

# Postcolonial Gothic and the Politics of Justice: A Study in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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## Abstract

The central goal of this paper is to scrutinize the systemic failings of the contemporary moment of Iraqi government aftermath. The study comes as a critique of the colonial moment of injustice using the resurrection of Frankenstein which appears as a moment of resistance and failure. The study, furthermore, reveals how the cruelty of war is shown as a dehumanizing force in Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* with continuous violence that refreshes itself by generating more violence and how that everyday harsh stories are mostly shaped by the state of disorder under and after the occupation. It, also, shows the extent to which the monster is the representation of reality of Iraqi conditions after the 2003 US occupation. One of the conclusions the researcher has arrived at is that under the US occupation people, instead of welfare, left without a will to decide their fate. They cannot declare their position against the Americans and the state of armed terrorism, and they cannot at the same time support acts of murder and terrorism.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Gothic, Frankenstein, abject, monstrosity, violence.

**القوطية ما بعد الإستعمار وسياسة العدل: دراسة في رواية فرانكن شتاين في بغداد**

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## المستخلص

تقوم الفكرة الرئيسية لهذه الدراسة على دراسة الإخفاقات المنهجية للحياة المعاصرة للمجتمع العراقي في أعقاب الاحتلال الأميركي ما بعد 2003. وتأتي الدراسة نقداً لمرحلة الاحتلال باستخدام مسخ فرانكن شتاين والتي تبدو لحظة مقاومة وفشل. تُظهر الدراسة، علاوة على ذلك، كيفية تقديم عنف ما بعد الحرب قوة غير إنسانية في فرانكن شتاين في بغداد للكاتب احمد سعداوي مع عنف لا يمكن إيقافه حيث ان الوحش او العنف ينعش نفسه من خلال توليد المزيد من العنف وكيف تتشكل قصص العنف اليومية هذه في الغالب من حالة الفوضى. إحدى الاستنتاجات التي توصل إليها الباحث أنه في ظل الاحتلال الأمريكي، لا يمكن للناس أن يقرروا مصيرهم أو يعلنوا موقفهم. ولا يمكنهم إعلان موقفهم ضد الأمريكيين ضد دولة الإرهاب المسلح، ولا يمكنهم في نفس الوقت دعم أعمال القتل والإرهاب.

**الكلمات الدالة:** قوطية ما بعد الكولونيا، فرانكن شتاين، مدل، الوحشية، العنف.

## Introduction

Contemporary postcolonial Gothic suggests an ongoing process of the continuity of colonial violence and its aftermath. It is interested in the consequences of chaos, misery, and coercive displacement which seem unavoidable results of the environmental disaster created in Aftermath. However, the most compelling feature of the postcolonial gothic is its affinity for violence. It can certainly stimulate the traumas that result from the colonized people's experience of loss and displacement aftermath. Sadaawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a postcolonial gothic story that activates the effects of something buried with the inclusion of the colonial, a new sort of darkness – of race, landscape, erotic desire, and despair – enters the Gothic genre, and I here want to show and explain the consequences of that “invasion” throughout the twenty-first century. Textual reading of the gothic texts, however, supports the evidence that the relationship between the gothic and the failure of the postcolonial regime in postcolonial gothic fiction is not so easy. The setback of those national and political projects is being represented in different ways. For example, the appearance of monsters and unheimlich return of the repressed reveal the unnatural of those projects.

In postcolonial Gothic criticism, writing and critical reading of literary Gothic texts have something to do with imperialism and violence. In her work *Contemporary Gothic*, Sarah Iltott claims that those writings and readings made it visible to form an anti-colonial politics with Gothic mode. In that current period, the consequences and the new outrages that accompany neo-imperial ventures, contemporary Gothic critics continue to adapt new contexts and new modes of resisting and portraying the new atrocities [1:30].

As such, the monster is a helpful tool for unmasking locked up or repressed forces accompanied by injustice. The re-engagement with the lived realities of twenty-first-century postcolonial societies in the face of systemic violence and the structural exclusion of minority voices generates those monsters. Saadawi's *Frankenstein* is a consequence of the coloniasation of Iraq 2003, whose body parts are taken from the bombing victim's remaining bodies. The monster cannot integrate himself into society because of its dreadful appearance but relentlessly attempts to conform himself to better match of humans. Concerning the creation of the monstrosity in literature, Elizabeth Bohls claims that *Frankenstein* “indicts aesthetics as an inherently imperial discourse, structured by principles of hierarchy and exclusion... [it] binds together a little community, a microcosm of polite British society, marred by its... colonization of non-European peoples” [2:217].

