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What's its Name? Dealing with Monstrous Identities in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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Abstract

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad,* originally published in Arabic in 2013 and translated into English by Jonathan Wright in 2018, is set in the chaotic socio-political condition of post-invasion Iraq. The Nobel exacerbates the horror of sectarian violence by introducing a Frankensteinesque atmosphere of magical realism. However, this paper concentrates on the concept of monstrosity as presented in the novel. The paper shows how the concept of monstrosity, being a fluid one, problematizes the notion of identity. By carefully considering the multiple manifestations of 'monstrous identity', the paper demonstrates that 'monstrosity' is not an easily identifiable physical attribute found in conventional deformed-body 'monsters'; nor is it just a characteristic trait of an evil mind; rather, it is a highly nuanced term which complexly affects social identities.

Keywords: Monstrosity, Identity, Society, Post-invasion Iraq, Body.

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is set in urbicide-affected Baghdad of post-invasion Iraq. Through the use of magic realism, he depicts an Iraq where explosions are part of daily life; where, those who step out of their houses cannot avoid the sight of blood and scattered body parts on roads; where car-bomb explosions are regular events. This paper examines the concept of monstrosity as presented in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. The paper draws on various established ideas of monstrosity and shows how the author presents 'monstrosity' as an unstable, fluid concept, which problematizes the notion of identity. By blurring the human/monster binary, the novel warns the readers against making hasty moral judgments. Moreover, by carefully considering the multiple manifestations of 'monstrous identity', the paper shows that 'monstrosity' is not an easily identifiable physical attribute found in

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conventional deformed-body 'monsters'; nor is it just a characteristic trait of an evil mind; rather, it is a highly nuanced term which complexly affects social identities.

People have been curious about monsters since time immemorial. Speculations about the existence of monstrous races go back to Old English *Beowulf* and Medieval Arthurian romances such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Shakespeare has also dealt with various forms of monstrosity in his plays. From *A Midsummer Night's dream* where Puck worries that his "mistress with a monster is in love" (3.2.6-7) to *The Tempest's* Caliban; from *Macbeth's* witches to the "civil monster" (4.1.64) of *Othello*, from *Love's Labours Lost's* "monster ignorance" (4.2.23) to Lear's confrontation with the "monster ingratitude" (1.5.40) in *King Lear* – every time 'monstrosity' has received a new definition in Shakespeare's plays. As Simona Dragan puts it:

> Theoretically, monstrosity is defined and perceived by people as an extreme form of abnormality, either physical or mental, and, particularly, as a single or multiple manifestation of deformities or infirmities that can be either innate, or developed, or imagined, or indicative of obvious forms of degeneration. (1)

At present, connotation-wise, the term 'monster' has moved a long way from what it was in earlier times. Today's monsters no more represent a failure of divine creation. Rather, it has emerged as an umbrella term bringing diverse identities together.

One of the most important literary works to take monstrosity to a different level and compel the readers to sympathize with the so-called 'monster' was Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; Or, The Modern Prometheus*. The Promethean scientist hero, Victor Frankenstein's irresponsible decision to abandon his creature to the cruelties of society turned the innocent creature into a veritable 'monster.' Taking cue from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Ahmed Saadawi, an Iraqi author, journalist and documentary maker, crafted his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. As pertinently pointed out by Ola Abdalkafor, "*Frankenstein in Baghdad* is the first Arabic novel that has borrowed the Frankenstein element to address issues related to Iraq, presenting a Frankenstein-like monster to show the consequences of the American military intervention and the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, which resulted in a form of man-made monstrosity" (1). Perturbed by the fact that the pieces of corpses of the victims of suicide bombings and sectarian violence in Baghdad never receive a decent burial, Hadi Al-Attag, a junk dealer, decides to literally stitch together the pieces to form a composite whole so that it "wouldn't be treated as rubbish" (Saadawi 25) and can be given a proper burial. It is to be carefully noted that Hadi, unlike Victor Frankenstein, never intended to create a living human being. His real intention was to craft a composite corpse ultimately to bury it properly. But contrary to his intentions, a lost soul, the soul of Hasib, a hotel guard killed recently in a bombing attack, takes refuge in the soulless body, which Hadi calls *shesma* or Whatsitsname.

