches and wheelchairs walking around the tomb of their spiritual symbol and leader" (Antoon, 2013, p. 150). Here, people's connection to the sacred space transcends physical differences, and in their physical proximity to the shrine, they also attempt to reconnect with the spiritual dimension of places in Baghdad. Such a scene suggests that reconnecting with the city and maintaining cultural continuity and community solidarity could also be made possible through continuous spiritual endeavours.

Another sacred place that Jawad explores through his senses is the Imam Musa Al Kadhimi shrine. Jawad visits the shrine to seek healing, ask for forgiveness of his sins, and fulfill his spiritual needs. Jawad, along with millions of Shiite Muslims in Iraq, believes that their religious identity does not contradict their national identity. The extent to which Shiite Muslims depend on an ethno-sectarian background to advocate their political voice is a reaction to the ethno-sectarian groundwork that had long rendered them voiceless. There is little evidence that their identity as Shiite Muslims undermines their sense of belonging or allegiance to the multiconfessional Iraqi state (Al Mawlawi, 2022). In this regard, many Shiites believe that their sense of belonging to their country is intertwined with their sense of belonging to the holy shrines in Iraq.

Jawad's aspiration to become an artist and his appreciation for great works of architecture, like those of Giacometti, enrich his interaction with the sacred architecture of the Imam Musa Al Kadhimi shrine. As he approaches Baghdad from the north, the visual impact of the shrine's golden minarets and domes underlines his deep connection to artistic beauty and architectural grandeur. He provides an intimate and vivid description of his visit to the shrine:

The two golden domes and four minarets glittered under the chains of lights, which linked them like tiny bridges. The light emanating from the shrine lit the sky. We parted at the iron fence, and my mother went to the women's entrance... The green neon lights at the top of the gate illuminated the engravings and verses adorning the arch of the door. (Antoon, 2013, p. 189)

For Jawad, the shrine was the best place to seek calmness and pray, as it provided him with a sense of peace in his daily life before the war. The power of colourful lights inside the shrine rekindles the artist within him, and he appreciates the architectural features of the shrine with the discernment of a sculptor:

I looked at the white marble walls and the ornaments and arabesques on the ceiling. I crossed through the golden gate to the courtyard of the mosque. There were hundreds of men and boys, all wearing black. Many crowded around the gates leading to the mausoleum. It looked impossible to gain entrance, and the crowd barely moved. (Antoon, 2013, p. 190)

Westphal (2011) suggests that a colourful landscape, presenting a visual space, reflects a person's tone and meaning. Jawad's visual descriptions of the shrine convey his sense of belonging, merging with the throng of visitors. The predominant use of black in the attire of men and women, a colour that denotes grief and mourning in Iraq, amplifies Jawad's visual experience. This suggests that the visitors' traumatic pasts, linked to the long history of Shia suffering dating back to the martyrdom of Prophet Muhammad's grandson in Karbala, resonate with their challenging present.

Despite the novel's rather bleak ending, the shift in its narrative—from Jawad's attempt to flee Iraq to his eventual return to it and the Maghaysel—is underscored by an emphasis on the rearticulation of his artistic pursuit, one which acknowledges that life and death are “conjoined, sculpting each other” (Antoon, 2013, p. 205) rather than separate. Towards the end, the narrative again recalls the Mesopotamian creation myth, sensory-rich in its sequence of actions and materials—gods labouring, mud drawn from deep waters, clay shaped by divine hands, and the blending of blood and earth—all of which are foundational, sacrificial ingredients. The polysensorial nature of this creation story reflects Jawad's own connection to the physicality of life and death in Baghdad. Jawad's work as a corpse washer, through a tactile, olfactory, and visual immersion in death, resembles this mythic process of creation. The Maghaysel, like the gods' realm in the myth, is a space where flesh and spirit converge and where Jawad repeatedly re-enacts this ancient ritual of handling bodies and washing away the marks of death. By doing so, he is bound to his city and its people in the way the myth describes: “eternally united in clay” (Antoon, 2013, p. 203). Despite his surroundings, the association between his work and an ancient creation process offers him spiritual and emotional continuity, which reiterates his sense of belonging to Baghdad's legacy as a living embodiment of an enduring civilization.

Conclusion

This study, grounded in Bertrand Westphal's geocritical approach, analyses the representation of postwar Baghdad in Sinan Antoon's *The Corpse Washer*, focusing on how the protagonist Jawad exerts his sense of place in a polysensorial way. While the altered urban landscapes of Baghdad, transformed by the war's devastation, have impacted Jawad's experiences of the city, his polysensorial interactions help him both mitigate the trauma of loss and violence and reconnect with his surroundings. By engaging with Baghdad through its smells, sounds, and textures, Jawad confronts and resists the war's erasure of personal and collective histories. Like the pomegranate tree, which symbolically intertwines life and death, Jawad endures amidst Baghdad's ruins. Through Westphal's concept of polysensoriality, *The Corpse Washer* can be read as both a depiction of the Iraq War's impact on Baghdad and its people and an illustration of how its characters reclaim their sense of belonging to the city.

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