GOTHIC POLITICS IN AHMED SAADAWI’S
FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD (2013)

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Abstract: The present article examines a narrative of darkness to illuminate the rhetoric of haunting and monstrosity. Gothicity evokes a sense of indeterminateness and it dramatizes disruptive incorporeal occurrences as interrogated in Ahmed Saadawi’s Frankenstein in Baghdad, a war Frankenfiction. It stages horror to chronicle national disintegration through the rise of a sewn-together zombie to mark the appalling arrival of the Iraqi dissenter. The new twenty-first-century monster is a zombie to defy marginality and to associate monstrosity with deviance and abnormality. Within this rationale, the present study investigates the aesthetics of Postcolonial Gothic politics to examine the use of the supernatural, the grotesque body, the monstrous abject, and the haunted ruins to depict a dismembered nation through the deployment of eerie motifs and surreal techniques. My premise fleshes out the Frankenstein hubris to dismantle the US political culture in Iraq. The aim is to reframe the modern Gothic monster as an emblem of reverse colonialism to defy the imperialist ideologies and to articulate past trauma through the rhetoric of bodily horror, haunting and ghostly fear.

Keywords: gothic politics, postcolonial gothicism, monstrosity, Frankenstein, Frankenfiction

Introduction: Gothic Criticism

Gothic in literature is broader than genre, deeper than plot, and wider than a single tradition. (Williams, 1995: 241)

The appeal of Gothic fiction resides in its rejection of rationalism, its desire to move beyond the empirical world and its quest for the mysteriousness. More importantly, the Gothic possesses an outstanding array of “potential significations from ethnicity, fashion, art, music and literature” (Reeve, 2012: 233). Gothic make-believe, thus, can be identified as a discourse that reveals the shaded side of modernity. As such, it is not an expression of escapist fiction; on the contrary, it embodies a threat to socio-political stability and a temptation to violate boundaries. Modern Gothic writing has dynamically marked the rise of national literatures through the use of “Gothic
imaginary [which] is a vehicle for staging and challenging ideological thinking” (Riquelme, 2000: 589). Horror tales are by nature allegorical and symbolic. Horror imagery plays a remarkable role in subtly alluding to the impending demise of a political order and depicting a post-apocalyptic future to expose the ugly face of technological advances and the extensive use of militarism.

Horror is an expression of the corporeal dimension, derived from the Latin horrēre meaning “to shiver [or] to bristle,” a point mentioned by James B. Twitchell: “From this comes the most appropriate trope for horror—creeping flesh or, more simply, the creeps” (1988: 11). Fear is a major thread that unites all Gothic fiction; a fear that “is not merely a theme or an attitude [but] also has consequences in terms of form, style and the social relations of the texts” (Punter, 1996: 18). The Gothic unsettles the present by introducing paranoia, anxiety, disgust, and horror into familiar spaces or structures. The display of uncontrolled and violent sensations is the “staple emotional responses of the gothic” (Botting, 1996: 6). What is paramount is that “Gothic tropes of fragmentation, psychological and physical disarray, and hesitation could be regarded as the discursive repertoire underlying the representation of the polymorphousness of fear and its affects” (Cavallaro, 2002: 113).

Tropes of horror fiction are deployed in political contexts to examine fearsome issues and to dismantle abusive systems. The intersection of horror and politics is, thus, an “explicit blending of the Gothic and the government, of politics and poltergeists, and of campaigns and carnage. A public discourse that not only equates politicians with monsters, but that also encompasses considerations of the campaign challenges” (Knopf, 2020: 5) that give rise to the rhetoric of monstrosity as a sign of opposition.