Simona Dragan in her paper, "Abnormality, Deformity, Monstrosity: Body Transgressions in Contemporary Visual Culture," claims:

> Most often, zoomorphic and anthropomorphic monstrosity were projected by humans at a certain distance, considering that monsters could be found mostly in the tales of travellers to distant lands (and invariably amplified and increased by the people's imagination). This physical presence of the monster 'far away from here' also indicated his or her moral and cognitive otherness: everything that people could not understand or assimilate, just like everything that did not fit their commonsensical morality, was usually connected to various transgressive practices or was projected by people outside their worlds. (2)

However, Saadawi breaks the convention by placing Whatsitsname among us, amid the chaos of post-invasion Iraq. The author exacerbates the terror by making his readers realize that if Whatsitsname is a monster, he is not a far away creature, but rather, a very real constant presence among us. Now, the question is, whether Whatsitsname can justifiably be called a monster. As Hadi describes:

> Whatsitsname was made up of the parts of people who had been killed, plus the soul of another victim, and had been given the name of yet another victim. He was a composite of victims seeking to avenge their deaths so they could rest in peace. He was created to obtain revenge on their behalf. (Saadawi 125)

Thus, the idea of monstrosity here gets problematized. Being a "composite of victims" (Saadawi 125), his acts of apparent cruelty bring justice to the victims whose body-parts make-up his body. He is Criminal X for people like Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid, the head of the mysterious Tracking and Pursuit Department, who cannot understand the logic of Whatsitsname's monstrous cruelty. As has aptly been pointed out by Dwight Garner in "In Frankenstein in Baghdad," a Fantastical Manifestation of War's Cruelties, "Saadawi's creature feels he is misunderstood. He's not a bad man, he wishes to explain" (para. 11) and in an attempt to explain himself, Whatsitsname records everything he has to say about himself in a recorder and sends it to Mahmoud al-Sawadi, a young journalist at al-Haqiqa. He himself says, "They have turned me into a criminal and a monster, and in this way they have equated me with those I seek to exact revenge on" (Saadawi136). Rebecca Merkelbach in "Monster Theory and the Study of Monstrosity in the Íslendingasögur" opines that monstrosity should not always be associated with physically hybrid or paranormal creatures (3). Rather, whatever disrupts or transgresses the social norm, itself becomes monstrous in the eyes of the society. In a similar way, Whatsitsname's acts to seek justice for the victims turns him into a social transgressor and, therefore, a monster and a criminal, in the eyes of the so-called protectors of society.

"The social and the monstrous . . . are not mutually exclusive; in fact, the one depends on the other" (3), states Merkelbach quite significantly in "Monster Theory and the Study of Monstrosity in the Íslendingasögur". Truly, in Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the society gives birth to the 'monster' – Whatsitsname. A product of the frenzied socio-political conditions of post-invasion Iraq, Whatsitsname's initial goal of life – to avenge the victims, whose body-parts have made him–was also defined by the ailing society. Moreover, the way French Revolution was considered to be monstrous by Mary Shelley's parents, in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the revolutionary acts of Whatsitsname are also seen to be monstrous. "Almost every

aspect of the French Revolution discloses monstrosities, according to the writings of Edmund Burke" (1), wrote Botting in "Frankenstein and the Language of Monstrosity". Whenever the masses try to resist authority, their actions are labeled monstrous. Thus, these society-bred 'monsters' suffer the burden of multiple conflicting identities. In this context, we are reminded of Julia Kristeva's concept of the Abject. According to Kristeva, Abject "disturbs identity, system, order" (Kristeva 3). Whatsitsname, in this novel, appears to be the disturbance incarnate. His complex identity signifies a mysterious source of terror, or, to use Kristeva's words, "that conglomerate of fear, deprivation, and nameless frustration, which, properly speaking, belongs to the unnameable" (Kristeva 35). However, as he himself reveals in his recordings, Whatsitsname, unlike Shelley's monster, who was shunned both by his creator and the society, has a large number of followers. Therefore, he is at once Criminal X for a part of the society and "the model citizen" (Saadawi 140) for others. According to his follower, the young madman:

> 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 . . . (Saadawi 140).

Another follower, the old madman thinks that Whatsitsname is "an instrument of mass destruction that presages the coming of the savior that all the world's religions have predicted . . . the one who will annihilate people who have lost their way and gone astray" (Saadawi 140). He believes that by helping Whatsitsname in his mission, he is actually facilitating the advent of the savior for whom the whole world is anticipating. Whatsitsname's another follower, the eldest madman believes him to be the "saviour" (Saadawi 140). Thus, while a part of the society abhors Whatsitsname for his 'monstrosity', another part of the same society glorifies and almost reveres him for those same actions. Ironically, those who are on his side are termed as 'madmen', thereby articulating the common belief that a sane person should abide by the rules and regulations of the society; whoever dares to transgress social norms is labeled insane or mad.

