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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A symbolic reading of "Whatsitsname" in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the monster known as "Whatsitsname" in Ahmed Saadawi's (2013) novel Frankenstein in Baghdad. The paper argues that the monster symbolizes the basic unity of the Iraqi nation and represents a spokesperson for all the people who were victims of violence in the modern history of Iraq. It maintains that, as the plot develops in the novel, Whatsitsname turns into a symbol of political and sectarian conflicts that Iraq experienced after the American invasion of the country started in 2003. Although the monster's early intention is to restore justice, he creates more suspicion, fear, and killing. Thus, the study contends that by developing the character of Whatsitsname, Saadawi suggests that the American invasion of Iraq contributed to creating further political and sectarian divisions in the community and ultimately a vicious cycle of violence. It further argues that, through the monster's portrayals, the author urges all Iraqis from different political, social, and moral backgrounds to go beyond variation, as this is the way to achieve peace and to restore stability.

KEYWORDS

Ahmad Saadawi, Frankenstein in Baghdad, sectarian conflict, Whatsitsname

ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

Ahmed Saadawi's (2013) *Frankenstein in Baghdad* received the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2014. Saadawi portrays a vivid image of the devastating situation in Iraq during the American invasion that started in 2003. He draws horrific pictures of wars, terrorist attacks, abductions, suicide bombings, and improvised explosive devices that destroyed the streets of Baghdad, Iraq's capital city. In the novel, death looms everywhere in Baghdad's streets, aimlessly chasing people and disrupting family bonds. Due to the endless chain of violence, the victims of violent attacks become mere statistics. In this context, Annie Webster (2018) argues that Saadawi's novel "confronts readers with the body parts of Iraqi civilians who did not survive the violence that permeated post-2003 Iraq and whose remains, left unidentified and unburied on the streets of Baghdad, do not seem to be valued" (p. 445).

According to Saadawi, he was not only inspired by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), but also "the vast cultural space that is called 'Frankenstein'" (Najjar, 2014). This statement suggests that what influenced him was the metaphoric legacy of Frankenstein. In addition, he indicates that he "was a massive fan of the 1994 film *Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*" (Hankir, 2018).

Saadawi's novel primarily revolves around Frankenstein as a creation of Hadi, the novel's protagonist. Hadi's intention of creating Whatsitsname is to collect the body parts of the victims of the bombings and give them a proper and fitting burial instead of them being scattered around the city of Baghdad. Yet the creature comes to life to represent the chaotic political situation in Iraq in the aftermath of the American invasion.

This paper argues that this monster, Whatsitsname, represents all religious and ethnic groups of Iraqi society; such a symbol condemns the failure of both the American forces and the Iraqi government, who are supposed to be responsible for maintaining security, curbing the violence, and establishing peace in Iraq. Frankenstein stands as a symbol of unity that is achieved through pain and suffering. Yet, as the plot develops, the monster turns into a symbol of the political and sectarian division in the country. Ultimately, Whatsitsname reflects the chaotic situation and the endless chain of violence that emerge as a consequence of the overlapping reasons throughout the history of Iraq.

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2. Literature Review

According to Hani Elayyan (2017), *Frankenstein in Baghdad* "tells the story of the violence that erupted after the occupation and seeks to investigate the reason for the increase in violence and terrorism in the years that followed the occupation" (p. 159). Elayyan contends that the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 created a chaotic situation that led to violence and fear.

According to Salam Mir in his 2019 study titled "Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Globalization, and Arab Culture," the colonial entities in the Arab world, including Iraq, have always shaped Arab history as they continue to influence their affairs through the persistence of conflict and patterns of control and resistance. Iraqi writer and intellectual Sinan Antoon pointed out that even after the American invasion of Iraq, that would inevitably lead to a "chaotic and catastrophic" postcolonialism. Antoon worked on a documentary that is basically an archival record of real Iraqi voices and stories of the trauma and turmoil people experienced post-invasion. *About Baghdad* (Antoon et al., 2004) documents "Iraqis who have been silenced by Saddam Hussein and re-silenced by the American invasion" and concludes with "a people who are tired, traumatized, and uncertain about their future, and yet, are determined and united in seeking to build a strong nation for its people" (Mir, 2023, p. 51).

