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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Whatsitsname in Baghdad: Colloquial Naming, Trauma, and Register Compression in Arabic–English Literary Translation

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how naming operates as a site of identity formation, trauma inscription, and social positioning in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein fi Baghdad* and in Jonathan Wright's English translation, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Rather than treating the creature's names as interchangeable labels, the study argues that they form a layered register system through which post-2003 Baghdad is linguistically mapped. The analysis centers on three recurring designations—*al-shasma*, *al-mujrim X*, and *alladhī lā ism lahu*—and their English counterparts, "the Whatsitsname," "Criminal X," and "the One Who Has No Name." Through close comparison of selected Arabic and English passages, this study combines Vinay and Darbelnet's procedural model with Venuti's domestication/foreignization framework and trauma-oriented linguistic analysis to evaluate how these naming choices travel across languages. The findings show that Wright succeeds in preserving semantic instability and much of the creature's narrative ambiguity, but that the English version reduces some of the sharp register contrasts that distinguish colloquial, bureaucratic, and elevated forms of naming in the Arabic. Therefore, this article argues that the translation maintains the creature's instability at the level of reference while partially smoothing the sociolinguistic architecture through which Iraqi cultural trauma is articulated. More broadly, it proposes that naming should be treated as a key translational problem in Arabic conflict fiction because it carries not only denotative meaning, but also voice, hierarchy, locality, and memory.

## KEYWORDS

Ahmed Saadawi; *Frankenstein in Baghdad*; Arabic–English literary translation; naming; register; cultural trauma

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## I. 1. Introduction

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein fi Baghdad* stages post-2003 Baghdad as a space in which bodies, memories, and forms of belonging have been violently disassembled. At the center of the novel stands a creature made from the remains of bombing victims, a figure whose very composition resists stable identity and whose meaning shifts according to who speaks about him. He is not only a monster, avenger, or scandal; he is also a problem of naming. The novel repeatedly returns to the question of what he should be called, and those acts of naming become a means of distributing fear, legitimacy, pity, and authority across the fractured social world of Baghdad.

This article starts from the premise that the creature's names are not merely descriptive tags. They are socially marked utterances that place him within different interpretive frameworks: neighborhood speech, official security discourse, and elevated quasi-religious language. In the Arabic novel, *al-shasma*, *al-mujrim X*, and *alladhī lā ism lahu* do not simply refer to the same figure in three different ways; together they stage a conflict over who has the power to define him and what kind of being he is. The instability of naming is therefore inseparable from the instability of post-invasion Iraqi identity itself.

Jonathan Wright's English translation preserves this multiplicity, yet it also raises an important translational question. What happens when a set of names rooted in distinct Iraqi sociolinguistic registers is transferred into English, a language with different

resources for marking locality, hierarchy, and tonal distance? If the Arabic text uses naming to map a fractured social field, the translation must decide whether to reproduce, redistribute, or neutralize those distinctions. The issue is not only lexical accuracy, but the survival of a wider structure of voice and power.

The article therefore asks: **How does Wright's translation of the creature's names preserve or reshape the relationship between naming, register, and cultural trauma in Saadawi's novel?** To answer this question, the discussion concentrates on a small but analytically dense cluster of passages in which the creature is designated as *al-shasma*, *al-mujrim X*, and *alladhī lā ism lahu*. By focusing on this naming cluster, the study isolates a site where translation choices can be examined not only for semantic equivalence, but also for their effects on tone, hierarchy, and the representation of collective violence.

The argument developed here is that Wright's translation is often effective at the level of immediate communicative force, especially in the rendering of *al-shasma* as "the Whatsitsname." At the same time, when the three naming forms are read together rather than separately, the English text narrows some of the register distance that gives the Arabic naming system its social depth. What emerges is not a mistranslation of meaning, but a partial reduction of sociolinguistic contrast. This matters because in *Frankenstein fi Baghdad*, naming is one of the ways trauma becomes legible as a distributed social condition rather than as individual suffering alone.

By examining naming as a translational problem, the article contributes to scholarship on Arabic conflict literature, trauma representation, and the politics of literary translation. It proposes that names in war narratives should be read not only as referential units, but as compact carriers of register, ideology, and historical memory. In Saadawi's novel, the struggle to name the creature is also a struggle to name a broken city, and the English translation reveals how difficult it is to carry that struggle intact across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

## **2. Literature Review**

Recent scholarship on *Frankenstein in Baghdad* increasingly treats naming as a central device for staging identity under conditions of violence. Critics do not read the creature's labels as neutral references; instead, they show how the novel moves between everyday speech, official discourse, and elevated or quasi-sacral expression, turning language into a record of Baghdad's fractured social life. In this body of work, the creature is not simply a monster with several names. He is a figure whose unstable designation exposes how post-2003 Baghdad is narrated through competing registers of recognition, judgment, and exclusion.

