

Spatial Space and Its Representations in Abu Ishaq al-Khuraymi's Poem "Baghdad": A Reading of the Presence–Absence Duality

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Abstract:

Space holds an essential value in the minds of many, as it transcends the geographical framework to encompass cultural, social, and human values that contribute to the expression of the self. The disappearance or destruction of a place creates a sense of disorder within the soul, while longing for it continually draws one back to the past and allows the imagination to wander far away in an attempt to reconstruct it anew. With an imagination burdened by concerns, one seeks to compare it with the present place. For Abu Ishaq al-Khuraymi, yearning for that place and lamenting its loss assumed an idealized form through his exaggerated descriptions, to the extent that he portrayed it as a paradise from which he had been forcibly expelled, where life resembled that of kings, marked by comfort, prosperity, and happiness. Spatial space constitutes an effective element in poetic discourse, particularly in the poem "Baghdad". It served as a source of inspiration for the poet in creating noteworthy images that seek to evoke and find solace in the past, describe and mourn the present, and aspire to explore and contemplate the image of the future.

Keywords: space, place, time, images, presence, absence.

1. Introduction

The linguistic and critical concepts that seek to define the notion of "space" are numerous, as its meaning has fragmented into several related notions, including place, emptiness, area, and void. However, in this study, we attempt to relate it to the concept of "place", understood as an expanse of land defined within a clear geographical framework and spatial structure, and to examine its manifestation in poetic discourse. In both its geographical and semantic dimensions, place occupies a significant position in poetic creativity, as it embodies the psychological, social, and cultural being of poets. Through the eloquence of expression and the power of imagery, poets have sought to evoke place in their poetic works by lamenting and elegizing it. The loss of their homeland and country generated diverse images that stimulate the reader's imagination, whether through recollection, description, or exploration, within the duality of presence and absence and between the temporal dimensions of past and present.

Accordingly, this paper seeks to address the following problematics:

If the concept of space encompasses multiple meanings, can these meanings be brought together through the images in which they are manifested in poetic discourse? How are they represented

in Abu Ishaq al-Khuraymi's poem "Baghdad"? Does the duality of spatial presence and absence carry psychological and social significance produced by the prevailing political situation? Or does it transcend this context to generate multiple meanings, thereby producing images of spatial space with diverse and even contradictory dimensions?

To answer these questions, we will examine spatial space and the images through which it is manifested in al-Khuraymi's lament for Baghdad, focusing on his evocation of its original image, his exaggeration in describing it, and its contemporary image as portrayed through a careful depiction that contrasts the present with the past.

2. Spatial Space and the Duality of Geographical and Semantic Dimensions

Grasping a unified concept of space is elusive and fluid in meaning; one may capture it momentarily only for it to slip away repeatedly. This is because the difference between "space" and "place" is the difference between the whole and the part. In Arabic, "space" is used to denote "that which extends broadly over the land" (Ibn Manzur, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 343). The French, however, employed the term "espace" (space), meaning emptiness or expanse, instead of referring to the specific location where an event takes place (Azzam, 2005, p. 66). Thus, space is a broad concept with diverse semantic dimensions and dispersed components, while place constitutes one part of this larger space, which is, "from a philosophical perspective, prior to places, since it possesses a precedence that makes it exist beforehand. There is space first, and then places emerge to occupy a position within it. 'Places are islands in space,' individual essences, separate microcosms within space" (Najmi, 2000, p. 44).

Spatial space is therefore defined as a component that is both connected to and separate from this comprehensive and all-encompassing space. In elegies of cities, the poet focuses on place in its geographical dimension, as a witness to events and a setting for wars and conflicts. Through it, the poet "provides a minimum of geographical references that merely constitute a starting point for stimulating the reader's imagination or for undertaking systematic explorations of places" (Lahmadani, 2000, p. 153). Through these geographical references, diverse images of place are explored within a temporal sequence based on the narration of events.

