SOUTH ASIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES

ISSN: 2582-7065 (Online) SAJSSH, VOL 6, ISSUE 2, PP. 183-194

Reconstructing the Self: Trauma and Identity in Frankenstein in Baghdad

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Received: 16th January 2025 **Accepted:** 13th March 2025 **Published:** 5th April 2025

Abstract

This paper investigates trauma traces and reconstructing the self in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. As the aftermaths of war do not end when it stops, its consequences should be traced and dealt with, especially the psychological effects. Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad (2018) gives this psychological ruin a body: the Whatsitsname, a conscious corpse sewed together from Baghdad's bomb victims. More than a literary device, this creature embodies trauma transformation in people to make them archives of violence, carrying physical proof of wounds that would never easily heal. Hence, paper explores how Saadawi's novel redefines the common understanding of the Iraqi war aftermath, revealing how collective suffering reformats both individual psyches and national identity. Moving beyond Western trauma models that prioritize "recovery narratives," the analysis demonstrates how Iraq's particular history of colonialism, sanctions, and occupation demands alternative frameworks. The Whatsitsname's cyclical violence—targeting both criminals and onlookers—mirrors the real-world impossibility of moral attitudes in war areas. Its very existence challenges simplistic divisions between victims and monsters, suggesting that in war's moral vacuum, these categories collapse into one another. So, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* forces us to confront the unavoidable truth which says: the distance between "us" and "monsters" is never such long as we pretend. By giving shape and name to war invisible psychological wounds, Saadawi creates not just a masterpiece of Iraqi literature, but a vital narrative in world literature about trauma, memory, and the price of survival.

Keywords: Frankenstein; Reconstructing the Self; Iraq War; Trauma; Identity.

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2024.6213

INTRODUCTION

Trauma can be defined as a psychological and emotional reaction to a great event, often resulting in long-term adaptations in memory, identity, and understanding of the surroundings. Judith Herman (1992) argues that trauma upsets an individual's sense of selfhood and his/her ability to narrate the experiences in common language. Bessel van der Kolk (2014) elaborates on this idea by assuring that trauma is not only reserved in memory but also it is embedded in the body, affecting the behavior and bodily reactions. In war times, trauma emerges in both personal and social lives, marking a new identity for people and societies. Literature mirrors life. Thus, war literature traces trauma with its deep psychological effects. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Ahmed Saadawi provides a case study of trauma's long-term effects on people and societies.

There is something deeply unsettling about the way war lies, not just in the scary patches, horrible buildings or in the empty spaces at family gatherings, but also in the way people keep it inside them. Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* not just narrates a story about war aftermath; it makes that aftermath walk and breathe as an animated creature. The Whatsitsname, the novel's monstrous central figure, is not some fantastical character found in fantasy; it is something far more disturbing: a creature depicted from the very real human ruins of Baghdad's streets. Each organ, belonged to someone who died violently, unjustly, their stories cut short by bombs or bullets. The novel does not belong to Gothic fiction, it belongs to war fiction rooted in real-life experience.

Mary Shelley's character of Frankenstein was a threat against playing god. However, Saadawi's creation is something else entirely. The Whatsitsname is not the product of a single genius in a lab; it is the inevitable result of a city drowning in corpses. When Hadi, the old junk dealer, pieces together a body from scattered remains, he isn't trying to defy nature—he is attempting to restore dignity in a place where death has become routine, where bodies are treated like trash. But in a war zone, even good intentions curdle. The body does not stay still. It gets up, walks and remembers.The psychological wounds are the horrors that mark the novel. These wounds are epitomized in a creature. That is to say, Whatsitsname is not just *a* monster, it is every monster in every psyche affected by trauma. It is the taxi driver blown apart by a car bomb, the shopkeeper executed in the street, the child buried under rubble. It speaks with their voices, demands justice in their names. This creature is Baghdad's grief given flesh, its rage given teeth.

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Traditional horror evolves around supernatural creatures such as ghosts, devils, and things that roam in the night. But the terror of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is that nothing in it is supernatural at all. The Whatsitsname is a distorted extension of the real. In a city where bodies are routinely cut up, where mass graves are dug and forgotten, is a stitched-together corpse really so hard to believe? War already turns people into fragments. Saadawi just takes that reality one step further and asks: What if this flesh rose up and came back to life?