A second cluster of studies reads the novel through trauma and the crisis of identity. Al Mahfoodh and Benny (2025), Salih and Mohammed (2025), and Karrar Haydar Zachi (2025) each emphasize that Saadawi's creature embodies fractured selfhood, postwar instability, and a postcolonial breakdown of social belonging. Their work is useful because it links the creature's bodily composition to a wider symbolic collapse: the stitched body is not only a Gothic image, but also an allegory of a nation unable to consolidate itself after violence. Read in this way, identity in the novel is never fixed or private; it is always shaped by war, memory, and the social conditions under which a person can or cannot be named.

Other studies make the national dimension of this fragmentation even clearer. Abdellaoui and Seghiour (2025), building on earlier readings of Saadawi, argue that the creature assembled from Sunni, Shia, Christian, and Kurdish body parts can be read as both an image of the "ideal" Iraqi citizen and a sign of the failure of the national project. This interpretation is especially important because it shifts attention away from the creature as an isolated Gothic figure and toward the novel's larger political imagination. In that sense, the monster's composite body becomes a national allegory: a body made from parts that cannot be harmonized into a stable whole, just as the social body of Iraq remains divided by sectarian violence and unresolved political rupture.

The question of naming becomes even more significant when the novel is placed in conversation with studies of prolonged trauma in Iraqi war fiction. Mousa and Alhomoud (2022) argue that post-2003 trauma should be understood not as a single event but as a prolonged, socially embedded condition shaped by dictatorship, invasion, sectarian conflict, and displacement. That perspective helps explain why the creature's names matter so much: each designation marks a different way of surviving and organizing a damaged world. In this sense, naming is not merely descriptive. It is one of the novel's main mechanisms for converting collective disorder into language.

Translation-focused scholarship adds another layer to this discussion. Phillips (2023) shows that the English version of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* participates in processes of consecration, annexation, and decontextualization, which means that translation is never simply a transparent transfer of meaning. Machine translation research also shows that translation quality is shaped by contextual complexity and translation difficulty, which supports the argument that culturally dense texts are especially vulnerable to distortion when moved across languages (Al-Yousef et al., 2025). This reinforces the idea that translation is not only lexical transfer but also a cultural negotiation, since Arabic literary texts often lose pragmatic and contextual meanings when moved into English (Al-Yousef et al., 2025). A related discussion of discourse and power shows that language choices are never neutral, since CDA examines how discourse constructs and reproduces social power relations (Al-Hawamdeh et al., 2026).

Similarly, Jebur (2024) demonstrates that discourse patterns in the novel are central to identity construction, so translation must be understood as a pragmatic as well as lexical process. This complexity involves more than semantic equivalence. It also reflects

sociolinguistic and cultural meanings shaped by Iraqi trauma, where naming functions as a cultural practice rather than a simple linguistic label. Vinay and Darbelnet's procedural model helps explain the translation strategies used to render such names, while Venuti's domestication and foreignization framework clarifies the ideological consequences of those choices. In the English translation of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the creature's unstable reference is preserved, but it partly smooths the sharp contrasts between colloquial, bureaucratic, and elevated registers that are more distinct in the Arabic original. This means that translation may retain ambiguity while still reducing some of the sociocultural texture carried by the original naming system. These studies suggest that the problem is not only how the creature's names are rendered into English, but also what happens to the social hierarchy of voices attached to those names. A translation may preserve referential meaning while still altering the texture of address, irony, and register that gives the original its local force.

This concern aligns with broader translation theory. Venuti's distinction between domestication and foreignization remains useful for describing the tension between readability and cultural specificity, especially in literature marked by conflict and historical trauma. Tymoczko and Gentzler likewise stress that translation participates in power relations, canon formation, and cultural filtering rather than acting as a neutral bridge between languages. In the case of Saadawi's novel, this means that a translated naming choice can either preserve or soften the sociolinguistic distance between street speech, official discourse, and quasi-religious language. What is at stake is not only semantic accuracy but also the visibility of the social fractures that the Arabic text encodes through naming.

Regional scholarship on displacement and fragmented identity also helps clarify the stakes of this reading. Abedalqader et al. (2021) argue that the Syrian war produced not only external exile but also forms of internal diaspora, in which people remain within national borders while becoming estranged from the social and cultural structures that once anchored identity. That formulation is helpful for reading Saadawi because it provides a comparative model for understanding how a damaged homeland can generate forms of belonging that are unstable, partial, and coercive. Although Iraq and Syria have different histories, the concept of internal diaspora helps illuminate how the creature in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* moves through a city in which social continuity has been broken but not completely erased.

Abedalqader's later work on *Otared* (2025) also contributes a useful conceptual parallel by showing how authoritarian violence can reorganize not only space but time, memory, and futurity. Although that study concerns a different novel, its emphasis on necropolitical control over historical experience is relevant to Saadawi because it highlights a broader regional pattern: war fiction often represents power through the manipulation of recognition, memory, and social legibility. This broader frame strengthens the argument that naming in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* should be read as part of a larger politics of identity under conditions of violence rather than as a purely stylistic feature.