From all of this, it may be inferred that spatial space is "the spatial domain of narration, commonly referred to as geographical space ("Espace géographique")" (Lahmadani, 2000, p. 153). However, it can only become an effective element in poetic discourse when associated with another form of space related to figurative imagery, namely semantic space ("Espace sémantique"). This space is established through the interaction between the figurative signification and the literal signification, and is referred to as the "figure", which is "the form assumed by space, the thing to which language itself gives being; indeed, it is the symbol of the spatiality of literary language in its relation to meaning" (Lahmadani, 2000, p. 61).

Thus, Gérard Genette drew attention to an important element in literary works, and particularly in poetry: figurative language in its various forms. It is through figurative expression that place acquires geographical, expressive, artistic, and aesthetic significance.

3. The Aesthetics of Creative Expression in Recovering the Absent Place

The absent place through its geographical structure, its original features, and its fragmented significations manifests its presence and is recalled in classical poetic discourse through the motif of standing before ruins and lamenting loved ones. In the Abbasid period, this developed into an independent poetic theme and artistic genre embodied in elegies of cities and vanished kingdoms. Place constituted an essential element in human life; for centuries, the loss of a place or the disappearance of some of its defining features and former image rendered life devoid of meaning. The image of loss often generates representations tinged with bitterness and the gloom of existence. For this reason, place has always stirred individuals' emotions and sentiments, while also serving as a source of inspiration for poets and a wellspring of their artistic creativity. Such creativity "acquires its human dimension only through the interweaving of the elements of experience, particularly in its spatio-temporal dimension. To the extent that the writer is conscious of the reality he lives in and aware of the nature of its conflicts and relationships, his intellectual position toward it becomes clear, and his philosophy of artistic expression is determined" (Blouhi, n.d., p. 74).

The destruction, devastation, and ruin that befell certain Iraqi cities during the Abbasid era caused place to transcend its function as a mere geographical setting. It came to embody human, social, cultural, and religious belonging.

Place could not be present in poetic discourse without being accompanied by time, the two forming an inseparable and interconnected unity. Because of this association, "many poets borrow expressions denoting time in order to express place" (Blouhi, n.d., p. 74), or employ terms denoting place to signify time, as though they were two sides of the same coin. One cannot be mentioned without implicitly invoking the other, even when it is not explicitly named. Nevertheless, each retains its own distinctive characteristics. "Time is perceived indirectly through its effect on things, whereas place is perceived sensorially, beginning with the human experience of the body: this body as 'place,' or, in other words, the repository of the psychological, intellectual, emotional, and instinctive forces of the living being" (Aqaq, n.d., p. 259).

Time, therefore, represents events and is perceived psychologically; its mode of presentation in poetic discourse is narration. Place, on the other hand, generally denotes the specific framework within which events occur, is perceived sensorially, and is presented through description. Through the parallelism between time and place, we will focus on the latter as an important space that occupies a significant position in poetic creativity through its ability to shape images that unite past and present within the duality of presence and absence.

References to absent or metaphorically "dead" places in classical poetic discourse constitute a recovery of their image and architectural form as they existed in reality or in the poet's imagination. Nostalgia restores them to life within the memory of the past, elevating them into magnificent architectural and structural images. The poet then speaks of them in the third person "How were they?" before returning the reader to places that are alive in the present yet have lost their brilliance and radiance, appearing instead as images of destruction and ruin.

We have termed the absent place of the past the "dead" place because lamentation is directed only toward the dead. Indeed, architecture, urban prosperity, well-being, justice, and peace have all perished. In their place has emerged another reality: a landscape of rubble, destruction, hardship, and oppression. Thus, it may be said that everything belonging to the past has "died,"

whereas everything belonging to the present is “alive,” carrying all the meanings of loss and suffering implied by this symbolism.