The creature's existence forces Baghdad to confront what it wants to forget. People turn their eyes away from corpses in the street; they stop asking why their neighbors fade away. The Whatsitsname would not let them do. It is a memory that is unavoidable. It is a walking, talking monument to the dead. And like all monuments, it demands something from the living, not just remembrance. There are no clear divisions between the guilty and the innocent, no pure heroes or villains. The question of justice haunts post-war societies. When violence is everywhere, when everyone has blood on their hands, how does healing even begin? The novel just reveals the wound, bleeding and unstitched, and asks us to look at it. It is not a story about healing. It is a story about what happens when healing fails. The Whatsitsname does not get a neat ending—it wanders, decays, rebuilds itself, a perpetual reminder that some wounds don't scar over. They just keep bleeding.

Trauma extends beyond memory; it becomes engraved in the psyche as the neuroscientist Bessel van der Kolk (2014) asserts. Similarly, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* reveals how war reshapes consciousness, disrupting identity and distorting the passage of time. Saadawi's gripping novel reveals three profound truths about war's lasting damage; First, trauma does not only cause injuries in the body, rather it affects the mind. Secondly, violence never really ends—it just changes its form. Fanon (1961) asserts that colonialism has an endless aftermath. Finally, war makes everyone a participant. The creature's body stitched from killers and victims, reveals how conflict deletes the line between guilty and innocent. This study investigates how *Frankenstein in Baghdad* brings these painful realities to life. The Whatsitsname isn't just a monster; it is Iraq's living memory, a grotesque mirror showing what happens when trauma isn't healed but literally stitched together. Through this unforgettable creation, Saadawi forces us to see war's true cost, not in broken buildings, but in broken minds and a broken society struggling to piece itself back together. Saadawi's re-creation of Frankenstein's monster needs rethinking about the role of both characters and audience as witnesses to war and trauma. While Shelley's creature symbolized the consequences of

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2024.6213

scientific outreach, Saadawi's represents historical oblivion. So, it calls for a confrontation with the persistent inheritances of colonialism, war, and trauma.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Modern literary studies have started to recognize how trauma and identity take on distinct forms in postcolonial war literature. Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) offers a distinctive case study—not merely reworking Mary Shelley's Gothic tale but transferring its themes into the visceral reality of postwar Iraq. Previous studies have dwelled on trauma. However, little studies have tackled this novel especially from this angle. The Whatsitsname, emerges as more than a supernatural entity; it becomes a walking embodiment of national fracture. The theories recommended by Western psychology frequently fails in Iraq. While American psychologists may advise their patients to verbally work through their trauma, many Iraqis express their grief in a different way: through ritual and shared silence rather than words. Scholar Al-Ali sums this up quite well: these therapeutic methods may seem like just another alien idea pushed upon a culture that has its own profound understanding of loss. In Iraq mourning is about community rather than closure. Private grief becomes public testimony through the Shiite practice of matam. The purpose of mourners' collective chest beating is not to fix their suffering. They are honoring the basic fact that some wounds never go away instead they become a part of who we are. A new kind of medicine is produced by this collective grieving one that is based on community rather than analysis and presence rather than words. Iraqis have experienced decades of unrelenting violence, so they understand what Western therapy frequently overlooks: some griefs are too big to put into words.

In the streets of Baghdad, Hadi performs his own kind of resistance. While Western aid workers might distribute questionnaires about "PTSD ", this old man collects something far more tangible, the scattered remains of his neighbors. Each severed hand he retrieves, each trunk he stitches together turns into a silent protest against the notion that trauma can ever be "resolved." In this novel, Hadi understands what foreign psychologists often miss; these bodies are not just casualties to be counted and mourned. They are living testaments, flesh-and-blood archives of what his city has endured. Like the Bosnian survivors Summerfield studied, who refused to call their grief a "disorder," Hadi's makeshift memorial rejects the very idea of closure. His monstrous creation forces Baghdad's writers and the world writers on a larger scale to dwell on Iraqi war trauma.