The appearance of the gothic in postcolonial fiction comes as a reaction to the failure of national politics that are split by sectarian, caste divisions, and imperialism. It is one way in which literature responds to increasing problems of the postcolonial domestic landscape. The present paper discusses the politics of monsters in Ahmed Saadawi's fantasy *Frankenstein in Baghdad* that is the winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (2014), as an attempt to show how, thematically and stylistically, the writer exploits the literary Gothic strategies to describe the horror and violence, resulting from colonialism and national political strife, of Iraqi post-2003 US occupation. Accordingly, post-colonialism has an implicit connection with the construction and representation of monsters in the addressed novel. In this way, the presence of Gothic stylistic features in

postcolonial fiction has been linked to the failure of the postcolonial national political project.

After one explosion in the middle of Baghdad, Hadi Al-attag, a junk peddler, is in search of the last part to complete the monster's body since it is completely made of discarded parts of bombing victim's bodies who collected secretly. As the policemen collect the parts of the bombing victims, Al-attag among them in search of the last thing needed. He suddenly finds his target and picks up a nose. After a huge storm and following strange events, the corpus comes to life and mysteriously disappears. The strange creature begins to take revenge on its killers. After that, the creature learns that his body belongs to criminals and innocents as well. The monster, which is a symbol of aftermath regime, and as the Baghdadi people call it Al-Shismma (English translation is Whatsitsname), finds itself in need of refreshing its old or damaged parts. So, the monster begins to kill whoever meets to take spare parts for being alive. And this is the recycling of the violence in the aftermath. In this way, Saadawi aesthetically exploits the Gothic genre to show how everyday stories of violence in Iraq after 2003 generates a common state of disorder after and under the US occupation.

## Discussion

It is of a grave importance to understand whether the appearance of the monster is a kind of resistance or failure. Reading the postcolonial Gothic narrative, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* gives us a profound understanding of the ontological existence of the violence itself. Arguably, the self-defense involving violence is legitimated. In this respect, theories such as Marxism, resistance takes different shapes and needs difference responses [3:9]. A license of violence is also permitted as it is proposed by Franz Fanon for the indigenous as a way of resisting the colonial oppression. Fanon claims that this violence is taken as a therapy for cultural abuses brought by the colonizer and it is a self-defense mechanism. For Fanon the process of violence is part of decolonization he claims:

decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature...[t]heir first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together – that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler – was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons [4: 36].

Fanon argues that the consequence of colonization 'is the bringer of violence into the home and into the mind of the native'[4:38].

Written in 2013, the events of the Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* began in 2005 just a few months before what was called the Iraq 2006-2007 civil war (as it is described by some politicians). Through its simple language, Saadawi reflects the experience of the Iraqi people under and after the war. Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, in sketching a monster of Baghdad, calls upon the imperial brutality that haunts the Baghdadi inhabitants. Within postcolonial fiction, the writer discusses the influence of the occupation and the failure of the postcolonial Iraqi regimes to extend and democratize the significance of social advance, represented by decolonization, which comes as a result of consequences of the imperialism.

In her discussion of the colonial aftermath, Leela Gandhi argues that the aftermath does not mean the end of colonialism, rather it is the continuation of a damage caused by the period of colonization [5:3]. A contemporary political reading of monsters in fiction, then, reveals the metaphor of humanistic anxieties and ambivalence. Monsters are types of creatures who defy moral distinction between what is human and what is not, carrying out a humanistic message against imperialism, to maintain goodness in the ugly face or inhuman representing the face of the evilness of imperial power. Monstrosity serves another purpose to be used as a metaphor for the postcolonial regimes or systems. Those systems are often described as an offense to political imaginations that are in need of purity and rejection of violence [6:632]. Three readings, then, for Saadawi's *Frankenstein* "Whatsitsname". The first is that the monster symbolizes all the Iraqis regardless of the sects. Each part of its body, which Hadi Al-attag (the narrator) collects from explosions, is an image of one sect. In this sense, the monster is a good example that dissolved in his body all Iraqis. The second reading lies in its revolution soul that represents the savior who fights for justice in a society torn up by civil and foreign wars. The third is the monster as a serial killer. It is then seen as the dramatic incarnation of destruction which every Iraqi wants to get rid of it.