In "The Repercussions of Sectarian Violence in Post-Invasion Iraq: The Implementation of Fanon's National Culture in Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*", Altaai (2003) provides a framework on how post-invasion has led to "cultural estrangement, moral degeneration, and sectarian trauma in Iraq. It has been suggested that the colonizing entity's main strategy is undermining the social cohesion in Iraq. As the novel's events unfold and the various characters in the novel are introduced, the possibility for a united, clear identity of the Iraqi citizen coexisting with fellow citizens regardless of the religious differences seems impossible. According to Altaai, Saadawi demonstrates the failure and fragility of the Iraqi state in preserving national security and presents it as an accomplice in the degeneration of morals, values, and ethics among Iraqis (Altaai, 2003, pp. 43-44). That is precisely what happens to a variety of characters in the novel, such as Mahmood Swadii, the journalist who initially pursues the truth but, after facing temptation from his friends, ends up leading a life of moral deviation, losing track of his purpose and indulging in worldly pleasures such as alcohol and sex, believing it to be the "freedom they want to enjoy." This decline in morality is a predicted result of the occupation; moreover, it is also evident in the monster, as he strays away from his main purpose of seeking revenge and restoring justice and unity and indulges in murdering innocent people.

Furthermore, in Awajan's (year) study "Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in the Time of COVID-19: A Postmodern Reading," the psychological devastation and hopelessness that are evident in the conditions of Iraqis living post-invasion are parallel to those conditions experienced globally during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is not only striking in resemblance but also allows a closer understanding of the psychological state of Iraqis post-invasion. It also provides a new lens in understanding the mission and significance of Whatsitsname in the novel. As Awajan mentions, Saadawi is quoted through the words of Frankenstein: "I am the answer to their call for an end to injustice and for revenge on the guilty...I will take revenge on all the criminals. I will finally bring about justice on earth..." (Saadawi, 2013, p. 143).

In the study of Shaban and Awajan titled "Characterization of Death in Ahmad Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Margaret Edson's *Wit,*" the monster is considered the focus of the entire plot and is treated as a character on its own, representing death and inflicting it on Iraqi civilians, regardless of their innocence. It is argued that the monster's loss of identity reflects death itself, because the monster is always referred to without a specific name. (Shaban, Awajan, 68). This symbolic identity loss that is implied in the study through the monster also correlates with the apparent and fragmented post-invasion loss of identity of the Iraqi citizen. This suggests that the monster, himself a character of death, is essential in creating a united identity of the Iraqi citizen post-invasion. Furthermore, only through destruction could the true identity of the Iraqi people be formed, as death happens to be the common denominator between all diverse religious and ethnic sects.

Making use of the previous accounts, this study contends that the monster is the ideal representation of all Iraqis, despite their beliefs, values, differences, and the way they want to take back what is taken from them. More specifically, the monster is the only entity that did not belong to a tribe or have a religious or political affiliation. Nevertheless, it still exposes underlying divisions that are deeply rooted in political views and sectarian differences.

3. Discussion

Ahmed Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* begins by describing the state of sectarian conflict and security breakdown that the people of the *batawyīn* area of Baghdad experience. It is rather important in this regard to mention that the *batawyīn* area reflects the diversity of Iraqi communities in terms of its inhabitants and its history. Khoury (2016) argues that "to write the history of cities at war is to move from national narrative to one focused on urban communities." While the *batawyīn* area used to signify diversity and liveliness, it has become a symbol of devastation, fragmentation, and political failure. Therefore, it is presented in the novel as a microcosm of Iraq.

Hadi, a junk dealer and antique collector, describes stitching together a corpse made of different body parts: the remains of victims of terrorist attacks. Hadi explains that his goal was to create a human-like body that would denounce the government's inability to curb violence in the city. In addition is his willingness to prove that the victims of terrorist attacks

are real people who deserve a dignified burial, not mere sets of dismembered body parts. When analyzing the character of the monster from the biological point of view and how its various body parts were collected from a number of dead bodies, we find that the composition represents all the different groups of Iraqi society. However, in the novel, the monster ends up ravaging through Baghdad, committing murder according to his own moral standards while preserving himself, which, in a way, mirrors the acts of the government itself, and thus the monster has failed at achieving justice.

Made of different body parts from different bodies, the monster in the novel represents the Iraqi community in the aftermath of the American invasion of the country in 2003; the stitched parts of the dead victims from bombing incidents represent a nation of multiple identities. As one can notice, the characters have diverse backgrounds: Sunni, Shiite, Christian, rich, and poor, among others. Such a collective image mirrors the diversity of Iraqi society. Bakhtin (1984) notes, "Manifestations of this life refer not to the isolated biological individual, not to the private, egotistic 'economic man,' but to the collective ancestral body of all the people" (p. 19). In this sense, Whatsitsname does not represent an isolated, self-contained individual but rather a shared history, collective trauma and pain, and communal concerns. For Saadawi, Whatsitsname "is the mirror image of us as a whole" (East, 2018, para. 12). As such, it explains Whatsitsname's statement: "[I am] 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" (Saadawi, 2014, pp. 146–147). Whatsitsname states, "I'm the model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce" (Saadawi, 2014, p. 146). Statements like these can be seen as a call from Whatsitsname to the Iraqi people urging them to go beyond sectarian and social boundaries and to maintain social cohesion. Moreover, it can also be seen as an urging to overcome all the destruction that was caused by foreign military intervention and to endeavor to restore justice, political reformation, and freedom.