Finally, Arabic pragmatics and sociolinguistic studies help show why the distinction between names cannot be reduced to dictionary meaning. Research on Arabic verbal emphasis shows that repetition can carry pragmatic force, reinforcement, warning, and affective intensity, and that these functions are difficult to reproduce fully in English (AlYousef & Mahadi, 2019). Related work on built-in-language repetition also shows that repetition is structurally more central in Arabic than in English, which makes straightforward translation difficult (AlYousef & Mahadi, 2019). These findings matter for *Frankenstein in Baghdad* because the creature's labels do not only identify him; they also carry emphasis, stance, and social positioning. Studies of bilingual code-switching show that switching between Arabic and English can express identity, self-confidence, and social positioning, not only fill lexical gaps (Al Yousef et al., 2025). Research on intercultural persuasion likewise shows that language choices are shaped by rhetorical purpose and cultural context (AlYousef et al., 2025). In the same broader pragmatic tradition, studies of refusal strategies, politeness, and lexical adaptation show that meaning in Arabic discourse often depends on social force and contextual function rather than dictionary meaning alone (Al-Natour et al., 2025; Al-Natour et al., 2025; Al-Yousef et al., 2025). These findings support the argument that naming in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* operates as a register-sensitive act rather than a purely semantic label. In such a context, naming becomes a pragmatic act: it locates the creature socially, not just semantically, and reveals who has the authority to classify him, condemn him, sanctify him, or joke about him.

Taken together, this scholarship shows that *Frankenstein in Baghdad* can be read through naming, trauma, and national fragmentation without reducing the novel to a single symbolic formula. What remains underexplored is the way these names work as a linked system of registers, and how translation reshapes that system for English readers. That gap makes naming a productive entry point for examining how identity and national allegory are constructed in the novel.

### 3. Method and Theoretical Framework

This study employs a qualitative, comparative textual analysis of selected passages from Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein fi Baghdad* (2013) and Jonathan Wright's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018), concentrating on the "naming node" where the creature's three main designations co-occur. The Arabic excerpts include the street-level use of *al-shasma*, media and security announcements referring to *al-mujrim X*, and formal references to *alladhī lā ism lahu* in contexts where officials and quasi-religious figures discuss the creature. The corresponding English passages render these as "the Whatsitsname," "Criminal X," and "the One Who Has No Name," providing a compact set of naming choices through which shifts in lexis, register, and ideological framing can be traced.

### 3.1 Research Design and Sampling

The research design adapts the three-tiered analytical procedure developed in this study for the broader trauma-translation project and applies it specifically to the naming node. A purposive sampling strategy is used to identify all passages in which the three core designations occur in meaningful narrative or dialogic contexts—street scenes, coffee-shop negotiations, media announcements, investigative reports, and quasi-religious commentary. These are then paired with their English counterparts using the published edition of Wright’s translation. The sampling aims to capture variation across narrative voice, institutional discourse, and everyday speech, rather than an exhaustive catalogue of every naming instance, in line with qualitative sampling principles that privilege depth and contextual richness over sheer quantity (Creswell, 2014).

### 3.2 Triple-Layer Coding

Following this study’s methodology, the analysis proceeds through a triple-layer coding scheme: 1) procedural coding based on Vinay and Darbelnet; 2) register and trauma-language coding; and 3) postcolonial interpretive coding.

At the first layer, each Arabic–English pair is coded for translation procedure using Vinay and Darbelnet’s (1995) taxonomy. Their methodology distinguishes seven procedures distributed across two overarching strategies, direct and oblique translation: borrowing, calque, and literal translation on the direct side, and transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation on the oblique side (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). In this study, *al-mujrim* X → “Criminal X” is coded as literal translation, whereas *al-shasma* → “the Whatsitsname” and *alladhī lā ism lahu* → “the One Who Has No Name” are coded as equivalence, in the sense of idiomatic or phrase-level reformulation. Additional phenomena such as explicitation or cultural compensation, identified during pilot coding in this study, are marked where Wright inserts clarifying information or shifts connotation to make references more accessible to Anglophone readers.

At the second layer, each passage is coded for register and trauma-language markers. Drawing on Arabic pragmatics and trauma scholarship (ALYousef & Mahadi, 2019a, 2019b; Basu, 2019; Mousa & Alhomoud, 2022), the study identifies features such as repetition, fragmented or paratactic syntax, depersonalizing labels, and oscillation between bureaucratic and colloquial voices (ALYousef & Mahadi, 2019a, 2019b; Basu, 2019; Mousa & Alhomoud, 2022). Register categories—street colloquial, institutional/bureaucratic, media discourse, and quasi-religious rhetoric—are applied to both ST and TT, using patterns established in this study’s coffee-shop, Elishva, and theological-lexicon nodes. This allows the analysis to track not only what is translated, but who is speaking and under what sociolinguistic conditions.