If we attempt to apply the categories of place proposed by Ghālib Halasā in literary works, we find that place in Abu Ishaq al-Khuraymi’s poem “Baghdad” may be defined through three forms of place (Azzam, 2005, p. 65):

- **Place as lived experience:** a place capable of evoking memories in the reader. It is generally associated with the past, a place that has become a ruin and whose image is later recovered through the recollection of the past.
- **Metaphorical place:** a place that serves as the stage for events and complements them. It is characterized by passivity and submission, is associated with the present, and remains alive through its suffering and subjugation.
- **The upper place:** a place elevated in rank, through which the poet rises toward “the anticipation of an unseen place” (Azzam, 2005, p. 61). Through it, events are projected in advance, and it may be either a place of comfort or a place of torment.

4. Spatial Space and Its Images between Presence and Absence

In his elegy for Baghdad, Abu Ishaq al-Khuraymi’s lament transcends the boundaries of houses, dwellings, and palaces to become, first and foremost, an elegy for the self and, secondly, for the other. This is because, according to Gaston Bachelard, “the intimate place is a metaphor for the self, and any aggression directed against it is considered an aggression against the self” (Aqq, n.d., p. 259). The wars that disfigured the beauty of Baghdad left a profound impact on the poet’s psyche, generating feelings of sorrow and grief and awakening in him a sense of nostalgia through which he sought to recover his personal memories and those associated with the people among whom he lived and interacted.

His lament thus evolved spontaneously from a ritualistic form into a creative expression, producing an enlarged image of mourning for Baghdad in both its geographical and semantic dimensions, situated within the duality of presence and absence.

The presence of place, in its semantic and geographical dimensions, acquires greater effectiveness in Baghdad as a means of shaping images that express the poet’s psychological, social, and cultural being. In his elegy for Baghdad, place assumes three significant images that stimulate the reader’s imagination, either through their evocation or through their exploration.

4.1. The Image of the Ideal Place

Place possesses an essential value in the minds of many, extending beyond the geographical framework to encompass its connection with the expression of the self through cultural, social, and human values. The disappearance or destruction of a place creates a sense of disorder within the soul, while longing for it continually draws one back to the past and allows the imagination to wander far away in an attempt to reconstruct it anew. Burdened by concerns, the imagination seeks to compare it with the present place.

For Abbasid poets, yearning for that place and lamenting its loss assumed an idealized form through their exaggerated descriptions, to the extent that they portrayed it as a paradise from which they had been forcibly expelled and in which they had lived a life of royal comfort, prosperity, and happiness. The place that was destroyed thus becomes an ideal place,

unparalleled and irreplaceable, for it is depicted as an earthly paradise that has been annihilated and an eternal happiness that has been taken away.

Abu Ishaq al-Khuraymi says (al-Tabari, n.d., p. 76):

They said: Has Time not toyed with Baghdad,	And have its misfortunes not stumbled upon it?
When it was like a bride, whose inner being	Was opened to the youth, while her outward appearance shone in beauty.
A paradise of eternity and a blessed abode,	Rarely visited by the blows of calamity.
The fortunes of the world poured forth upon its inhabitants,	And hardship and adversity were seldom found therein.
Its people dwelt in a fresh and flourishing garden,	Whose splendor shone brightly after the rain fall.
Whoever was deceived by life amid such ease and delight,	As though a world whose prosperity would endure forever.
An abode of kings whose foundations stood firm,	Where their thrones were established and their pulpits secure.
The people of nobility, generosity, and assemblies of glory,	Whenever its distinctions and virtues were enumerated.
The offspring of prosperity, heirs to a kingdom,	Whose bonds had been strengthened by its great men.

Al-Khuraymi portrays Baghdad as an ideal place without equal. How could it be otherwise when it is depicted as a paradise whose blessings were abundant, whose lights shone brightly, and whose life was filled with comfort and prosperity? Baghdad is likened to a bride in her beauty, adornment, and splendor. If a woman displays her ornaments only on special occasions, Baghdad's adornment is permanent; thus, it surpasses the bride in its charm and allure. Its blessings are equally manifest in both its outward and inward aspects, in its nights and its days, captivating minds and hearts at all times.