Twentieth-century Gothic fiction identifies race as “a master signifier of monstrosity” (Halberstam, 1995: 5). The Gothic form functions “as a curious knot in the formations of modernity, figures of excess, monstrosity and sublimity around which reason, progress and knowledge cohere or collapse” (Botting, 2008: 154). The Gothic speaks of “the fascination with the violation of cultural boundaries combined with anxieties bred by the possibly dire repercussions of transgression” (Cavallaro, 2002: 8). Gothic narratives are ambiguously irrational, advocating excessive themes and disruptive structures; what is more, Gothic figures are “responsive to changing times, continue to serve as sites of projection and fantasy, metaphor of form and medium” (Botting, 1996: 199). Gothic is ambiguous and an amalgamation of fantasy and mundane reality. More precisely, it heavily relies on defamiliarization and estrangement tropes to highlight surreal disruption. As such, Gothic is “a vibrant, flexible mode, mutating to fit changing cultural and ideological dynamics” (Powell and Smith, 2006: 2) within the multiplicity of postmodern and postcolonial studies to investigate new hybrid forms and to explore uncanny atmosphere.
Etymologically, monster comes from the Latin *monstrum*, meaning *divine omen* or an aberrant/supernatural occurrence. Monster has sprouted from the Latin verb *mōnstrᾱre*; meaning “to reveal [or] to show and demonstrate” (Ng, 2004: 4) while the Latin root *monere* means “to warn” (Ng, 2004: 4). Monsters such as zombies and vampires are definite threats, and the peril they pose must be defeated to restore political stability and harmony. Monsters provoke horror since they literally personify the abnormal, inspiring disgust and revulsion. The threat to normality is demonstrated through odd behavior and transgressive conduct to challenge the dominant societal rules. These monsters are labeled deviants, a “category that includes stalkers, slashers, and psycho-killers” (Russell, 1998: 241). Postcolonial Frankenstein signifies an imminent crisis; his colossal grotesque form, no longer under the control of his creator, can be associated with such ghostly things as a plague or distrust of politicians, hegemonic institutions, or countries like America that have been involved in acts of wars and terrorism: “Monsters and ghosts of all incarnations frequently represent the feared, mistrusted, or misunderstood Outsider and the marginalized Other. The monstrous is a way to conceptualize that which society finds shocking or exotic, especially that which may upset the status quo” (Knopf, 2020: 6). Within this rationale, monsters in modern horror fiction are often metaphors for hostile existential and political realities that both colonial authority and dictatorial regimes deny and attempt to expurgate. Monster narratives are engaged with heavy historical/political trappings to grapple with themes of violence and dehumanization.

**Rationale and Scope**

The present study interrogates *Frankenstein in Baghdad* as a twenty-first-century Postcolonial Gothic novel to explore the effects of neo-colonial practices, economic disenfranchisement, and warfare which are all part and parcel of colonial legacies. The Iraqi writer, Ahmed Saadawi (b. 1973) stages horror to chronicle national disintegration through the rise of a sewn-together zombie to mark the appalling return of the Iraqi dissenter. The new twenty-first-century monster is a zombie to defy marginality and to associate monstrosity with deviance to reinforce the process of transformation in order to usher new modes of resistance. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) has been replayed and adapted to the twenty-first-century Iraq in the wake of the US invasion in 2003 through the depiction of the rampaging zombie; a massive corpse stitched out of dead body parts of the Iraqi citizens who belong to different ethnic backgrounds. As such, the giant Iraqi zombie is an embodiment of victims sewed into one whole to symbolize the Iraqi national unity. The interest in the zombie outbreak in horror fiction is to question zombie-becoming. The appeal of Zombieism displays key tropes of exaggeration...
and burlesque through the process of physical decomposition and moral decay. The Iraqi Frankenfiction1 blows fresh life into the classical symbols of monstrosity through the portrayal of What’s-its-name as a Postcolonial Gothic figuration and as a hideous prodigy in his own right to signify subversion against George Bush’s 1991 New World Order.

Within this rationale, Postcolonial Gothic is an act of re-engagement with a twenty-first-century nation that has been inflicted with systemic violence, expulsion, and plundering through the use of eerie motifs and surreal techniques. The petrifying Gothic politics is examined to address a number of research questions: 1) Why is Gothic fiction popular? And why should we read horror stories? 2) What horrifies in Frankenstein? 3) What are the aesthetics of Gothic politics? 4) What is Gothic now or how Gothic is deployed to embody fears of Otherness in different historical/cultural contexts? 5) Can Gothic politics map postcolonial resistance? The aim is to reframe the modern Gothic monster as an emblem of reverse colonialism to defy the imperialist ideology of US regarded as a vampire-free garrison driven by a cannibalistic intent. Iraq has been ravaged by “global geopolitical forces in the last three decades” (Botting, 2019: 2) and the military tactic of “shock and awe” (Ullman and Wade, 1996: 23) has prepared for “the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003” (Ullman and Wade, 1996: 23). Monster-makers and monster-killers are caught in a vicious circle of violence and terror. The Iraqi Frankenstein has learned the language of curse and has exhibited an uncontrollable energy to spread chaos, disorder, and fear.