However, Whatsitsname, at one point of time, is compelled to transgress his own law. As has already been mentioned before, his body was a composite of different parts of various victims and his goal was to avenge those persons whose body-parts have made up his body. But whenever he avenged someone, he lost that particular part of his body, which belonged to that person. Therefore, to continue his mission and stay alive, he needed a constant supply of body-parts. Whatsitsname determined that he would only use victim-flesh to repair his body-parts. But soon, he realized:

> My list of people to seek revenge on grew longer as my old body parts fell off and my assistants added parts from my new victims… under these circumstances I would face an open-ended list of targets that would never end. (Saadawi 146-147)

At one point of time, he realizes that the flesh used by his assistants to amend his body and keep him alive does not always come from innocent victims. He comes to know

from the magician, one of his assistants, that now half of his body was made up of criminal flesh. Realizing the concern of Whatsitsname, the magician says:

> Each of us has a measure of criminality . . . Someone who's been killed through no fault of his own might be innocent today, but he might have been a criminal ten years ago, when he threw his wife out onto the street, or put his ageing mother in an old people's home, or disconnected the water or electricity to a house with a sick child, who died as a result or so on. (Saadawi 149)

Therefore, criminality and its resultant monstrosity is not a fixed concept, rather a fluid one. Margrit Shildrick quite appropriately states:

> In place of a morality of principles and rules that speaks to a clear-cut set of binaries setting out the good and the evil, the self and the other, normal and abnormal, the permissible and the prohibited, I turn away from such normative ethics to embrace instead the ambiguity and unpredictability of an openness towards the monstrous other [...] to contest the binary that opposes the monstrous to the normal (qtd. in Merkelbach, The Monster Theory 4).

However, the magician's rationalization boosts Whatsitsname's self-assurance and he starts killing people at random to ensure an uninterrupted supply of new body-parts.

In this novel, the concept of monstrosity is more nuanced than the conventional representations of it in earlier literary works. Initially, there is the American power, which is responsible for initiating all the trouble. Backed by this superpower are national authorities like The Tracking and Pursuit Department, who never prioritize the interests of Iraqi people. As revealed by Saidi to Mahmoud, Brigadier Majid of The Tracking and Pursuit Department was employed by the Americans Coalition Provisional Authority to spread violence among the Iraqi people in the name of controlling them. He claims:

> . . . for a year or more he's been carrying out the policy of the American ambassador to create an equilibrium of violence on the streets between the Sunni and Shiite militias, so there'll be a balance later at the negotiating table to make new political arrangements in Iraq. The American Army is unable or unwilling to stop the violence, so at least a balance or an equivalence of violence has to be created. Without it, there won't be a successful political process. (Saadawic 170)

If the monstrous cruelty of the American forces is responsible for the birth of Whatsitsname, the failure of national authorities of post-invasion Iraq to ascertain security and peace is equally responsible for its existence. Therefore, in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, multiple facets of monstrosity become evident. When criminal flesh contaminates Whatsitsname's composite body, and he deviates from his initial aim of seeking justice for the victims whose body-parts have contributed in his existence, he becomes a symbol of the then social condition of Iraq, where everyone kills everyone. Khaled Hroub in his article "International Prize for Arabic Fiction 2014: *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Beyond Good and Evil", quite significantly opines:

> Saadawi's Frankenstein monster is a deadly creature of legend that has many fathers: the Iraqis and their religious denominations, terrorist organisations of

> all kinds, the Americans and the West, the Arabs and Iran. Each claims it is the others who are to blame for the brutality, the bloodshed and the killing, each washes his hands clean of all sin. Shesma, however, lives among them, sleeps in their houses and looks very much like them until they finally chase him out of town. All of them hate the ugly monster, but none are willing to admit that they too had a hand in creating and protecting it. (qtd. in Abdalkafor 12-13)

What becomes evident is that monstrosity is not physical; rather, it is an attribute developed by one's interactions with the society. Quite rightly does Rebecca Merkelbach in "The Monster in Me: Social Corruption and the Perception of Monstrosity in the Sagas of Icelanders" raise the question, "If a monster is lurking and there is no one to be threatened by it, is it a monster?" (23).