As a consequence of the US occupation and in the absence of clear postcolonial political solutions, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* focuses more on violence and its impact on the lives of Baghdadi citizens. In *Aesthetics and World Politics*, Roland Bleiker notes that the wars of dominance in Afghanistan and Iraq have engendered grudges, terror, and unstoppable violence instead of creating safety and peace. It is clear that the cycle of violence knows no end. Culpability consequences of the conflict have instead been organized for decades [7:52]. To ensure this, the novel opens up with a huge explosion in the middle of Baghdad (Tayaran Square), as an example of violence resulting from occupation, to exercise daily car bombing stories, terrorism, physical torture, and suffering:

The explosion took place two minutes after Elishva, the old woman known as Umm Daniel's mother, boarded the bus. Everyone on the bus turned around to see what had happened. They watched in shock as a ball of smoke rose, dark and black... the drivers were frightened and confused: they were assaulted by the sound of car horns and of people screaming and shouting. [8:1]

Gothic literature trends toward re-creating monsters and ghosts to depict the whole scenario of the world of violence and terror. In considering Iraqi post-war fiction, the monster serves both to critique and evaluate the legitimized events. It is natural, therefore, for the existing horrified political and social events to supply valuable sources for playwrights to present horror fiction. Iraq in particular, as with other countries like Syria and Afghanistan, is currently suffering-free massacres, as a result of colonization and crises related to political and economic issues, the rise of Salafi terrorist religious groups, the lack of social justice, and the domination of superpowers are now the true sources of misery in the Arab world. It is through his novel that Saadawi sketches the trauma produced by the US occupation. The novel emphasizes the troubling experience of Iraqis and the extraordinary level of physical as well as spiritual violence which pervades Baghdad. The everyday stories of suicide bombing scenes generated the

monster named “Al shismma” which reflects all the absurdity and moral dysfunction that came about caused by war. As a consequence, the current events produce terrorism, which has been shaped into a monster. This monster, as Saadawi mentions in an interview, “is made up of parts taken from Iraqis of different races, sects, and ethnicities,” therefore it “represents the complete Iraqi individual”, it is “trying to bring together all of the elements of the Iraqi experience, there are many messages. One of them is that with this war and violence, no one is innocent” [9]. The monster has no name because it belongs to no sect or ethnicity, but it is a milting of all Iraqi identities. To represent Iraqi new realities, we first met the monster “Whatsitsname” in the house of the old Christian woman Elishva, naked sleeping on the sofa, and clear cuts of his parts on his face and body. Elishva calls him as if it is her dead son Daniel (who lost in the first Gulf war of the 1980s) and gives him the clothes of her son Daniel. She is convincing herself that this new shaped man is her long-awaited son calling for him to “GET UP, DANIEL,” Elishva shouted. “Get up, Danny. Come along, my boy.” [8:53] Everyone in the novel creates a fictional monster/angel to fit his/her present situation. For Elishva, the monster is the “Godot” who waited for him for a long period of time.

So, aesthetically Gothic fiction permits the description of the present situation under a horrific picture. The disorder, fear, and violence are transformed into a monster to which the writer longs to describe his ideology of Iraq's current situation. In *Monster Theory* Jeffrey Cohen refers to the cultural and social matrix of monstrous creations. Fear and monstrosity are allegorical sociopolitical within the social contexts in which they act. In his words: “Monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural and political) that generate them” [10:199]. The representation of the monster in of postcolonial fiction needs an outstanding background of the historical, social, and political factors which participate in the forming of different monsters in various contexts. Hawkins-Dady, moreover, argues that “[t]he horror is seen as a mode of cultural self-analysis, which represents deep-rooted social and psychological anxieties” [11:332]. In this respect, Saadawi’s monster is generated from different bodies that represent different social and ethnical identities, so it is a social human being, but with an ugly face whose mission is to avenge the victims hence the monster is a site for social justice. The “Whatsitsname” claims:

I’m not asking anyone to take up arms with me or to take revenge on the criminals on my behalf. And please don’t panic when you see me. I’m saying this to good, peace-loving people. I ask you to pray and to pin the hopes in your hearts on my winning and accomplishing my mission before it is too late and everything is out of my hands. [8:143]

Referring to Mary Shelly’s *Creation of the Frankenstein*, Stephen Prickett explains that Shelly is firmly established the monster as a myth whose shape can be assimilated by a seemingly endless variety of situational contexts. The monster has always been “loose and baggy”: its function, like its body, is fabricated from the different parts. The construction of the monster, the construction of its world, and the construction of the context of the reality are offered by the novelist as analogs of one another [12:217]. Justice is seen as his mission to be achieved, so the monster says:

I'm the model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce, at least since the days of King Faisal I. because I'm made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds- ethnicities, tribes, races, and social classes- I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. I'm the first true Iraqi citizen.[8:146-7]

The mission of the monster is also seen in his taking the revenge of some bad reputation security firms and their lieutenants such as Black Water com who even send criminals and suicide bombers to secure their remaining in Baghdad. The monster now has to kill all those foreign security men as a first step. In this respect, the monster claims:

I killed the Venezuelan mercenary in charge of the security company responsible for recruiting suicide bombers who had killed many civilians, including the guard at the Sadeer Novotel, Hasib Mohamed Jasfer. I killed the al-Qaeda leader who lived in Abu Graib and who was responsible for the massive truck bomb in Tayaran Square that killed many people [8:153].

The other important point related to the postcolonial gothic is the "abjection", as stated by Julia Kristeva in her essay "*Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*". Kristeva's idea of terror and violence is present at the heart of human existence. In every human, there is a monster in some way. To Kristeva, the abject or waste "disturbs identity, system, order" [13:3]. Saadawi's monster is an Iraqi one who embodies such "disturbance" of the whole identity because he is mended together out of other criminal and innocent bodies collected by his god-father Hadi Al-attag. Kristeva says, "Any crime because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject" [13:4]. In other words, Saadawi's idea of violence is a monster created out of waste and thus is abject.

As a resistance embodiment, Saadawi's monster is made of different parts from different people. It is seen as an embodiment of moral corruption since it is generated from waste to represent the power of terror produced by the current context. Those hard times, as portrayed by the fiction, has created a dehumanized picture of reality and how the people lost their faith and became part of the monster body. In this development and in a negative way, the monster is seen as a representative of postcolonial dangerous force, reinforcing the possibility of radical mob violence. Arguably, once people start violence collectively, differences among individuals and ethical principles vanished and the crowd was probably to execute the massacres. Therefore, the monster appears to be a serious, uncontrollable, and stubborn tool in society. The picture is seen in the novel by different groups who fight and kill each other as a futile civil war. The novelist describes the monster's state with confusion and disorder, as a general mess is seen in Iraqi's daily life. Conflict among Iraqi politicians on TV screens is also reflected or generated a civil war between different parts of society. Suicide bombing, assassination, and kidnapping of cars with their passengers. The night is changed into the force of criminals, but the monster:

[I]s now at a loss for what to do. He knew his mission was essentially to kill new people every day, but he no longer had a clear idea who should be killed or why. The flesh of the innocents, of which he was initially composed, had been replaced by new flesh, that of his own victims and criminals. [8:200]

In this way, the monster is the manifestation of that civil war. He transformed, after his good moral message, into a criminal or a cannibal who lives by killing innocent people and taking their body parts as spare parts for him. Saadawi describes him and asserts that “He thinks he is doing something good but he is participating in killing and destruction,” he adds. “All of us have done this in one way or another, by welcoming, endorsing or not objecting to crimes.” [9]. The monster is changed into a criminal “killing the innocent people to take their bodily parts for him” [8:236].