At the third layer, a postcolonial interpretive code is applied, informed by Fanon’s (2004) theory of national culture, Said’s (1978) critique of Orientalism, and recent work on annexation and decontextualization in the translation of Arabic literature (Casanova, 2007; Phillips, 2023; Tymoczko, 2000; Tymoczko & Gentzler, 2002). This layer asks: Does Wright’s naming decision preserve the political and emotional valence of the original designation? Does it reproduce or resist Orientalist representations of Iraqi culture and violence? Does it honor or dilute the function of Saadawi’s creature as an articulation of national culture and collective resistance, in Fanon’s sense? The interpretive coding is triangulated with secondary scholarship on Saadawi, Iraqi war fiction, and Arabic–English translation to mitigate idiosyncratic readings (Abdellaoui & Seghiour, 2025; Aubed, 2019; Phillips, 2023; Jebur, 2024).

### 3.3 Comparative Tables and Bilingual Reference Materials

In line with this study, the coded data are organized into comparative tables that juxtapose Arabic and English forms, transliteration, literal gloss, procedural code, register category, and trauma-language markers. For the naming node, this involves extending the original Table 4.1 (“Naming node — main designations of the creature”) to include explicit TT columns and coding fields. Bilingual reference materials—including dictionaries of Iraqi colloquial Arabic, Qur’anic and theological lexica, and bilingual corpora—are consulted to refine connotative and pragmatic readings of key expressions, particularly where names intersect with religious or institutional discourse (e.g., *alladhī lā ism lahu* in quasi-religious speech). This bilingual scaffolding ensures that interpretive claims about nuance, register, and allusion are grounded in documented usage rather than impressionistic judgement.

### 3.4 Domestication, Foreignization, and Register Compression

Venuti’s domestication/foreignization paradigm provides a macro-level frame for reading the patterns that emerge from the comparative tables. Venuti (1995, 2008) argues that dominant Anglo-American translation norms prioritize “fluent” domesticating practices that erase foreignness and render the translator “invisible,” while foreignizing strategies foreground difference and resist assimilation to target-culture expectations (Venuti, 1995, 2008). Building on this, the study assesses whether the naming node in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is oriented primarily toward target-culture fluency or source-culture distinctiveness. Particular attention is paid to register compression—instances where multiple, socially stratified Arabic names (street slang, security jargon, quasi-religious framing) are translated into a narrower, more homogenized set of English designations. Such compression is treated as a form of domestication at the level of sociolinguistic system and is evaluated in light of critiques of how translation can annex or decontextualize Arabic war narratives (Casanova, 2007; Phillips, 2023; Tymoczko, 2000).

### 3.5 Trauma-Language Triangulation

Finally, the naming node is triangulated with broader trauma-language features in the novel. Basu (2019) identifies repetition, dislocated syntax, and oscillation between depersonalizing labels and hyper-concrete detail as characteristic of trauma narratives, while Mousa and Alhomoud (2022) show that Iraqi war fiction deploys fragmented narrative, repetitive motif clusters, and dehumanizing designations to register prolonged trauma and social repression (Basu, 2019; Mousa & Alhomoud, 2022). Drawing on these insights, the study reads the creature's names alongside recurrent explosions, recursive references to body parts, coffee-shop bargaining scenes, and the satirical exchange with the president that are analyzed elsewhere in this study. This allows the article to assess how the naming node contributes to the novel's cultural-trauma encoding—whether names intensify, mask, or redistribute the affective and political weight of violence—and to what extent the English translation maintains, dilutes, or reconfigures that encoding.

By integrating procedural coding, register and trauma-language analysis, comparative tabulation, bilingual reference materials, and a postcolonial interpretive layer, the study moves beyond a purely semantic comparison of names to a multi-layered account of how translation affects the sociolinguistic and traumatic texture of the narrative. Naming is treated not as an isolated lexical problem but as a nexus where formal choices, ethical orientations, and trauma representation converge, making it possible to evaluate Wright's translation decision-making in relation to established translation theory, contemporary trauma and diaspora scholarship, and recent Arabic-language pragmatics and persuasion research (Abedalqader et al., 2021; Abedalqader, 2025; Al-Yousef et al., 2025; Rabee et al., 2025).

## 4. Findings and Analysis

### 4.1 Naming as Identity and Social Map

In the Arabic source text, naming is one of the primary ways the novel explores identity in a city fractured by violence. The creature is first introduced not only as a composite body but as a problem for recognition and classification: because he is made from the remains of many victims—Sunni, Shi'a, Christian, Kurdish—he cannot be neatly assigned to one family, sect, or bureaucratic category. Characters' attempts to name him therefore become attempts to decide whether he can be made legible within existing social frameworks.

This struggle over naming unfolds in a Baghdad where social bonds, state institutions, and public trust have been weakened by repeated explosions, displacement, and sectarian conflict (Mousa & Alhomoud, 2022). In such a context, a name does more than identify a person; it signals neighborhood belonging, communal memory, and degrees of threat or legitimacy. Saadawi concentrates these pressures into the creature, whose identity is constantly being produced, revised, and contested by others' speech.