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Furthermore, Western trauma theories skepticism did not appear suddenly. It is rooted in decades of postcolonial tendency to stand against one-size-fits-all approaches to healing. Fanon laid this plain theory back in 1961. In *The Wretched of the Earth,* Fanon (1961) elaborates on that notion case that colonized countries frequently ignore community histories of violence and collective surviving strategies when enforcing Western psychological models. This idea can be extended in Saadawis *Frankenstein in Baghdad* which shows how trauma in Iraq is a collective historical problem that shapes identity rather than a disease that can be cured. This viewpoint has been tackled by recent research on war trauma in Middle Eastern literature. Khalili (2012) emphasizes in *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* how war-torn societies frequently create alternative memory structures to deal with collective trauma something those Western frameworks overlook. According to Bahoora (2015) the disjointed psychological landscape of post-invasion Iraq where memory loss and identity are inextricably linked to the experience of war is mirrored in the fragmented narrative of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

PTSD in Iraqi masculinity have been centrally focused in newspapers, media and everywhere, women's suffering often remains hidden behind closed doors. Al-Ali (2-16) captures this painful divide: war distorts along gender lines, giving men public platforms for their pain while silencing women in private spaces. Elishva, the grieving Christian mother, embodies this silent burden. Where Hadi stitches together bodies and Mahmoud documents the carnage. As Al-Samman (2015) observed in Syrian narratives, men's pain creates monsters the world notices, while women's pain remains like ghosts. In this, Saadawi mirrors war's cruel irony about the women’s deep wounds.

There is no clear border between the public and the private suffering in the novel, nor exaggerating of the sectarian belonging of the wounded identities. The *Whatsitsname* is a creature made of multiple victims from different sects. In her argument about patriarchal bargains, Kandiyoti (1991) confirms that women in conflict zones are often viewed as passive mourners or guardians of social honor and female purity, whereas men get engaged in the active process of fighting and resisting the occupation. Cooke (2007) in *Women and the War Story* argues how war narratives often prioritize male experiences, excluding women’s grief to the silent world of the dumb. Al-Mohammad (2010) elaborates that women in war literature frequently become symbols of preservation, carrying the burden of cultural conservation even when the outer world around them is destroyed. However, Saadawi’s novel challenges this notion by shedding light on female suffering.

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One of the main themes of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is the moral responsibility during times of war is complicity. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's (1963) concept of the banality of evil, Saadawi portrays common Iraqis who condone violence through opportunism excuses or inaction even though they do not directly engage in it. The Whatsitsname is a result of collective violence in contrast to Shelleys Frankenstein where Victor bears sole responsibility for his creation. Being made up of victims from various backgrounds and sects its body is a physical representation of the trauma experienced by the country. As stated by Sinan Antoon (2013). "In war, there are no sidelines—only different degrees of blood on your hands." The Whatsitsname also questions the traditional moral dichotomies of the victim and the criminal. It shows how violence feeds on itself by first pursuing justice for the unpunished dead before turning into an indiscriminate killer. This change comes in line with Primo Levis (1986) idea of the gray zone in *The Drowned and the Saved* which challenges oversimplified moral narratives during times of conflict. Recent research conducted by Sasson (2020) elaborates on how literature from conflict areas frequently mixes heroism and collusion. The Whatsitsname is portrayed by Saadawi in a way that invites readers to ponder about being innocent in a society marked with systemic violence.

Saadawi's recreation of Shelley's *Frankenstein* extends the theme of mere creation. Each of its body parts comes from a different victim, symbolizing a fractured Iraq where any attempt at national unity is stitched together from incompatible histories. This reflects postcolonial theories of identity. As Botting (1996) argues in *Gothic*, monsters are cultural symptoms, embodying the fears and anxieties of their time. Jebur (2024) analyzes identity in the novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* revealing the dynamic process of identity shape, how social forces contribute in it and how language becomes a means of identity expression and investigating surrounding powers. Other studies have tackled the novel from different perspectives. Alkhayat (2013) tackles the theme of gothic politics in the novel and rhetoric aspects of horror in the novel that recalls aspects of gothic novel. Additional studies show how Saadawiss work modernizes Gothic horror tropes to explore the realities of war highlighting the cyclical nature of violence and retaliation (*Psychology and Education Journal*, 2023). Karzan (2023) dwells on the common features between the novel and Mary Shelly's Frankenstein and how Saadawi adapts that figure. It is a comparison study of both novels and reveals how Saadawi's has got shaped and affected by Shelly's.