Gothic politics has been advocated by postcolonial writers to deconstruct colonial violence, horror, and trauma; it is a literary enterprise to write back to “a body of imperial Gothic literature that supported the colonial project through the othering of colonized peoples” (Ilott, 2019: 20). The postcolonial theorist Tabish Khair astutely states that the “screams and sulky silences of Gothic fiction do not set out to ‘represent’ the Other; they primarily register the irreducible presence of Otherness” (2009: 173). Postcolonial Gothic is an act of negotiation with alterity to articulate past trauma through the rhetoric of bodily horror, haunting and ghostly fear, hence, Postcolonial Gothic fiction renders the monster-makers themselves monstrous to expose the tensions of imperialistic relations. It is a genre in which the white ghosts of hegemony re-emerged in fearful disturbing shapes in clashes with dreadful domestic resistance. Thereby, Postcolonial Gothic fiction is “open to a play of ambivalence, a dynamic of limit and transgression” (Botting, 1996: 9) to contest neo-colonial boundaries. Therefore, a Postcolonial Gothic reading of Frankenstein in Baghdad presents a non-linear retelling of a traumatized evasion of a troubling past and a Gothic present that bears traces of the author’s creative attempts to articulate both incurable fears and postcolonial predicaments.
Frankenstein in Baghdad: A ‘Blowback’ of the White Frankenstein

Violence can be justified, but it will never be legitimate. (Arendt, 1969: 52)

Frankenstein has evolved as a modern lexical item to refer to fear, horror, and anxiety. The ambiguity of the term is that Frankenstein is deployed to signify both the monster and the monster-maker. The US has created several dreadful monsters that have run amok and have massacred many vulnerable nations. This underscores the vital strength of the Frankenstein metaphor; its protean nature that defies categorization. In this sense, Frankenstein in Baghdad is a cautionary tale about monster-making that goes beyond control. Frankenstein in Baghdad can be interpreted as a “blowback” (Johnson, 2000: 32) to interrogate contemporary animosity against the United States of America which originates from its terrorism and its “plot of boomerang violence” (Johnson, 2000: 32). My premise fleshes out the Frankenstein hubris to dismantle the US political culture in the Arab region and especially in Iraq. More significantly, the Frankenstein monster functions as a dystopian threat to its creator, denouncing the rising uneasiness over dark neo-colonial anxieties.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the American President Bush raised this question: “Why do they hate us?” The recklessness of the US foreign policy has inspired hatred to the extent of bringing so much “blowback” upon itself. Frankenstein in Baghdad is an eye-opening account of the US imperialist ideology in Iraq and a literary enterprise of retaliation. American politicians speak of Iraq as a rogue state, but the question poses itself: Has America itself become “a rogue super-power?” (Johnson, 2000: 1066). The destroyers of the Iraqi socio-political fabric have institutionalized ethnic divisions and “as Iraq becomes more of an international concern, an object for debates and discussion, there is a danger of identity erosion. The more talk about a country as an object, the greater the risk of the eradication of its sovereignty” (Al-Musawi, 2006: xvii). As such, “blowback” is the tangible cost of the Bush administration for advocating the machinery of neo-colonial practices, thus, the “blowback” itself has led to more blowbacks within a vicious circle of destruction and violence. The war, as a theme, has become the most critical focal point of academic investigation since the toppling of the ruling regime in 2003. The US invasion has “generated a widespread—with some particularly dynamic modes—mass culture of critical engagement with texts, in a pragmatic, immediate, interpretive fashion” (Gupta, 2011: 26). This is attributed to the US-centered world maintaining a global empire scheme and the rhetoric of the Cold War to justify aggression, brutality, and exploitative hegemony.
A myriad of narrative responses has emerged to serve as a counter attack of the American “adventurism” in Iraq that has led to anti-American hostility. Noam Chomsky’s *Interventions* (2007) rigorously criticizes Bush’s malicious intervention in Iraq, predicting that the growing hatred and anger against the West and the Americans could reap tumultuous acts of terrorist retaliations. Giorgio Agamben’s *State of Exception* severely condemns Bush’s war against terrorism; a war described as “a lethal machine” intended to deprive the indigenous individual of his “legal identity”: “What is new about President Bush’s order is that it radically erases any legal status of the individual, thus, producing a legally unclassified being” (2005: 3). More significantly, Judith Butler’s *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* aptly interrogates the state of violence and its victims. Butler believes that war is framed to heighten “conditions in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence and death” (2009: 25). Rasheed El-Enani’s *Arab Representation of the Occident: East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction* investigates the “radical changes” in the American representation in the Arab literary fiction “towards the negative” (2006: 154). This is attributed to the appalling torture of the Iraqi detainees in Abu Ghraib Prison in Baghdad. As such, the proliferation of fiction and non-fiction about the Iraq’s calamitous war experiences and political disintegration reflect the urge not only to read Iraq, but also a need to reinterpret it, hence post-2003 Iraqi fiction is a strong manifestation of war trauma colored by dark nightmares.