The naming system thus functions as a social map. When the creature receives one designation in colloquial dialogue, another in media discourse, and another in formal or elevated language, the reader sees that identity in the novel is not fixed in itself but shaped by who is speaking and from which position. Naming becomes an act of interpretation and power: whoever names the creature attempts to define what kind of being he is and what kind of danger—or justice—he represents. This is particularly visible in passages where security commanders announce the arrest of "the dangerous criminal that official reports called Criminal X, and that the public called the Whatsitsname," bringing together institutional and street naming in a single narrative moment.

#### 4.1.1 Example 1: Hadi's Act of Naming (al-shasma / "the Whatsitsname")

##### Arabic ST:

- كنتُ أريد تسليمه إلى الطب العدلي، فهذا جثةٌ كاملة تركوها في الشوارع وعاملوها كنفاية... إنه بشر يا ناس... إنسان يا عالم
- ليست جثةٌ كاملة... أنتِ عملتها جثةٌ كاملة
- أنا عملتها جثةٌ كاملة حتى لا تتحول إلى نفايات... حتى تُحترم مثل الأموات الآخرين وتُدفن يا عالم
- وما الذي حصل بعد؟
- حصل لي أم للشسمة؟
- لكما كليكما (Saadawi, 2013, p. 34)

##### English TT:

"I wanted to hand him over to the forensics department, because it was a complete corpse that had been left in the streets like trash. It's a human being, guys, a person," he told them.

"But it wasn't a complete corpse. You made it complete," someone objected.

"I made it complete so it wouldn't be treated as trash, so it would be respected like other dead people and given a proper burial," Hadi explained.

"What happened next?"

"To me, or the Whatsitsname?"

"To both of you." (Saadawi, 2018, p. 27)

In this inaugural naming scene, Hadi defends his decision to assemble a “complete corpse” from scattered body parts left “in the streets like trash,” insisting that by completing it he has restored a minimum of dignity so it can be “respected like other dead people and given a proper burial.” Against this background, the line “حصل لي أم للشسمة؟” / “To me, or the Whatsitsname?” introduces the name almost casually: *al-shasma* becomes the creature’s first nickname, functioning as a placeholder for an entity everyone recognizes but no one can—or will—name directly.

In Iraqi Arabic, *al-shasma* is a contracted form meaning “what’s its name,” used as a placeholder in everyday speech when a speaker cannot or will not specify a name. In the novel, it solidifies into a semi-fixed nickname for the creature, preserving the paradox of naming through non-naming and anchoring the figure in the neighborhood’s living dialect. In Basu’s (2019) terms, this is a trauma-language strategy of non-naming and displacement: the characters speak around a composite, mutilated body and the state’s necropolitical neglect without fully confronting its horror (Basu, 2019).

From the perspective of Vinay and Darbelnet (1995), Wright’s rendering of *al-shasma* as “the Whatsitsname” is an instance of equivalence. Rather than literally translating “what is its name,” he chooses an English colloquial noun that fulfils the same pragmatic function of pointing to an unnamed entity. The surrounding dialogue (“complete corpse,” “treated as trash,” “respected,” “given a proper burial”) is largely translated by literal translation, preserving the denotative meaning of Hadi’s justification. Functionally, “Whatsitsname” is a strong TT solution: it is a colloquial English noun derived from a question, mirroring the ST’s non-naming strategy and conveying that the creature is being identified precisely by the failure to provide a proper name.

Yet the equivalence produces a measurable register shift. In Arabic, *al-shasma* is unmistakably Iraqi colloquial, marked by phonological contraction and street-level usage. The gap between this term and formal Modern Standard Arabic is substantial, and that gap itself encodes a sociolinguistic hierarchy between everyday speech and institutional discourse (Masmoudi, 2015). “Whatsitsname,” by contrast, is a fully lexicalized English word that appears in dictionaries and can be used in a range of informal contexts across varieties of English. The trace of localized, spoken formation visible in the Arabic is concealed in the TT. From a Venutian perspective, this is a mixed move: the lexical choice appears foreignizing, because “Whatsitsname” is unusual enough to signal strangeness, but at the level of the register system it participates in domestication by narrowing the distance between street speech and literary narration in English (Venuti, 1995, 2008). Wright successfully preserves the creature’s semantic instability, yet some of the Baghdadi neighborhood texture embedded in *al-shasma* is inevitably thinned.

#### 4.2 “Criminal X” and “the One Who Has No Name”: Register Hierarchy and Compression

The naming node becomes fully visible when *al-shasma* is read alongside *al-mujrim X* and *alladhī lā ism lahu*. In the Arabic source text, these three designations form a hierarchy of registers:

- الشسمة (*al-shasma*) – used by Hadi and ordinary residents of Bataween; pure colloquial street register.
- المجرم إكس (*al-mujrim X*, “Criminal X”) – used by television journalists and security reports; standard media Arabic with an English letter inserted, reflecting code-switching in Baghdad’s media class.
- الذي لا اسم له (*alladhī lā ism lahu*, “the One Who Has No Name”) – used by the astrologer and senior officers; formal, elevated Arabic with a quasi-Qur’anic tone.