Alhashmi (2020) investigates the hideous imagers of the Whatsitsname and concludes that this is a shattered decaying image that represents the broken social and political image of Iraq. The

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2024.6213

novel portrays national grief and communal suffering as essential and typical to the fabrication of the supernatural is also examined in *Revenant Journal* (2023) which suggests that the Whatsitsname is a symbol of unresolved trauma. The fictional characters in the novel struggle with illusion, fear and moral ambiguities which reflect the underlying trauma according to another study that relies on psychoanalytic interpretations (Al-Leithy, 2023). All in all, this study is a new approach to the trauma and identity as presented in the novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. It is a bridge between western theories and Eastern studies emerged after Iraq War. The novel has never been tackled duly in previous studies. Thus this study dwells on the trauma and how the fragmented self can be reconstructed after war.

METHODOLOGY

In investigating how *Frankenstein in Baghdad* depicts trauma and identity reconstruction, this study uses a qualitative research methodology and textual analysis according to literary criticism. It thoroughly analyzes the main characters. The analysis probes how Saadawi uses the characters to depict psychological fragmentation and collective suffering drawing on literary theory especially psychoanalytic and postcolonial frameworks. The foundation for comprehending how memories of violence impact identity is provided by van der Kolks trauma. Furthermore, the complexity of Baghdad after war is better understood in light of Arendt’s theory of the banality of evil.

This study employs a close reading approach as its methodology concentrates on the novel symbolism character development and narrative structure. To examine how language and narrative shape trauma and identity in post-invasion Iraq it also uses discourse analysis. Books, journal articles and critical essays are examples of secondary sources that are used to place *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in the context of larger literary and historical debates. The study is organized thematically looking at important themes like moral ambiguity, monstrosity and fragmentation. This multidisciplinary approach provides a lens through which to view the collective and individual struggles of post-war Iraq enabling a nuanced examination of how the novel reinterprets psychological and historical wounds.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* offers a profound reflection on the psychological and social consequences of war, particularly in relation to the destabilization of individual and collective identity. The central charcter, the Whatsitsname, serves as a powerful allegory for

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post-invaded Iraq, which is a nation struggling to reconcile its shattered sense of identity in the mid of sustained violence. Composed of disparate body parts from victims across sects, this composite being physically manifests the dissolution of coherent identity narratives in conflict zones.

The novel dwells on fragmentation in the self that is reflected in the narrative. Hadi represents the endeavoring attempts made by the general population to maintain order in the midst of chaos. His ironic attempt to use functional reconstruction to provide a dignified burial for unnamed victims emphasizes the impossibility of traditional mourning customs in environments of unending violence. This illustrates the irrepresentability of war experiences according to conventional frameworks as defined by trauma theory scholars. The investigation of unstable identity is further supported by supporting characters. In post-war societies where moral certainty disintegrates and truth becomes pliable, Mahmoud the journalist personifies the epistemic crisis. His career path reflects the novel's more general examination of the ways in which narratives are put together and challenged in settings where conflicting realities contest for acceptance. The significance of the novel arises from its nuanced portrayal of war psychological effects. Instead of portraying trauma as a personal illness Saadawi shows it as a communal ailment that is ingrained in the urban environment. This idea is represented by the deteriorating but enduring form of the Whatsitsname which is a tangible representation of past wounds that will not go away and insist on acknowledgment rather than healing. This method presents trauma as a continuous conversation between past violence and present survival challenging Western therapeutic models that place a higher priority on closure. Blending elements of social realism and Gothic horror, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* offers important insights into the complex processes of identity formation in post-conflict societies. According to the novel, identity must be shattered in these situations and must instead be agonizingly pieced together from the pieces that are available. This is the main outcome of the novel.

The Whatsitsname: A Symbol Collective Trauma

As an allegory for collective trauma Whatsitsname symbolizes the cumulative suffering and unresolved loss of the Iraqi people. The monster is a tangible representation of the suffering of the country not just a supernatural being: "I carry their spirits within me," the Whatsitsname proclaims, "and I will not rest until justice is served" (Saadawi, 2013, p. 145). The formerly cited statement emphasizes that historical wounds cannot be avoided, and societies affected would surely be affected by conflict and therefore compelled to seek revenge. Additionally, as

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it becomes a must to constantly kill in order to replace its deteriorating body parts, the Whatsitsnames pursuit of justice becomes more and more contradictory. This cycle of devastation reflects Iraq's own difficulties where endeavors to bring about peace are continuously ruined by fresh outbreaks of aggressiveness. The breakdown of the monster illustrates how trauma overturns ideas of continuity and stability by reflecting the shortness of both national and personal identities. This is clearly stated as: "Every time you think you understand what's happening, another explosion changes everything" (Saadawi, 2013, p. 201). The constant instability marks the essence of increasing trauma victims as those are entrapped in a relentless cycle of horror and loss.