Moreover, Kristeva explains the notion of ‘abject’ and how the narratives are constructed through the elimination of the uncanny or strange. The worth of studying the “abject”, as an uncanny, can be found in its vast political and religious influence over different contexts. The organization that exercises power in the modern world, to be oppressive and inhumane, is made upon the belief that man must be protected from the abject. Proper modes of society, then, necessitate the discharge of all that disturbs decorum, order, and cleanness. From this notion of ‘abject’, it seems that in itself abject is not essentially dirty, bad, or disorderly, rather its ambiguity disturbs the clarity of distinctions between order and disorder, clean and unclean, proper and improper. The abject is a repressed and unspeakable force that remains inside a person's psyche—and touches the role the abject has played in the progression of history, religion, and politics [14:140]. The disorder is seen first within the monster itself. when it is trying to take criminal and innocent bodily parts to replace his old decaying ones. The monster is transformed step by step into a complete super criminal, killing an innocent old man only to take his eyes to replace its decaying ones. He is aware that: “these are eyes from the body of innocent victims”. The monster justifies his act of killing by saying that “the old man will be killed sooner or later by the bullets of the fighting militias.” [8:161]

As the monster has been ironically disturbing the presence symbolizing abnormality, insanity, brutality, terror, and violence, which hover over inhabitants and social *disorder* (not order because the context is disorder in itself, and thus it becomes disorder in disorder). Not only do the monsters disturb the order and overexposed uncanniness or otherness, even leaders like Saddam Hussein and the underexposed otherness of Osama bin Laden, especially since September 11, 2001. In this context, Saadawi overexposed the monster to show the brutality of the US occupation that leads to the hidden brutalization of the institutions, sectarian armed groups, and even the postcolonial Iraqi regime. The monster describes the situation after the hard fighting of different militias: "the next morning I went out to inspect the area. There were bodies everywhere – on the street, on the sidewalk, some propped up against the walls, others slumped over balconies or piled at the entrances to apartments or rooms." [8:163]

It is seen here that the monster is the continuation of violence. In other words, violence generates endless violence, which Ahmed Saadawi wants to show. In the light of these atmospheres, attitudes, and robbery of will and action, Baghdad is no longer a safe place, as it has turned into a city of free killing and death, “when I issued an order on the bodies of many dead people lying in the alleys as if they were rubbish” [8:240]. Many left their homes or shops for fear of kidnapping or murder for various reasons. Gangs are scattered in its neighborhoods and streets, and the explosions continue almost daily in Baghdad, the city whose people had refused to leave, or who came to it from distant cities

because it is safer, are now leaving it without return. The narrator, Mahmoud al-Sewedi sums up the Iraqi scene saying: "there are two fronts: the Americans and the government on one side, and the terrorists and the various militias fighting them on the other." [8:245] This is the scene of Iraq after the occupation. People left without a will can decide their fate or declare their position publicly. They cannot declare their position against the Americans and against the state of armed terrorism, and they cannot at the same time support acts of murder and terrorism.

## Conclusion

The novel ends with no clear occlusion with the monster after a spectacular soliloquy jumping out of the compartment window, carried by the waves and missing in mystery and space. All Iraqis discover that they are involved in one way or another in the monster case as they form part of this being, or provide it with the fuel of survival and growth, events come to a sad end. Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a fictional work of the everyday stories of Iraqi people after the US occupation. In this way we have to return to the previous questions to what extent Iraq gains independence after the occupation and whether the colonial aftermath means the real end of colonization. The result of the above discussion shows, by employing the idea of a monster, that the colonial aftermath is the extension of the colonial period. Iraq is torn up by different ideologies resulting from the occupation. Ahmed Al- Saadawi employs the monster to serve many purposes. First, the monster is sketched without any name (Whatsitsname or in Iraqi dialect Al-Shismma) and even it is composed of different parts, to represent all Iraqis and the terrorism has no religion and ethnicity. The second purpose is seen as a Savior who fights hard for justice. We have seen him taking revenge on all those people who participated in killing Iraqis. In this way, Al- Saadawi gives the monster an aspiration to take revenge for all innocent victims. The monster's mission of justice is very complex. The monster thinks that the increasing number of victims in Iraq stands for a sort of salvation for Iraqis from their unfortunate life. It is a metaphysical dream of the idea of salvation being fulfilled by a monster. The novel covertly dwells around this notion of salvation. A concept like that may lead to the shaping of a weak postcolonial regime in Iraq after the occupation. The situation is then changed into a harsh monster who kills everyone and his noble mission, under the abnormal situation of Iraq, changed to an 'object'. Finally, the novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a black and tragic picture of Iraqi people who live under the impact of the imperial forces. Their life is changed into a common fictional story of mass destruction. In other words, the monster is a dramatic representation of destruction which growing up more and more like a snowball.



**CONFLICT OF INTERESTS****There are no conflicts of interest****Abstract**

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