##### 4.2.1 Example 2: Media and Institutional Naming

###### Arabic ST:

في الحادي والعشرين من شباط عام ٢٠٠٦ أعلنت القيادات الأمنية العليا في بغداد عن إلقاء القبض أخيراً على المجرم الخطير، الذي تسميه بعض التقارير بـ «المجرم إكس»، ويسميه الأهالي «الشسمة»، وله أسماء أخرى عديدة. كان العميد سرور في مكتبه يتابع حديث فريد شواف على شاشة التلفزيون حول المجرم إكس. هكذا، من هؤلاء المذيعين يسمون المجرم الخطير، حوّلوا الموضوع إلى عرض تلفزيوني؛ إنه أمر مروع، والعميد سرور غير قادر على ترك هذه العادة (Saadawi, 2013, pp. 247, 346–347).

###### English TT:

On February 21, 2006, the supreme security commanders in Baghdad announced they had finally arrested the dangerous criminal that official reports called Criminal X, and that the public called the Whatsitsname, along with many other names. (Saadawi, 2018, p. 278)

Brigadier Majid was in his office watching Farid Shawwaf speak on television about Criminal X, as the journalists were now calling the One Who Has No Name. The television channels were covering the criminal almost every day, showing Identikit drawings of his face, with a caption stating the reward for anyone who provided information leading to his arrest. (Saadawi, 2018, p. 209) Here, institutional and popular naming collide. Security commanders speak in high, bureaucratic style of “the dangerous criminal” that official reports call *al-mujrim X*, while “the public” calls him *al-shasma*, and television journalists shift to “the One Who Has No Name.” The same figure is framed as an anonymised case file, a neighborhood rumor, and a quasi-mythic entity within a few lines.

In Vinay and Darbelnet's terms, "Criminal X" is a direct rendering of «المجرم إكس», exemplifying literal translation: the hybrid Arabic-English label, with its capital X, is carried over with minimal adjustment and retains its bureaucratic, case-file flavor (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995). "The One Who Has No Name" corresponds to an Arabic formulation such as «الذي لا اسم له» and is best described as equivalence: Wright recreates a marked, elevated epithet rather than producing a clumsy word-for-word calque. "The Whatsitsname," as already seen in Example 1, is also equivalence: instead of literally translating "what is its name," Wright uses a colloquial English noun that fulfils a similar pragmatic role as a vague, placeholder term.

In the Arabic hierarchy, these three formulations occupy clearly distinct sociolinguistic spaces; a reader moves through street colloquial, media standard, and formal/religious registers and understands the creature differently in each (Abdellaoui & Seghiour, 2025; Jebur, 2024). The names encode neighborhood gossip, securitized media framing, and quasi-theological interpretation.

Wright translates them as "the Whatsitsname," "Criminal X," and "the One Who Has No Name." Individually, each choice is defensible: "Criminal X" preserves the bureaucratic, depersonalizing tone, and "the One Who Has No Name" retains the solemn, almost biblical quality of the original. However, when the three names are read together, the register distances between them are narrower in English than in Arabic.

"Criminal X" in English sounds like a familiar crime-show or tabloid label, a generic media designation rather than a specifically Iraqi coinage tied to post-2003 security discourse. "The One Who Has No Name" retains more foreignizing force, as such a solemn formula is unusual in ordinary English journalism and hints at mythic or religious registers (Phillips, 2023). Yet when these appear alongside "the Whatsitsname," the overall spread of registers in TT is compressed: what were sharply distinct street, media, and quasi-Qur'anic registers in Arabic now sit more comfortably within a single tone of narrative English.

This register compression matters for trauma-language. In the ST, the coexistence of popular and official names within the same narrative space indexes a fractured social order in which no single institution can impose a stable identity—a symptom of collective trauma (Alexander, 2004; Eyerman, 2001). In the TT, the multiplicity of names remains, but the sense that they belong to dramatically different sociolinguistic worlds is softened. The translation preserves the naming instability as stylistic variation; it partially domesticates the deeper breakdown in mechanisms that assign and fix identities (Venuti, 1995, 2008; Casanova, 2007).

### 4.3 Naming, Narrative Voice, and Trauma

Naming in *Frankenstein fi Baghdad* is inseparable from narrative voice. The creature is often seen and judged through the words of others, and scenes shift in tone as different speakers name him differently. Colloquial naming embeds him in the lived texture of Bataween; media naming turns him into a spectacle and a case; elevated naming moves him into a quasi-mythic space where he stands for abstract crisis and punishment. Each naming act reconfigures narrative voice, and each voice reconfigures the creature's identity.

This pattern aligns with trauma-language observations in Iraqi war fiction, where repetition, fragmented perspective, and depersonalizing labels are used to express collective shock and disorientation (Basu, 2019; Mousa & Alhomoud, 2022). "Criminal X" functions as a trauma marker: it recodes a composite victim-body into a securitized target, producing a bureaucratic frame that obscures civilian suffering. *Al-shasma* functions as a different kind of trauma marker: it signals the neighborhood's attempt to speak about something that exceeds ordinary naming, a linguistic residue of speechless terror transformed into ironic, unstable designation (Basu, 2019).