**Poetics of Postcolonial Gothic: Rhetoric of Monstrosity**

Gothic literature is a literature of destabilization in that it inspires its readers to ask questions about themselves, their society, and the cosmos surrounding them. It serves as a cultural artifact, reflecting the concerns and fears not only of the time in which it is written but also of the time in which it is read. (Oakes, 2000: 1; emphasis added)

The politicized Iraqi literature, under the ruthless rule of the Baath Party, has been engaged in a series of wars fictionalized as “a wedding party and martyrdom as a feast” (Ali, 2008: 213). The ruling regime’s oppressive authority and absolute control of literary productions drove many Iraqi poets, writers, and intellectuals to leave their homeland:

What happened to Iraqi cultural production during the terrifying years of the Baathist rule, under the sanctions of the 1990s, or following the 2003 U.S. invasion and occupation? What has been the role of the Iraqi intellectual since
then, and how has Iraqi culture responded to memories and traumas of recent, violent pasts? Moreover, who, for that matter, can speak in the name of Iraq at a time when the country is more fragmented than ever before and an increasing number of writers live abroad? (Moosavi, 2015: 383)

Post-2003 Iraqi narratives render the state of vulnerability and dismemberment, war trauma, and the cyclic nature of violence after the fall of Saddam’s regime to reconstruct the image of the repressed and to interrogate the effects of ethnic/cultural cleansing.

The Iraq’s ambiguous political spectacle is attributed to its oddity; it is “once a war, a civil war and a post war occupation” (Luckhurst, 2012: 721). This oddity inspires the close association between the Gothic and the historical events to deconstruct the line between “the terror sublime and the uncanny, the rational and the irrational, science and art—and indeed, between the living and the dead [which] is central to the workings and effects of the Gothic” (Tibbets, 2011: 5). This brings forth, Devendra Varma notes, the difference between terror and horror; terror is associated with “awful apprehension” (1957: 16) while horror is related to “sickening realization” (1957: 16). The difference is between “the smell of death and stumbling against a corpse” (1957: 16), thus, terror creates “an intangible atmosphere of spiritual psychic dread [while] horror resorts to a cruder presentation of the macabre” (1957: 16). Both terror and horror are “drawn together by Gothicity as a cultural discourse that provides the underpinning of disparate narratives of darkness of which terror and horror are the recurring affects” (Cavallaro, 2002: 9). The Gothic mode blends the tangible with the intangible, colonial past and present trauma to question paradigms of terror of war, fear of death, and the morbid supernatural.

The representation of war’s aftermath demonstrates the Iraqi textual realms “either explicitly against the invasion or against war in general” (Gupta, 2011: 13). Iraqi novelists, once hushed by a tyrannical regime, have dramatized a plethora of themes to document death, existential despair, and religious sectarian fight. Yasmina Khadra’s The Sirens of Baghdad (2007), Inaam Kachachi’s The American Granddaughter (2010), and Sinan Antoon’s The Corpse Washer (2013) fictionalize shocking scenes of death, routinized everyday violence, and decapitated bodies. This underscores the maturity of the Iraqi fiction after the toppling of Saddam’s regime to monitor the grim Iraqi realities. I seek to establish Frankenstein in Baghdad within the realm of Gothicity to usher in what can be termed an “aesthetic of the unwelcome” (Cavallaro, 2002: 1) to conceptualize a novel tackling of Zombieism as an enduring grotesque aspect of psychological and physiological deviance to elicit both pleasure and revulsion, thereby, “what simultaneously scares and cheers us is the recognition of everyone’s more or less latent monstrosity”
Frankenstein in Baghdad is a national dark tragedy that reveals the haunting awareness to interrogate the disturbing past and the colonial present within the paradigm of Gothic bodily horror.