How could it not be so when it is portrayed as a paradise free from distress, calamities, and hardship, a place of bliss, pleasures, and abundant living? Such qualities belong only to the promised Garden of Eden. The poet thus evokes an image of Baghdad that may be regarded as highly idealized. In reality, Baghdad was not a paradise for everyone; the abundance enjoyed by the wealthy often corresponded to the hunger of the poor, and extravagance and luxury existed alongside poverty and need. In sum, a life of prosperity coexisted with a life of hardship. However, the horrors and destruction that befell Baghdad erased these distinctions. Whoever lost a humble hut in those conflicts suffered a loss comparable to that of one who lost a palace. The loss of security and peace became the calamity shared by all. This is what makes the image of Baghdad appear as a paradise of eternity from which its people were forcibly expelled. For the possessor of a blessing rarely appreciates its value until it is lost; only then does what once seemed ordinary reveal itself to be a precious treasure and a priceless jewel.

This is precisely what the image of Baghdad signifies as it is recalled in a vivid descriptive scene: a place that, at the very least, may be described as an ideal place without equal.

4.2. The Image of Place Between Two Temporal Dimensions

As previously noted, place and time occupy a position of great importance in creative works, and their effectiveness lies in generating artistic images with human and aesthetic dimensions. Place and time often “express an existential stance that transcends the limits of the physical realm toward the boundlessness of knowledge, through which the creator conveys a particular moment characterized by an eternal duality that is both tragic and optimistic” (Blouhi, n.d., p. 74).

In elegies of cities, we frequently encounter this tragic dimension of the destroyed place as a geographical space to which the poet returns at the moment of shock in the present. Time is what guides us in exploring places between “here” and “there,” between the present and the past. Through it, the presumed existence of the literary text is realized “an act whose accomplishment resembles a musical composition, in that it consists of a succession of moments that attain completion through duration, within our own duration” (Najmi, 2000, p. 67).

The aesthetic appreciation of both literary and poetic texts can only be achieved through “temporality”, which imposes itself through narration within the text, “for narrative and language recognize only a semiological time, whereas real time is merely a referential or realistic illusion” (Najmi, 2000, p. 67).

The various patterns of time that frequently appear in elegiac poetry devoted to cities reveal different spatial configurations, which may either correspond to one another or stand in opposition. Moreover, “the temporal patterns in poetry are generally determined by three types” (Azzam, 2005, p. 105), which may be outlined as follows:

- **Ascending Time:** This is the temporal pattern in which events progress upward through the act of narration and the succession of scenes.
- **Discontinuous Time:** This is realized through narration, which may either move forward or revert backward in its course; in other words, it involves a transition from the present to the past and then a return from the past to the present.
- **Descending Time:** This occurs in narration through a return to memories, whereby the movement is from the present back to the past.

From this classification, it can be noted that the temporal pattern employed by the poet in city elegies is a “discontinuous time”. At times, he returns to the past to evoke the original place within a descending temporal pattern; at other times, he returns to the present in order to describe the image of the transformed place within an ascending temporal pattern. This is done so as to compel the reader (the recipient) to rely on imagination in order to visualize two different architectural images of the same place between construction and destruction, in both the past and the present.

Abū Ishāq al-Khuraymī states (al-Ṭabarī, n.d., p. 76):

Have you ever seen gardens in full bloom,	Whose flourishing beauty delights the discerning eye?
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Have you ever seen palaces standing open,	Their chambers sheltering maidens like delicate dolls?
Have you ever seen the villages whose estates	Were planted, their farms lush and verdant?
Surrounded by vineyards, palm trees, and sweet basil,	So abundant that even birds could scarcely exhaust their yield?
Yet they have now become deserted of human beings,	Their very eye sockets bloodied with grief.
Barren and desolate wastelands where dogs howl,	And where the visitor no longer recognizes their traces.
Misery has become their constant companion,	Familiar to them, while joy has abandoned them
In Zandaward, al-Yāsiriyyah, and along the two riverbanks,	Where their crossings once came to an end.
And in Turlaḥī and Upper al-Khayzurāniyyah,	Over which their bridges once overlooked.
And the Palace of ‘Abdawayh remains a lesson and an admonition	For every soul whose inner conscience is pure.