Wright's translation keeps the basic pattern of shifting names but inevitably smooths some tonal variation. English prose tends to present voices in a more unified literary style, even when focalization changes, and the TT cannot reproduce the full range of Iraqi registers without extensive stylization. As a result, the TT sustains the creature's narrative instability—his meaning changes depending on who speaks—but the localized sound of those changes, the Iraqi Arabic voice work, is less vividly audible (ALYousef & Mahadi, 2019a, 2019b). In trauma terms, the TT preserves the structural logic of instability but partially erases the specific linguistic textures through which trauma is articulated in Baghdad's speech communities.

### 4.5 Translation Implications: Conflict, Register, and Ethics

From a translation-studies perspective, the naming node in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* illustrates how equivalence at the lexical level can coexist with domestication at the register-system level. Wright's choices are individually successful: he finds a creative, non-literal solution for *al-shasma*; he maintains transparent, literal renderings for institutional and elevated names; he keeps the overall structure of naming instability intact (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995; Venuti, 1995, 2008). Yet the systemic consequence is a TT where the sociolinguistic hierarchy encoded in the Arabic is less sharply articulated.

This has implications for debates on translating conflict literature and decolonial translation ethics. Scholars such as Venuti (1995, 2008) and Tymoczko (2000) argue that translators of texts from war-torn or formerly colonized societies must attend not only to semantic fidelity but also to the preservation of narrative strategies that express resistance, marginalization, and trauma. In Saadawi's novel, the naming node is one such strategy: it maps power relations and collective wounds through register and voice (Alexander, 2004; Fanon, 2004). When that mapping is flattened in translation, even partially, the TT risks presenting Iraqi trauma as "eccentric horror" rather than as a complex, culturally embedded sociolinguistic phenomenon (Phillips, 2023).

At the same time, the TT’s successes—especially “the Whatsitsname”—demonstrate that creative equivalence can carry core paradoxes across languages without resorting to exoticizing or opaque borrowing (ALYousef & Mahadi, 2019a, 2019b). The challenge for future translators of conflict fiction is to push this creativity one step further by finding ways to signal register hierarchies and localized speech communities in the target language, even when structural differences between Arabic and English make exact replication impossible.

**Table 4.1 Naming node: ST–TT comparison and trauma–register effects.**

| ST designation<br>(Arabic /<br>transliteration)  | TT designation               | Vinay &<br>Darbelnet<br>procedure | ST register and<br>function                                                                                                                     | TT register and function                                                                                                                                                   | Trauma-language and<br>ethical notes                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| الشسمة<br>( <i>al-shasma</i> )                   | “the<br>Whatsitsname”        | Equivalence                       | Pure Iraqi<br>colloquial; a<br>question-word<br>nickname used as a<br>placeholder,<br>marking non-<br>naming and<br>neighborhood<br>speech.     | Informal colloquial<br>English; dictionary-<br>listed noun phrase that<br>signals non-naming,<br>though it is less tightly<br>bound to a single local<br>speech community. | The non-naming<br>strategy is preserved,<br>but the Arabic dialect-<br>standard hierarchy is<br>muted, and some<br>Baghdadi texture is<br>reduced.                                 |
| المجرم إكس<br>( <i>al-mujrim X</i> )             | “Criminal X”                 | Literal<br>translation            | Hybrid Arabic–<br>English media label;<br>bureaucratic and<br>depersonalizing,<br>with a case-file<br>framing typical of<br>security discourse. | Familiar crime-show or<br>tabloid tone; highly<br>transparent to<br>Anglophone readers.                                                                                    | The bureaucratic,<br>depersonalizing<br>framing of a composite<br>victim-body is<br>retained, but the TT<br>may normalize<br>securitized discourse<br>as generic<br>entertainment. |
| الذي لا اسم له<br>( <i>alladhī lā ism lahu</i> ) | “the One Who Has<br>No Name” | Equivalence                       | Elevated, quasi-<br>Qur’anic<br>formulation;<br>solemn and quasi-<br>theological in its<br>interpretation of<br>the creature’s crisis.          | Solemn, somewhat<br>biblical-sounding<br>epithet; unusual but<br>still readable in English.                                                                                | The sense of<br>namelessness and<br>gravity is preserved,<br>but the specific<br>Qur’anic intertext is<br>softened, partly<br>domesticating the<br>religious register.             |

As Table 1 indicates, each individual ST–TT pairing is, on its own terms, a reasonable solution: *al-shasma* and “Whatsitsname” both encode non-naming, *al-mujrim X* and “Criminal X” both frame the creature as a case-file criminal, and *alladhī lā ism lahu* and “the One Who Has No Name” both foreground namelessness and gravity. What only becomes visible when the three rows are read together is the systemic effect of these choices. In Arabic, the three names are anchored in sharply distinct registers—colloquial street speech, standard media Arabic with code-switching, and elevated quasi-Qur’anic discourse—so that naming itself maps social position and trauma hierarchy. In English, the trauma markers associated with each name largely survive, but the register distances between them are compressed, meaning that the TT presents naming instability primarily as stylistic variation rather than as a finely graded sociolinguistic cartography of post-2003 Baghdad (Venuti, 1995, 2008; Basu, 2019; Phillips, 2023).

