

The Concept of Violence in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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Abstract

A prize-winning novel in literary horror after the occupation of Iraq, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) is a story about a monster who is created from the remains of bombing victims, which are often treated as garbage. This paper is about the concept of violence in Frankenstein. The paper shows how Ahmed Al Attar This study examines how the monster in the novel gives a voice to contemporary fears of society and what sorts of fears of the monstrosity are highlighted. To illustrate this claim, different roles of the nameless monster in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* are analyzed. The present study furthermore discusses how violence is represented as the main theme in the novel, how far the supernatural monster in Ahmed Saadawi's Arabic Booker Prize-winning novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2014) is a social construct and how he has reflected the violence and political dimensions in Iraqi society during 2005 to 2013.

Keywords: Frankenstein, Baghdad, monster, Saadawi

Introduction

A prize-winning novel in literary horror after the occupation of Iraq, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) is a story about a monster who is created from the remains of bombing victims, which are often treated as garbage. Hadi Al Attar a boozer and scavenger, who is dirty and eccentric, collects human body's parts of innocent victims from streets after explosions and stitches them together to give them a proper burial as a completed corpse. After finding a nose, the last part of the corpus, Hadi morphologically finishes his mission. But afterwards transmission of another victim's soul whose body has torn in the last explosion, to this corpus fully completes this mission. In a scary conversation with ("what's his name" or in Iraqi dialect Al Shismma) as Iraqi people call him, or Criminal X as the

authorities call him, Hadi realizes that he has inadvertently created a monster that will have a dynamic role in spreading violence and killings in Baghdad.

During the project of revenge, the monster or strange creature needs to repair or replace old and damaged parts of his body, in addition to the parts that fall off or melt after revenging the owners of these parts. Al Shismma or 'Frankenstein', as Baher Saidi the owner of a newspaper "The Truth" calls him, requires constant replacements of his parts. Urgent need for fresh and spare parts makes him utilize parts from innocents and criminals. The use of illegal parts confuses ideas and forfeits of the real purpose of Al Shismma. According to one of his assistants' statements "there aren't completed innocents or completed criminal" (Saadawi), Al Shismma kills many innocent people in different places in Baghdad when he needs their parts to finish his goal which becomes distorted, as well as his face. By using the method of "quotation" and "modulation", Ahmed Saadawi utilizes Mary's monster with a new form in order to embody the political deterioration and weakness of the government in the realization of the right: Baghdadi Frankenstein emerges to achieve one of three justices (justice of God, law, and society)

Aims of the study

This study examines how the monster in the novel gives a voice to contemporary fears of society and what sorts of fears of the monstrosity are highlighted. To illustrate this claim, different roles of the nameless monster in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* are analyzed. The present study furthermore discusses how violence is represented as the main theme in the novel, how far the supernatural monster in Ahmed Saadawi's Arabic Booker Prize-winning novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2014) is a social construct and how he has reflected the violence and political dimensions in Iraqi society during 2005 to 2013. The study shows how the quotation and modulation methods re-employ the old items to gain new meanings quite different from what they were before.

Analysis

In addition to the significance of literature, people read literature because they want to understand their own experiences and the experiences of others, "literature is above all, about the human, about what it means to be human, and therefore about non- human"

(Bennet and Royal, 2016, p. 225). As a matter of course, literature reflects all aspects of life: one of these aspects is violence, violence is used because it reveals the causes of conflict between members of society. Violence has become a theme of all modern writers who want to convey the reality of society as it is without retouching it. The Iraqi novel set after 2003 finds a new reality, a reality of Iraq in violent times, which comminutes with Fantasia to sketch the terrifying reality of Iraq.

Ahmed Saadawi discusses many important themes in his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. He presents these through the characters and their actions, and all of them represent occurrences from Iraqi people's own life. Many of the themes present debatable issues such as violence and political deterioration. Violence in the novel reflects what is in our world, the same form of violence, but with the possibility of changing the means if necessary to achieve the goal of presenting this violence in the novel. Violence is widely used in literature because writers and their readers want to know the real causes of violence in society. Franzak and Noll(2006) broaden the concept of violence in literature and offer the explanation that "Violence [in text], like violence in our world, is multifaceted. It functions at different levels, is perpetuated by different motivations, and is experienced in a variety of ways" (p.663). Realistically, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* presents the events in Baghdad that begin in 2005, exactly a few months before the Iraqi civil war 2006-2007. Ahmed Saadawi wrote *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in 2013 and he concentrated on the violence that occurs after fall of Baghdad and the U.S occupation of Iraq

Generally, there are two major categories of violence in literature. First, injury that occurs by characters to themselves or to each other, like violence in our world. Second, specific violence that occurs by the author themselves on their characters in a literary text in order to advance the plot or themes of the story. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* represents both kinds of violence in different forms. Saadawi begins his novel by an explosion in the middle of Baghdad; initiation of violence at the beginning of the novel indicates the prevalence of violence in Iraq in the period that this novel represents. Cunningly and masterly, Saadawi uses the non-sequencing method to narrate the events of his novel. In this method, Saadawi reflects one violent scene from more than one angle in order to confirm the intensity of violence.