Al-Khuraymī pauses, addressing the present reality before him, only to return with it to the past and evoke the image of Baghdad in its splendor, prosperity, and abundance. He then brings it back to the tragedy of the present before his eyes, as though he were speaking to a witness of Baghdad’s beauty, asking him to replace the former image with another one marked by devastation and ruin that he had never had the opportunity to behold.

The question that arises, then, is: whom is al-Khuraymī addressing? Is he speaking to a dead person? To a blind man who has lost his sight? To an emigrant who left Baghdad? Or is he addressing the past itself, which embodies his own self and being? For “time, in its extension between the present and the past, represents nothing but disappointment” (“The Structure of Poetic Discourse”, 1986, p. 167), as well as the pain resulting from the shock experienced by the poet due to the violation of Baghdad’s sanctity and sacredness by the followers of al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn. They turned it upside down, reducing its urban prosperity to heaps of dust and its inhabitants to piles of flesh and corpses.

The present state to which Baghdad has been reduced is the product of an absent time that conceals the historical events behind this distorted picture of the city. This compels the poet constantly to turn toward the past. He does not wish to see what has become of Baghdad; he rejects reality and refuses to believe it. Instead, he continually sails through his imagination and dreams toward the realm of his memories and longings, for it is a feeling that “penetrates the depths of the soul and adheres to its original and innate patterns. Returning to the past possesses a psychological dimension that is intimately connected to the inner self and the depths of human existence” (‘Aqāq, n.d., p. 303).

The poet deliberately returns to the past in order to evoke the image of Baghdad as a city of “construction and prosperity”, and to contrast it with the present image of Baghdad as a city of “destruction and ruin”. He does so through an abstract dimension that engages the reader (the recipient) in the act of comparison and contrast. Al-Khuraymī takes us from one place to another

and transports us from one image to another within the framework of time, “for migration from one place to another cannot arise except within the framework of time” (“The Structure of Poetic Discourse”, 1986, p. 170). In this way, he draws for us two different images of the same place “Baghdad” between urban flourishing and rubble, across two distinct temporal dimensions: the past and the present.

This interweaving of places within the poem, at the moments of present and past time, constitutes an expression of disturbance and fragmentation between the worlds of these places and their connotations between wakefulness and dream, turmoil and tranquility, fear and reassurance. Such “spatial multiplicity and interpenetration can only be embodied through a refined artistic image that approaches the boundaries of dream and is governed by the dialectic of the inner and the outer” (‘Aqāq, n.d., p. 284).

Thus, the image of place between two temporal dimensions depicts the action of time as it accompanies narration. Through dream and imagination, the poet moves toward a past that he knew, loved, and to which he was deeply attached, and toward a present that has shocked him a present he rejects and in which he does not wish to live. The poet remains bound by an “umbilical connection” between two temporal realms: the image of Baghdad with its prosperity, construction, and beauty, and the image of Baghdad with its destruction, rubble, and devastation. The latter is his pain, while the former was his hope.

5. Conclusion

Discussing spatiality in classical poetic discourse entails psychological, social, and political dimensions associated with places that were affected by various circumstances across different periods of time. Although the causes may have differed, they shared a common outcome: the disappearance of the place’s original features and structure, replaced instead by ruin, with traces and remnants bearing witness to its former existence.

Between the recovery of its image and the act of standing before its ruins, the representations of place emerged and their features varied between past and present. The absent place appears as an idealized space without equal, while the present place is laden with the meanings generated through description and imagery. Thus, the image of Baghdad is revealed in contradictory and opposing forms, shaped by the coordinates of time within the scene of presence and absence.

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