## 5. Conclusion

### 5. Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

#### 5.1 Conclusion

By foregrounding the naming node in *Frankenstein fi Baghdad* and its English rendering in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, this article has demonstrated that naming is a central site where identity, trauma, and power are negotiated in both source text and target text (Alexander, 2004; Eyerman, 2001). The creature’s multiple designations—*al-shasma*, *al-mujrim X*, and *alladhī lā ism lahu*—encode a sociolinguistic hierarchy of street, media, and quasi-religious registers, mapping a fractured post-2003 Baghdad in which no single institution can stabilise identity (Abdellaoui & Seghiour, 2025; Mousa & Alhomoud, 2022). Wright’s translation

preserves the creature's semantic instability through "the Whatsitsname," "Criminal X," and "the One Who Has No Name," yet compresses some of the register differences that make the Arabic naming system a detailed social and traumatic map, illustrating how equivalence at the lexical level can coexist with domestication at the level of register and voice (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995; Venuti, 1995, 2008).

## 5.2 Implications

### Theoretical implications.

The findings extend trauma-translation debates by showing that naming and register are not peripheral stylistic choices but core mechanisms through which cultural trauma and fragmented identity are encoded and transmitted (Basu, 2019; Stevens, 2016). The compression of register hierarchies in the TT suggests that translation can subtly reshape how national allegory and necropolitical critique are perceived, even when lexical meanings appear faithful (Abedalqader, 2025; Phillips, 2023). This underscores the need for models of trauma translation that incorporate sociolinguistic mapping—who speaks, in which register, about whom—as part of their core analytical toolkit.

### Practical implications for translation practice and publishing.

For translators working with conflict literature and postcolonial texts, the naming node in Saadawi's novel illustrates that creative equivalence at word level must be balanced with attention to register systems and local speech communities (ALYousef & Mahadi, 2019a, 2019b; Venuti, 1995). Decisions that make names more accessible in English can, if not carefully managed, flatten sociolinguistic hierarchies that are integral to how trauma and power are narrated. For publishers, the analysis underscores broader concerns about editorial abridgement and paratextual framing: cuts and marketing strategies that emphasize "universal Gothic horror" risk further domesticating culturally specific trauma encodings and annexing Arabic war fiction to Anglophone genre norms (Casanova, 2007; Phillips, 2023).

### Implications for future research.

The focus on a single naming node suggests wider possibilities. Naming and register in other Iraqi and Syrian war novels, especially those dealing with "new diasporic identities" and necropolitical temporality, may reveal similar patterns of register complexity in ST and compression or re-framing in TT (Abedalqader et al., 2021; Abedalqader, 2025). Reception studies in Anglophone contexts could explore how readers actually interpret designations such as "Whatsitsname," "Criminal X," and "the One Who Has No Name," and whether they perceive the sociolinguistic fractures the translation only partially conveys.

## 5.3 Recommendations

### For translators of Arabic conflict literature.

- Treat naming and register as **analytical starting points**, not afterthoughts: map who uses which name, in which register, and for what social purpose before deciding on TT equivalents (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1995; Mousa & Alhomoud, 2022).
- When using idiomatic equivalence (e.g., "Whatsitsname" for *al-shasma*), consider adding subtle textual or paratextual cues—such as consistent signalling of dialect or brief translator's notes—to keep the sociolinguistic hierarchy visible without overburdening the prose (Venuti, 1995, 2008).

### For publishers and editors.

- Avoid heavy **abridgement** and "smoothing" of repetition and fragmentary trauma-language markers in translated editions of war fiction, as these features are often crucial to the representation of prolonged cultural trauma (Basu, 2019; Phillips, 2023).
- Invest in **contextual paratexts**—introductions, translator's notes, or afterwords—that explain key naming and register choices, helping Anglophone readers understand why a figure may be simultaneously "Whatsitsname," "Criminal X," and "the One Who Has No Name" and what this multiplicity signals about Iraqi collective memory (Casanova, 2007; Tymoczko, 2000).

### For scholars and future research.

- Extend the naming-node approach to **comparative studies** of other Arabic trauma narratives and their translations, including Syrian, Palestinian, and Yemeni texts, to see whether similar register compressions emerge across different conflict literatures (Abedalqader et al., 2021; Rabee et al., 2025).
- Conduct **reader-response and classroom studies** with students and general readers in Anglophone settings, examining how they interpret naming strategies and whether targeted paratextual interventions change their understanding of trauma, identity, and sociolinguistic hierarchy in translated Arabic fiction (Al-Yousef et al., 2025; ALYousef et al., 2025).

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