Commenting on the issue of Iraqi identity in the aftermath of the American invasion of the country, Saadawi says, "I wanted to shed light on several issues with this book ... One [issue] was the paradox of identity diversity in Iraq and how people understand themselves. All my characters are from different backgrounds" (Hankir, 2019). This is easily noticeable in the novel, and, indeed, the *batawyīn* is highly significant. Many characters in the *batawyīn* come from diverse origins. Furthermore, most of the incidents take place in this area. It is here in the *batawyīn*, after all, where the main character, Hadi, lives and where the monster evolves. The residents of the neighborhood include Abu Salim, his wife Umm Salim, Abu Anwar, Aziz the Egyptian, Faraj the realtor, and Elisha or Umm Daniel, among others. In addition, Saadawi draws a fictional map, setting up his work in the *batawyīn* area, using it as a central point in his artistic creation. As Roger Allen (1993) argues, "With regard to the treatment of place, for example, the city in the Arabic novel serves as the primary location" (p. 216). Additionally, the characters of the novel are thoughtfully constructed; they represent the diversity in the Iraqi community and mirror everyday life in Iraq. For example, the characters embody different professions within the Iraqi society: a journalist, a migrant worker, a junk dealer, a housewife, a barber, and a brigadier general. This point is rather interesting; Saadawi endeavors to represent all components of the Iraqi community in an attempt to avoid marginalizing any group and to present a holistic picture of such a diverse society. Discussing the harmful consequences of misrepresentation, Nusair (2025) argues:

When "knowledge," perspectives, and voices of marginalized groups are distorted, silenced, ignored, or misrepresented by those with a distinctive epistemic authority, it may result in what Spivak (1988) refers to as "epistemic violence." Spivak argues that those in positions of power often represent marginalized communities without acknowledging the complexities of their experiences, leading to harmful misrepresentations. (Nusair, 2025, p. 4)

In light of the above quotation, one can argue that Saadawi tries to represent all social and political elements of the Iraq public to provide a realistic, just, and accurate depiction of all units and to prevent marginalization by incorporating all voices from different social layers and political backgrounds. In addition, such a portrayal shows the importance of each socioeconomic group.

Frankenstein can be read as a reaction to, in Judith Butler's words, the "corporeal vulnerability" of all of the victims of violence in Iraq (Butler, 2004, p. 19). He represents all the humans who were relegated to an inferior, subhuman status. This is because the frequent terrorist attacks did not target a specific group. Rather, their victims were of different ages and races, including Sunni and Shiite Muslims and Chaldean, Assyrian, Syriac, Orthodox, and Armenian Christians. Additionally, the victims of these bombings included both criminals and the innocent.

The monster was "made up of the body parts of people who had been killed, plus the soul of another victim. He was a composite of victims seeking to avenge their deaths so they could rest in peace" (Saadawi, 2014, p. 130). Throughout this process, Whatsitsname proves to be a heartless killer, showing no sympathy towards the many lives he takes. This quotation is suggestive, as it indicates that the concept of revenge is rather complex and elusive. This becomes a moral dilemma for the monster, as those who are victims could have been once perpetrators in the city and vice versa. The line between innocence and guilt is blurred. The monster himself becomes a victim of his own moral logic; his reasoning leads him to commit an endless chain of allegedly justified killings.

One of the most crucial points in the novel is when the monster witnesses the killing of two beggars by another two. The monster decides to kill the two who have carried out the killing, labeling them murderers who deserve to be punished.

Thus, the monster conspicuously adopts a logic of justification that starts his vicious cycle of violence. These men's brutal reactions tell us about the evil that can rise to the surface when humans encounter someone who is different from them. Even though the monster's announced intention is to restore justice, he indulges in a series of allegedly justified killings. This inclination towards division in the Iraqi community is clearly embodied through the behavior of the monster's followers. The reader learns that the followers divide into three groups, each of which has a specific justification for the purpose of his presence. These divisions soon turn into armed conflicts, resembling a civil war. One can argue that such divisions symbolize the sectarian conflicts taking place in Iraq at the time of the American occupation.