For instance, the opening explosion in the first page of novel narrates, from different angles, the reaction of more than one character of the cruel explosion. Hadi Al Attag gives more details in the description of the scene when he describes the mixed smell of grilled bodies and burned tires that smoke after the explosion, while the other angle describes the explosion as a stormy sound of an accident that awakens Mahmood Swadi from his sleep. The descriptive style, “the method of describing”, is used to help the reader to form images in their minds about the thing being described; Saadawi portraits and re-describes the events to let readers paint a clear image about what is happening. Specifically, Saadawi uses the re-descriptive style to give more details about violent scenes, but he re-describes them by using different points of view from different characters, such as in the scene of the explosion on the opposite side of the Hotel Sudair. This car bomb, that melts Hassib Mohammed Jaafar’s body (the guard of the hotel), is described three times from different angles. First, from Hadi’s point of view in place of the explosion:

Hadi flew with his bag and dinner in the air ... and hardly hit on the asphalt of the street ... A minute passed before Hadi noticed what had happened, and saw a number of young men crossing the street and running towards him, one of them was the journalist Mahmoud Sawadi (Saadawi,2013, p. 40-41).

Second, from the point of view of Mahmoud Sawadi and his colleagues:

Everyone fell back with a moment of explosion and was swept by a storm of dust and gravel. They thought they were wounded, passed a minute or more before regaining their senses to look at the accident, the four ran to the other side in unconscious movement, A distance from the middle sidewalk and on the asphalt of the street, they saw the body of a dead man. They approached from the corpse and with Mahmoud’s wiping by his hand the body suddenly moved, they stood him on his legs, and Mahmoud knew him, he was Hadi Al Attag. (Saadawi,2013, p.60-61)

Third, from Hassib Mohammed Jaafar and what he saw in only one second:

The car exploded and Hasib Mhammed Jafaar noticed on himself, who pursued the explosion ... he saw man with a white linen bag swam in the air and fell far from the place of explosion ... (Saadawi,2013, p.45)

This sequence of events in the novel is narrated by more than one narrator, and every narrator rephrases the event from their place, but at the same time of the event. This method enables the writer to show the scene of explosion in a three dimensional image in the mind of readers; this is called the “Multiperspectivity” method. Maria Magher (2016) explains that:

telling a story from multiple perspectives is one of the most common ways to create a multiple narrative. This strategy can include either changing narrator or point of view to explain a single incident from multiple perspectives, or it can include using multiple narrators to provide fragments of the same story.

Saadawi potentially uses this method (multiperspectivity) to demonstrate that the different viewpoints contribute to the comprehensive meaning of the novel and force the reader “into much closer scrutiny of the text” (Hutchinson, 1984, p.35).

Although Saadawi shows the violence through explosions, he also portraits another type of violence through the characters. By multiperspectivity and flashback methods, Saadawi interprets the main themes of the novel through the main and secondary characters. Actually, the novel is full of main and secondary characters, despite the space allotted to them, but they have an important role in presenting main events and themes. Faraj is the character who benefits from forced displacement in Baghdad, he buys and forges ancient relics from the houses of displaced or people who have fled from the civil war (a type of violence in the time of occupation and civil war). Abo Zeidoun is the Baathist who forces young men, one of them Daniel, to join the front lines of the fight in the Iran – Iraq war (a type of violence in the former regime) and Daniel is presented as the victim of violence in the former regime.

Iraq after the U.S. occupation suffers from security deterioration, especially Baghdad. It is difficult to understand how people, who live in unsafe areas of Baghdad, could go outdoors to get themselves killed by suicide bombers. The Iraqi security forces’ failure, the absence

of clear political solutions, and the absence of logical solutions lead to the fact that many Iraqis accept the bitter reality, and perhaps accept violence and death as part of their daily routine. One aspect of the novel is a mirror of society's problems, the absence of logical and political solutions, which has led Iraqi literature to take on the responsibility for addressing violence and death in Iraq.