Shelley’s Frankenstein is “the fountainhead for seemingly endless rivers of remakes, sequels, and various types of productions” (Friedman and Kavey, 2016: 2). It occupies the literary space as a cultural myth and as a metaphor of fear; a universal tale of what makes a monster monstrous. There is a subtle pleasure in reworking the classics to disrupt fixity of critical interpretations and to open fresh possibilities for the theme of fear and horror. Saadawi’s Frankenstein in Baghdad condemns the US modern warfare that Gothicizes the “War on Terror” and the act of revisiting the old text enhances the poetic vibrancy of the modern Gothic fiction which itself reflects “a cluster of cultural anxieties to which Gothic writing and literary modernism, along with postcolonial writing and some popular forms of expression, continue to respond” (Riquelme, 2000: 589). Frankenstein in Baghdad, awarded the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) in 2014, marks the extraordinariness of the Iraqi novel that has occupied a rightful position in the literary scene both nationally and internationally. Frankenstein in Baghdad boldly denounces the white Frankenstein hubris in the twenty-first-century war-torn Iraq. It also illustrates the state of estrangement between the Iraqis and their government, the loss of the ruling elite’s moral authority, and the increasing use of militarism to expose fierce repression and economic crisis.

The tedious witnessing of corporeal mutilation creates the centrality of “a dismembering violence” (Bahoora, 2015: 185) as a powerful theme in postcolonial Iraqi narratives. Portrayals of tortured bodies, decapitated heads, and mutilated corpses establish the Iraqi body as a site of repetitive practices with violence. The horror of violence is rendered within the mundane/unreal threads to underscore the supremacy of the uncanny, the supernatural, and the monstrous since the “literary recourse to the metaphysical, whether through the subconscious, nightmares, or the supernatural, are frequent stylistic conventions of post-2003 Iraqi literary production, narrating a terrain of unspeakable violence and its many afterlives” (Bahoora, 2015: 185). My premise foregrounds the aesthetics of Postcolonial Gothic fiction to examine the use of the supernatural, the grotesque body, the monstrous abject, and the haunted ruins. As such, the “post” in the postcolonial signifies the incapability of living in the colonial aftermath as dramatized in Frankenstein in Baghdad, a dystopian fiction of war nightmare. It explores dark fears, forbidding settings, erotic desires, and mysterious energies to expose the catastrophe of Iraq’s national disintegration. It is a dark Gothic tale in which terror and horror interact to anticipate images of physical abnormality conjured by intangible forces.

Past enactment of killings intervenes in the dark present to question what has been cast aside. Frankenstein in Baghdad fulfills the description of the Gothic as
“the art of exciting surprise and horror” (Scott, 1987: 91) to narrate the resurrection of the past within a bloody traumatic domestic space. As a dark narrative, it is antagonistic to verisimilitude to articulate the aesthetics of the horror. Dark absurdities of post-2003 Iraq are rendered once as ordinary and once as extraordinary within the realm of the supernatural to mock the new democratic Iraq after two years of the US invasion and before the rise of ISIS, a point illustrated in the novel’s closing quote: “Isn’t life a blend of things that are plausible and others that are hard to believe” (Saadawi, 2018: 755). Baghdad is mired in chaos dramatized in a magical-realist world of walking corpses, wandering souls, and tactful soothsayers. This is typical of postcolonial Iraqi fiction which has “veered towards the fantastic, the surrealist not out of renunciation of the real, but out of verisimilitude” (Ghazoul, 2008: xiv). This is attributed to war absurdities: “it was anarchy out there, there was no logic behind what was happening” (Saadawi, 2018: 741).

Hadi Al-Attaq’s Macabre Frankenstein

Hadi Al-Attaq’s macabre enterprise is intended to memorialize the death of his close friend Nahem Abdaki. This creative enterprise signals the departure from the real horror narration of bloody scenes to the mysterious “resurrection” (Kristeva, 1982 [1980]: 11) of the past. A surreal technique is employed to reanimate Hadi’s Frankenstein by Hasib’s restless spirit after being killed by a suicidal bomber. As such, the huge corpse becomes a whole, body and soul. What’s-its-name, the corpse’s name, has risen to roam a dystopian wasteland as an appalling superhero to correct past wrongs. His resurrection is a signifier of a national metaphor to restore political stability. However, he is destined to be a destroyer or a blood-thirsty monster voicing Iraq’s state of fragmentation since he has been born out of civil wars, lawless violence, and hatred.