The Banality of Evil in the Novel

According to Hannah Arendt's (1963) concept of the banality of evil, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* reveals how common people can participate in acts of violence through self-preservation opportunism or inaction. As contrary to Saadawis Whatsitsname which is the direct result of societal violence Shelleys Frankenstein depicts the creature's existence as a tragic accident. Government officials' militias and even civilians defend violence as a necessary reaction to unrest. The novel reveals how moral limits become hazy during times of war which weakens ethical accountability. "It's just the way things are now," as one character remarks, "We kill or we get killed" (Saadawi, 2013, p. 223). This tendency towards violence reflects the dissolving set of ethics in persistent conflict zones. Saadawi also criticizes how the media contributes to the continuation of violence. When Mahmoud, the journalist, tries to find out the truth he quickly learns that stories are twisted to suit political objectives. His steady moral deterioration serves as an example of how people, even those who are devoted to the truth, can get caught up in dishonest systems. "At some point, I stopped asking who was right or wrong," Mahmoud acknowledges, "because it no longer mattered" (Saadawi 2013 p. (256). The general disillusionment of society where survival comes before morality is reflected in this split.

Grotesque Imagery of the Self

Saadawi's novel is an adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. The Whatsitsname is motivated by vengeance and an existential crisis rooted in political realities whereas Shelleys creature seeks understanding and companionship. The Whatsitsname states: "I am not one man but many,"; "I have no past, only the memories of those who make up my flesh" (Saadawi, 2013, p. 187). By focusing on collective suffering rather than individual alienation, this self-awareness sets Saadawis monster apart from Shelleys. Moreover, the novel invests the

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grotesque imagery in order to highlight the horror of war. Baghdad becomes a horrific setting where damaged bodies and shelters are scattered in its streets haunting the living: "The city itself is a graveyard," (Saadawi, 2013, p. 289). By merging Gothic horror with allegorical figure, Saadawi creates a horrible and shattered image of the Iraqi identity marked by the protagonist who is a shattered image of the traumatic self.

Women's Identity in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

The conflict for agency cultural norms and war all influence women's identities in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. In the novel, women are portrayed as both survivors and victims navigating a violent patriarchal society. To show how societal instability impacts their roles and self-perceptions Saadawi presents female characters who represent various aspects of vulnerability and resilience. Elishva the elderly Christian woman who thinks the Whatsitsname is her son represents the ways trauma changes a persons identity and maternal grief. "He has returned to me," (Saadawi, 2013, p. 109). Her story demonstrates the ways in which women create alternate realities in order to survive or deal with loss.

Simultaneously, female journalists and experts deal with particular difficulties while navigating a culture that continuously threatens their independence. Women's voices are frequently silenced or manipulated during times of crisis as demonstrated by Saadawi's portrayal of Nawal as a resolute but disillusioned journalist. "The truth doesn't matter," Nawal confirms "only the story that sells" (Saadawi, 2013). This irony is a reflection of women's overall lack of empowerment in both personal and professional domains. The woman's imagery in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* challenges the strict gender norms that are imposed on women showing how war both intensifies their hardships and offers them moments of strength and defiance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a revelation of trauma and shattered identity as well as the normalization of violence according to the findings. As a physical and symbolic representation of Iraq's shattered past the Whatsitsname shows how unresolved trauma still shapes both individual and national identities. The Gothic tradition is reframed in Saadawi's novel to reflect modern socio-political realities and horrors of the war lying inside every human being. The book concludes by arguing that despite the lingering effects of war real justice is still elusive in a society where the cycle of violence feeds itself. The Whatsitsname sums up

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2024.6213

the harsh reality of a country caught in an ongoing war. This study can be a reference for other studies that can be done on this important novel tackling trauma in Iraqi individual and nation.

DOI: 10.48165/sajssh.2024.6213

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