Frankenstein in Baghdad is considered as a fantastical literary work, covering violence and its impact on Iraqi people. Some kinds of modern fantasy aim to elucidate reality itself as myth. In his book *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, Jackson (2015) explains that:

Fantasies express a longing for an absolute meaning, for something other than the limited 'known' world. Yet whereas 'faery' stories and quasi-religious tales function through nostalgia for the sacred, the modern fantastic refuses a backward-looking glance. It is an inverted form of myth. It focuses upon the unknown within the present, discovering emptiness inside an apparently full reality (p.158)

The writer needs to transform from a psychological myth-narrative to order it and make it comprehensible. This is of course what happens in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Saadawi uses 'quotation' and 'modulation' to transform the Frankenstein's figure from its original to Iraqi copy, taking into consideration the differences between English society in Mary Shelley's time and Iraqi society in Saadawi's time. In addition, the transmission of a spirit into another human body is borrowed from Islamic and Christian heritage, and perhaps from other religious cultures. Saadawi uses one of the famous phenomenon in Gothic literature which is to recreate monsters to depict the overall picture of the world of violence, fear, and terror.

Saadawi uses a monster that is made up of innocent people from all spectra of the Iraqi people in order to depict all types of violence which Iraqi people suffer from. Saadawi reflects the collective fear that has resulted from the various types of violence caused by the former regime and the U.S. occupation. In an interview, Saadawi mentions that “[Al Shisma] is made up of parts taken from Iraqis of different races, sects and ethnicities”, because the monster “represents the complete Iraqi individual”, and he is “trying to bring

together all of the elements of the Iraqi experience. There are many messages: one of them is that with war and violence, no one is innocent" (Najjar,2016).

In the fictional, realistic, detective, tragic, and also a kind of black comedy novel, Saadawi reflects the civil violence in Iraq by creating a monster who is made up of all races and sects of Iraq. The main events of the novel occur in the Al Betawin district in the middle of Baghdad where the population belongs to different races, religions and sects. It is a suitable place for the birth of Al Shamsa who is composed of the parts of the victims that belong to the various sects of society. Saadawi narrates his novel using simple language and by using the flashback method. His protagonist Hadi Al Attaq narrates the story of his creature in a café. No one believes him except the general Seror Majeed who opens the novel by his statement under the title of 'top secret'. He is the manager of the prosecution and tracking organization and his duty is to catch a real criminal. Seror Majeed orders to pursue the author who writes the novel based on the wonderful stories that are narrated by Hadi Al Attaq in a cafe.

'What's-it's-name' has consisted of all sects of Iraqi society because his body is a hybrid of all sects and ethnicities, innocent, and criminal people. Each sect considered him as their savior. For example, he kills a leader in Al-Qaida in the Sunni Abu Ghrab area and a leader in the Shiite Sadar city. As a matter of fact, 'What's- its name' is a character with the three-frame image of violence, each one interacts with one another. The first frame of violence is presented by his body which in the beginning consists of the parts of the innocent victims of bombings in Al-Batawin where all the different religions and sects live together. This means that the monster represents all of the Iraqis in their revenge for each other on the pretext of achieving one of the three justices (God's, law's, and street's Justice). Therefore the violence has become among members of one sect. The second frame starts when Al Shisma declares that:

I [What's –its name] was careful about the flesh used in reconstructing my body and that my aides don't bring me 'illegitimate' ones that belong to criminals. But, who can determine the rate of criminality in a person?
(Saadawi, 2013, p.173)

Thus he deviates from his aims because he seeks revenge for the victims and criminals that his body consists of. Saadawi writes on the cover of his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* that the main goal of his horrid creature was that “quickly he got up to carry out a reprisal and revenge of the criminals who killed the parts that make him up”. The existence of criminal’s parts in the monster’s body makes him kill criminals and innocents together “In other words, ‘what’s-its-name’ is the fictional representation of the process of everyone killing everyone. This character is the visual representation of the larger crisis, rather than the solution” (Najjar, 2016). Al Shisma has many followers such as: Saddam's magician who tells Al Shisma that “here is no purely innocent people and none who are fully criminals” (Saadawi, 2013, p.225); an old man who uses Al Shisma as a tool to take his revenge; the sophist who hates magicians and later is the cause of his killing; the small, bigger, and biggest Mad who has great numbers of followers. All of these followers with their subordination, have affected Al Shisma's decisions. Saadawi depicts that sectarian violence will continue until Al Shisma kills himself because his body is made up from parts of his victims. These lead to the third frame that portrays Al Shisma as the first sponsor of violence in Iraq. The monster represents the Iraqis who say that they reject violence and actually consider him to be their savior from the other sects “*Frankenstein in Baghdad* shows how people go mad, supporting shedding blood for the sake of shedding blood” (Jane, 2015, p. 327).

Conclusion

In conclusion, people who lose their humanity in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* become a part of the violent cycle. Violence is unstopped, and it renews itself by creating more violence. Violence deforms the psyche, both morally and emotionally. Frankenstein ‘What-it’s-name’ in this novel is a condensed symbol of Iraq’s current problems. The Frankenstein-esque atmosphere of horror was strongly prevalent in Iraq during the period covered by the novel (2005).

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