More significantly, the allusion of the cinematic monster in Robert De Niro’s remake of *Frankenstein* (1994) has an affinity with Hadi’s story of What’s-its-name as it narrates the construction of a supernatural creature assembled from dead people’s body parts. This poetic allusion establishes Hadi as a storyteller who blurs the borderlines between fact and fiction. Antithetically, “Frankenstein”, mentioned twice in the novel, is associated with What’s-its-name rather than its creator. The Iraqi writer uses the myth of Frankenstein to establish “The Frankenstein-esque atmosphere of horror [that] was strongly prevalent in Iraq during the period covered by the novel” (Najjar, 2014: paragraph 7). Unlike Shelley’s Frankenstein, Hadi articulates the humanity of his creation: “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” (Saadawi, 2018: 81).
Hadi’s trauma is transformed into oral narratives in Aziz el-Masry’s café: “Hadi was shocked to see that the bodies of explosion victims were all mixed up together and to hear the mortuary worker tell him to put a body together and carry it off—take this leg and this arm and so on” (Saadawi, 2018: 603). At the finale, Hadi’s face, after a huge explosion, is disfigured and he is arrested for being responsible of all What’s-its-name’s crimes:

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. (Saadawi, 2018: 726)

Hadi’s detention does not put a seal on the dark narrative for this ostensible final tragedy is a prelude to other ghostly returns. The last page depicts a mysterious figure in the companionship of a cat watching Baghdad’s streets. Hadi is not the Criminal X and his tragic end reveals that the Iraqis are all Frankenstein as issues of lawless and lawful violence are blurred. The loose end leaves the reader adrift in the aftermath of Hadi’s demise; the stimulating question is of whose justice is rightful; the American intervention, or the Sunni, or the Shiite. The final point is that Hadi’s dramatic fate is inevitable for being the maker of a monster. In this sense, Hadi functions as a subtle projection of America’s creation of many hideous monsters in war zones, thereby, America must be tracked for wreaking havoc in the Arab world.

Elishva: The Mad/Blessed Gothic Character

The old Christian widow, Elishva, is a phantasmagorical Gothic character wearing “thick glasses dangling from her neck” (Saadawi, 2018: 151). She is an amalgamation of mysticism and insanity living in a huge haunted house described as a “strange museum” in a “style favored by Iraqi Jews” (Saadawi, 2018: 46). She is described by her neighbors as the mad/blessed woman in a manner reminiscent of the Victorian madwoman in the attic. More importantly, she is an embodiment of the female hysteria suffering from a trauma after the death of her son, Daniel, in the Iraq-Iran War.

Aesthetically, Elishva’s traumatic experience can be interpreted within the frame of Gothic Postmodernism as she exists “on the margins between reality and unreality, self and other, fear and desire, reason and unreason, between past, present and future” (Beville, 2009: 96). Gothic Postmodernism functions as an
“outlet” (Beville, 2009: 33) to investigate Elishva’s unconscious anxieties and fears. As such, it is a genre “in which Gothic elements fuel postmodernist explorations of reality and hauntology” (Beville, 2009: 11) to underpin “the processes of subjectivity, inducing silent screams as readers’ illusions are shattered” (2009: 11). Elishva’s present moment is haunted by the specter of the past and her Gothic house underlies the *Unheimliche* concept of history that there is no escape from the past as articulated by Sigmund Freud: “on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight . . . everything is *Unheimliche* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (2003: 225). This practice of postcolonial *Unheimliche* symbolizes Elishva’s sense of alienation and estrangement and her house is the place of dim mysteriousness; a tormented soul living in delusions in a dark house lit by lanterns similar to a mediaeval asylum narrating “bizarre stories” (Saadawi, 2018: 36). The house’s *Uncanny* air of Gothicism, built in Jewish style, is a manifestation of interplay of reality and fantasy. She is also a symbol of multi-confessional Iraq; she performs religious rituals at the church, at the mosques, and at the synagogues seeking a miracle, like many grieved Iraqi mothers, to be reunited with her lost son.

