



Topography of Fear and Violence in Ahmad Al Sadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad

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Abstract:

This paper examines the postcolonial Iraqi novel which gives a voice to the Iraqi writers to describe for the first time the political repression and violence in Iraq before and after the US invasion. They address the bad conditions in Iraq after the 2003 and discuss the reshaping of the Iraqi identity due to the sectarian conflicts that have endangers the minority population in this pluralistic society. We intend to stress the contemporary fears of Iraqi people through the use of the monster. In this paper, the researchers attempt to present a new voice in the Iraqi novel that was silenced for a long time. The Iraqi writers tend to describe aesthetically the terrible national condition in Iraq post 2003.

Keywords: American invasion; terror; violence; monstrosity

Introduction

Iraq's Literature has witnessed many changes and transformations in its expression practically after the collapse of the dictator, Saddam Hussian. Writers are free to express the realistic experiences they themselves witnessed during and after the collapse of the regime. A new Iraqi voice comes to appear as a result of the freedom the Iraqi writers have post 2003. Almost all the narratives written post 2003 discusses the violence and fear of the Iraqis during and after the American invasion. Modern Iraqi writers tend want to convey the harsh and unbearable reality of Iraqi society as it is without retouching it. This terrible reality is described aesthetically through the use various means and styles to sketch the bad and terrifying conditions



of this country. Unluckily, The Iraqis still experienced violence and fear after the collapse of the dictator because the American invasion conducted more violence towards the Iraqis who continued to suffer the pain of the occupation and the sectarian wars followed the occupation.

Al Sadawi's Arabic Booker Prize-winning novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) relates the story of the brutality and violence that erupted after the US invasion of Iraq, and seeks to examine the reasons behind the increase of violence and pain after the invasion. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a story about a monster that is created from the remains of bombing victims, which are often treated as garbage. Al Sadawi takes nothing from Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* except the theme of monstrosity which becomes a prominent theme in Iraq's literature. The Frankenstein-like monster shows the consequences of the American military invasion on Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, which resulted in a form of man-made monstrosity. This novel offers an insight into terrorism and violence under the guise of the 'war on terror'. Franzak and Noll (2006) defines the multiple faces of violence in the world: "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). *Frankenstein in Baghdad* starts when Hadi, the old junk dealer, is appalled and distressed by the spread of ragged corpses everywhere in Baghdad owing to the chaos caused both by the American invasion and by the horror caused by the sectarian groups of Iraqis fighting themselves. Hadi is described in the novel as : "a scruffy ,unfriendly man in his fifties who always smelled of alcohol" (FB 10) His friends in the neighborhood accuse him for watching "lots of movies" (FB 18) because he tells many stories that are infused with a great deal of horrified realistic details. When Hadi loses his best friend Nadim in an explosion, he searches for his body to give it a proper burial. He is aghast that it "had been hard to separate Nadim's flesh from that of the horse" (FB 23) . This is an indication for "the loss of his [Nadim's] humanity." (Elayyan 160) Hadi bitterly describes the explosion:

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 (*FB* 40-41). Mahmoud Sawadi describes the same scene from another angle:

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)

Describing the same scene from different angles contributes to the comprehensive meaning of the novel and forces the reader "into much closer scrutiny of the text" (Hutchinson, 35).

There are other means through which violence is revealed. There is another type of violence during the time of the invasion represented by people who stole other people's houses who escaped to other cities and places for fear of death. Because people do not feel safe in their houses and they know that they might get killed if they go outdoors, therefore; the sense of fear is always there in the Iraqis' hearts. Violence and death become part of people's daily routine after the invasion due to the security deterioration. People are not safe in their houses. They know that if they go outdoors they might be killed in explosions.

After the explosion Hadi bears the responsibility of gathering the dead bodies scattered in the streets of Baghdad and give them a proper burial. He tells his neighbors:"I wanted to hand him over to the forensics department, because it was a complete corpse that had been left in the streets like rubbish. It's a human being, guys, a person."(*FB* 45) During his mission he finds a nose of a man after a vast explosion which kills many Iraqis. He takes it to his house to stitches it to the corpse he makes out of many scattered human parts. He



tells this story to his neighbor, the barber ,who asks:"But it wasn't a complete corpse. You made it complete?," Hadi replies: "I made it complete so it wouldn't be treated as rubbish, so it would be respected like other dead people and given a proper burial," (*FB 25*). Hadi 's creation is not given a name because it does not stand for one single group , party or religion. Hadi's neighbor call him Shesma . It is prepared to be buried different from Shelly's Frankenstein who wishes to be given life and be treated like a living human being. But contrary to Hadi's intentions, a lost human spirit enters the corpse ,and it becomes a living creature:

He lodged inside the corpse, filling it from head to toe, because, probably, he realized then, it didn't have a soul, while he was a soul without a body'. It declares itself 'the only justice in this country.' Provokingly, the monster calls itself Iraq's "model citizen... because I'm made up of body parts from people of diverse elements, ethnicities, tribes, races and social background. I represent the impossible mix that never came about in the past .(*FB 38*)

The creature is, like all children, born pure because he is made up of the bodies of victims. Everybody sees in him hope for revenge, or even a new beginning for the country. Some people think that Frankenstein is the ideal Iraqi citizen. He is made up of parts of people from every background. Others think that this monster is a tool of destruction that will pave the way for the appearance of the Savior, so they support him to make it possible for the Savior to come. While others believe that he is the Savior. Shesma has noble goals at the beginning because he decides to achieve justice by having a revenge on the people responsible for the terror in Iraq.