The second act of revenge is against the highly suggestive Abu Zaidoun, who is accused of being a former Baathist, the regime that was deemed the primary cause of the Iraqi involvement in two wars: the 1980 to 1988 Iran-Iraq War and the 1990 invasion of Kuwait, which led to the First Gulf War. The approach that the monster employs to deal with this character is strongly indicative. The monster justifies the killing based on the assumption that Abu Zaidoun is connected to the former regime as a contributor to the long-term trauma created by overlapping past and present forces throughout the history of Iraq. Whatsitsname's behavior implies that revenge is blurred with justice, as existing political issues become an act of settling scores. Hence, here, the monster represents revenge for unsettled political conflicts, unattainable justice, and the endless cycle of collective injuries.

Mahmoud works as a journalist for *al-Haqiqa* magazine. He suggests that part of the conflict revolves around the issue of political language: "'But there were two fronts now,' Mahmoud said to himself—'the Americans and the government on one side, the terrorists and the various anti-government militias on the other.' In fact, 'terrorist' was the term used for everyone who was against the government and the Americans" (Saadawi, 2014, p. 80). Anyone opposed to the current coalition is labeled a "terrorist." This strategy serves to delegitimize opposition groups by giving them this negative label. Thus, Mahmoud realizes that part of the government's strategy for domination and control is based on storytelling. Indeed, presenting the opposition as vicious "terrorists" gives less validity to these groups' claims for power and to their political vision. Those determining this vocabulary are the groups currently in power, who get to shape the way in which current events are presented to the public.

Although *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (Saadawi, 2013) primarily focuses on depicting Iraqis, and most particularly on those Iraqis living in the *batawyīn* area, it shifts here and there to highlight the presence of the American army. As the narrator informs the reader:

Hadi lay awake, looking up at the square of blue sky above and the birds darting past. He closed his eyes a while, then opened them again and caught sight of the silhouette of an American helicopter flying past, making a thunderous whacking noise. (Saadawi, 2014, p. 203)

By the same token, the owner of the *al-Haqiqa* magazine, Ali Al-Saidi, mentions that

Yes, for a year or more he's been carrying out the policy of the American ambassador to create an equilibrium of violence on the streets between the Sunni and Shiite militias, so there'll be a balance later at the negotiating table to make new political arrangements in Iraq. The American army is unable or unwilling to stop the violence, so at least a balance or an equivalence of violence has to be created. Without it, there won't be a successful political process. (Saadawi, 2014, pp. 177-178).

Ironically, the American military intervention in the novel is presented as a colonial project that adds a layer of complexity to the situation. Instead of simplifying the internal division in the Iraqi community, the American intervention intensifies it, clearly contributing to the creation of insecurity and instability in the country; more bombing incidents take place, more division among people based on political views and sectarian beliefs appear, and more horror and trauma are being generated. Here, Whatsitsname is used to suggest that instead of creating peace and achieving cohesion in the national fabric, the American invasion has ironically intensified the political and sectarian divisions.

In some instances, representations of the Iraqi community in Frankenstein in Baghdad (Saadawi, 2013) provide a glimmer of hope. In Hadi's house, different symbols of religious affiliations are put on top of one another: the Throne Verse of the Quran covers the statue of the Virgin Mary, which, in turn, is placed on top of the representation of a Jewish menorah. This juxtaposition of multiple religious symbols in Hadi's place symbolizes the capacity for peaceful coexistence. One can argue that such representations are a call from the author to the Iraqi people to go beyond politics and division and unite. For Saadawi, division is a main generator of terror and violence.

4. Conclusions

As it has been argued in this paper, Whatsitsname in Saadawi's (2013) *Frankenstein in Baghdad* represents the unity of the Iraqi community; it embodies a cohesive image of the Iraqi people despite the differences in terms of political loyalties and sectarian affiliations. At the beginning of the novel, Whatsitsname appears as a savior who endeavors to establish justice and to avenge those victims who have passed away in the bombings. As the plot of the novel develops, the monster ironically turns out to be a symbol of complicated political, sectarian, social, moral, and existentialist divisions. Later in the novel, the monster is unable to achieve peace and justice. On the contrary, it then carries out an endless series of vicious revengeful attacks, causing the death of many people.

As presented clearly in the novel, the body of Whatsitsname is made of stitched remains of bombing victims, and in order for it to sustain itself, it must conduct more killings and take fresh body parts. Moreover, the monster starts justifying his killings based on difference. Hence, Whatsitsname contributes ultimately to creating more violence, chaos, pain, and terror. By the same token, the American invasion of the country is presented in the novel as a main generator of violence, adding more complexity to the situation in Iraq. Through the character of Whatsitsname, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (Saadawi, 2013) suggests that following the American interventionism, the country fell into consistent and endless retaliations. By developing the character of Whatsitsname, Saadawi urges all Iraqis from different religious affiliations, social backgrounds, political loyalties, and moral perspectives to go beyond difference and to achieve unity; for him, national cohesion is the way to create peace and to restore order.

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