In Mary Shelley's novel, the creator, Victor Frankenstein, abandoned the monster. But in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* Whatsitsname himself abandons his creator Hadi after Hasib's spirit enters the composite corpse. Although the sequence of events differs, the creature's hatred for the creator is similar in both the novels. Like Victor Frankenstein's 'hideous progeny', Whatsitsname also believes that his creator is responsible for all his misfortune. In his first encounter with his 'father', Whatsitsname says:

You're responsible for the death of the guard at the hotel, Hasib Mohamed Jaafar . . . If you hadn't been walking past the hotel – the guard wouldn't have come close to the gate. He might have stayed close to the sentry box, which was relatively far from the outer gate, and opened fire from a distance on the suicide bomber driving the rubbish truck. The explosion might have caused him some injuries, or the blast might have thrown him, but he definitely wouldn't have died, and the next morning he could have gone home to his wife and his little daughter. (Saadawi 122)

When Haditries to remind him that he is his 'father', it was he who has brought him to existence, and for that he should be grateful towards him, Whatsitsname asserts:

> You're just a conduit Hadi . . . Think how many stupid mothers and fathers have produced geniuses and great men in history. The credit isn't due to them but to circumstances and other things beyond their control. You're just an instrument, or a surgical glove that Fate put on its hands to move pawns on the chessboard of life. (Saadawi 123)

Time and again, Whatsitsname punishes his creator, Hadi al-Attag, for bringing him to existence and making him live a monstrous life. On the other hand, when the officers of The Traffic and Pursuit Department fail to arrest Criminal X, they start torturing Hadi, to coerce him into falsely confessing his being Criminal X, knowing well that "this scrawny old man wouldn't be agile enough to run or put up much of a fight" (Saadawi 181). Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* here reminds us of the incident when Victor Frankenstein was taken into custody for the alleged murder of his childhood friend Clerval. In both cases, the 'creator' is suspected of being the perpetrator of crimes committed by the 'creation'. However, towards the end of the novel, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the security commanders fail to arrest Criminal X;

instead, the person arrested by them, whom they claim to be Criminal X, actually turns out to be Hadi al-Attag, whose face, at present, completely disfigured by another blast, resembles Whatsitsname's. It is quite interesting to note that while Victor's 'hideous progeny' was his alter ego in Shelley's novel, here Hadi, the creator becomes a distorted mirror image of Whatsitsname, his creation. Hadi, the creator, is now compelled to bear the 'monstrous identity' of his creation by the same society and law, which had earlier ascribed Whatsitsname with the identity of a 'monster'.

The novel ends with the image of people rejoicing over the capturing of the 'monster', who, as the readers ironically know, is actually Hadi. But, there is also the image of a mysterious man watching over:

The spectre of an unknown man also lingered there, standing for the past hour at the glassless window of a third-floor room, silently watching the people celebrate, smoking and lookingevery now and then at the dark clouds overhead. (Saadawi 272)

This might be Whatsitsname, but we cannot say that for sure. Rather, what is evident is that society and its law has failed to control the 'monster' and therefore, monstrosity will continue. Monstrosity is pervasive. People will go on killing each other in the name of achieving justice, as the ideas of justice and criminality are complexly entangled in post-war Iraq. Quite pertinently does Abdalkafor question:

> Who is the lawful and who is the lawless? Whose version of justice is the valid one; the American military's, Shesma's, Iraqis' - Shiite, Sunni, Kurd? None of these? (14)

In the chaotic socio-political condition of post-invasion Iraq, the binary between Humanity and monstrosity has been blurred.

Saadawi's novel, *Frankenstein in Baghdad,* thus, introduces a complex idea of 'monstrous identity'. An exhibition of various manifestations of monstrosity shatters our conventional ideas. That monstrosity is neither entirely physical, nor entirely intrinsic, nor entirely social, but rather a complex mixture of all these and probably much more, is in non-conformity with the traditional ideas of monstrosity. Whatsitsname, being a composite body, represents every religion and sect, and, therefore, attributing the identity of 'monster' to him implies that monstrosity is ubiquitous, irrespective of one's religious or sectarian identity. Moreover, the co-existence of innocent and criminal flesh in a single body – the body of Whatsitsname, the 'monster'– signifies social corruption. The confusion regarding the 'monstrous identities' of Hadi and Whatsitsname warns the readers against making hasty moral judgments. Instead of a traditional conclusion where getting rid of the monster establishes peace and order in the society, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* incites the readers to question the very justifiability of the term 'monster'. The novel, set in a Frankensteinesque atmosphere of gloom and terror, reveals that monsters are at once apart from and a part of one's self. Infact, when considered as Other, it remains complexly entangled with the Self. Scrutinizing the various aspects of monstrous identity, as revealed in this novel, we can conclude that Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* has redefined monstrosity.

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