At the beginning "Saadawi's creature feels he is misunderstood. He's not a bad man,he wishes to explain. He's not killing at random. Instead, he's after revenge. He is killing the men whose bombs created his parts" (Garner, par. 11). The monster sounds like a savior. He wants to exact revenge on the killers, criminals, and terrorists.

Shesma wants all people to know his intentions therefore; he records his story and sends it to Mahmoud al-Sawadi, a journalist. Shesma reveals his intentions to achieve justice:"With the help of God and of Heaven, I will take revenge on all the criminals. I will finally bring about justice on earth and



there will no longer be a need to wait in agony for justice to come in heaven or after death." (*FB 137*)

During his mission he attracts many supporters who are ready to scarifies their lives for him because they he is the leader who might give them a peaceful life and bring them justice that has been lost for a long time. Omar Dewachi says:"With the inevitable failure of earthly forms of justice, the Shesma cultivates a cult of followers in the city, from the most wretched who see him as the embodiment of a perverted God-sent justice. His followers offer him comfort, love and their own bodies as a sacrifice towards his undertaking." (Dewachi, par.10) This blind support makes Shesma establish his own kingdom with a set of rules and laws one of which his body must consist of the parts of innocent victims whom he has to revenge on their murderers. Every time Shesma kills one a part of his body decays and needs to be replaced, therefore; he has to continue killing to replace the decayed parts. Killing people must continue so that the monster can live. His blind supporters start killing innocent people to replace the withered parts of their leader. At the beginning, Shesma becomes angry when he knows his body now consists of parts of innocent people, but an idea has crept into his mind which gives him a relief. This idea is that all people are all people are half criminal and half innocent.

One of his supports informs him: "Tomorrow he'll tell you you're three quarters criminal, and later you'll wake up to find you've become totally criminal. You'll be the super criminal, because you're made up of criminals, a bunch of criminals" (*FB 151*).He sees people killing one another randomly which makes him think that it is difficult to distinguish the innocent from the criminal .In order to live he has to justify the killing of the innocents. He himself justifies his killing of a terrifying old man who was hiding from the bullets after he needs to replace his eye. He justifies: "The old man was a sacrificial lamb that the Lord had placed in my path. He was the Innocent Man Who Will Die Tonight [...] The bullets from the fighters were bound to hit him, and he would have died right here [...] So all I had done was hasten his death. All the other innocent people who came down this desolate Street will die too." (*FB 155*)



Sadaawi wants to show that the military and political forces controlling Iraq at that time were the responsible parties for creating this monster. When a Colonel wonders who has created this monster his friend informs him : "I think we played a role in creating this creature, in one way or another" (*FB* 209).

Hereafter, the Colonel begins to believe that the American invasion on Iraq is the reason behind the appearance of this monster: "The monster itself is their project. It was the Americans who were behind this monster" (*FB* 259). At the end of the novel The American troops announce that they have no relation with this monster and they are chasing him. Finally they announce that they have arrested him, but, in fact , the one whom they have arrested is Hadi whose face is so disfigured that one can not differentiate him from the monster:

In shock, he wiped his hand along the surface of the mirror to make sure it was really a mirror and then he leaned in to examine his disfigurement. He wanted to cry, but all he could do was stare. As he looked closer, he detected something deeper: this wasn't the face of Hadi the junk dealer; it was the face of someone he had convinced himself was merely a figment of his fertile imagination. It was the face of the Whatsitsname. (*FB* 258-9)

Omar Dewachi concludes that this novel "is indeed a commentary on contemporary colonial violence and its attempt to obscure and deny local and personal histories and wounds of ordinary Iraqis" (par. 11). Al Sadawi states that not only the US troops are to blame for creating this monster but other Iraqis are responsible for his appearance. Hroub argues:

Saadawi's Frankenstein monster is a deadly creature of legend that has many fathers: the Iraqis and their religious denominations, terrorist organizations 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. (par. 13- 14)



The creators either lose control over their monsters or just abandon them on purpose. This is clear not only in Shelley's text, but also in Sadaawi's.

Finally, Saadawi reflects the civil violence in Iraq by creating a monster that is made up of all races and sects of Iraq. The main events of the novel occur in the Al Betaween 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.

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 Iraqi people support killing and brutality, and blood shedding. *The novel* states that it is impossible to find justice in Iraq after the American Invasion. At the end of the novel the monster is free and the killing continues.

Conclusion

AlSadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* describes the harsh and multiple realities in Iraq after the American invasion. It attempts to show that Iraqis are caught in the 'awe' of decades of imperial brutality. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, violence is ubiquitous; everybody is killing everybody. Even Shesma's claim to achieve justice by avenging the victims cannot be maintained. The novel is full of violence; every party thinks they are fighting for a valid reason and see their violence as lawful while others see it as lawless. His body becomes a mixture of criminals' as well as victims' flesh, contaminating his mission. In this novel, issues of innocence and criminality are entangled in complex ways.



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