She lives alone with her cat, Nabu, and cherishes the ghostly companionship of the picture of St George the Martyr as she believes in his spiritual powers to bring back her lost son: “She looked at the picture of the saint hanging in front of her, his lance raised and the dragon crouching beneath him. She wondered why he hadn’t killed the dragon years ago. Why was he stuck in that posture, ready to strike, she wondered? Everything remains half completed, exactly like now: she wasn’t exactly a living being, but not a dead one either” (Saadawi, 2018: 554). She always fantasizes conversations with her patron saint, representative of interreligious “fraternity and multiculturalism” (Riches, 2015: 1), every night pleading to be given a sign that her son is still alive. What’s-its-name serves as a mysterious version of her son and she has brought him “out of anonymity” (Saadawi, 2018: 149). What is more, she supports his quest of revenge and celebrates the death of Abu Zaidon, “the Baathist who had taken her son by the collar and dragged him to the unknown” (Saadawi, 2018: 41). She calls him Daniel; a biblical name which means God’s Judgment. Symbolically, What’s-its-name acts a sovereign to avenge the victims of violence and terror. She revisits the past by establishing a maternal relation with an enigmatic monstrous figure. At the finale, her union with her grandson, Daniel, marks a drastic shift in her life; instead of thinking of revenge, she accepts God’s will and finds in her grandson a great solace. The tranquility of St George’s posture and her imaginary dialogues signal the process of her moral growth; from loss and alienation to a peaceful faith.
Four Dead Beggars

The American police interrogate an eerie scene of four dead beggars in “dirty and tattered clothes and their heads hung forward” (Saadawi, 2018: 189). Each beggar holds the neck of the man in front of him in a circle creating “a weird tableau or a theatrical scene (Saadawi, 2018: 189) as though they were all strangling each other. This horrifying spectacle is symbolic of domestic violence. It underscores an aesthetic aspect of Gothicism; “exploring Gothic is also exploring fear” (Punter, 1996: 18) through the use of the supernatural to evoke dark and heavy mood. The dramatic depiction of this spooky scene underlies the state of “transgression and excess” (Botting, 1996: 1) to exhibit a fascination with the “irrational, the immoral and the fantastic” (Botting, 1996: 2). Within this rationale, the prominent feature of Gothic is the atmosphere; one of a malevolent and an ominous terror. What’s-its-name’s ugly face incites the beggars to attack him aggressively just because he is different and does not fit in. The aesthetic significance of this “weird” scene is the use of double estrangement trope to uncover multi-ethnic conflicts and the escalating terror among minority groups, thus, “ethnic cleansing had become central to the spiraling violence in Baghdad” (Schwartz, 2008: 255) and control has been “slipped away” (Schwartz, 2008: 225) from America, the original maker of this monstrous anarchy.

The strangeness of the scene triggers the news photographer, Hazem Abboud, to take a picture to participate in international contests and get rewarded. Herein lies a covert criticism of the prevalent moral decay that seeks entertainment from violence and terror. The unexpected reaction can be interpreted within the Gothic Postmodernist paradigm of “the dreadful pleasure” (Punter, 1996: 7) to kindle excitements which blur the borderline between “reason and morality” (Botting, 1996: 6). The fear-pleasure dichotomy provides the dark narrative with “a singular moral function—that of provoking unease” (Carter, 1984 [1974]:133). This is attributed to the nature of dark desires and emotions related to Gothic fiction regarded as “ambivalent: objects of terror and horror not only provoke repugnance, disgust and recoil, but also engage readers’ interest fascinating and attracting them. Threats are spiced with thrills, terrors with delight, horrors with pleasures” (Botting, 1996: 9). This tragicomic sensibility creates a surreal world of a society inflected with fear and aggression. Baghdad is a Gothic city where the hard-to-believe supernatural events are intermingled with dark and gloomy everyday realities, thus, the supernatural has become normal and natural. The Gothic breaks the boundary between the unreal and the real since horror is a ghastly manifestation of the macabre “by an exact portrayal of the physically horrible and revolting, against a far more terrible background of spiritual gloom and despair. Horror appeals to sheer dread and repulsion, by brooding upon the gloomy and the
sinister, and lacerates the nerves by establishing actual cutaneous contact with the supernatural” (Varma, 1957: 131).

**Gothic Anarchy**

Bataween, a conflict-torn district in Baghdad, voices harrowing tales of war anxieties and its aftermath; al-Qaeda’s bombings, gunfire, dead bodies, restless souls, a heartbroken old mother, mysterious storytelling, Gothic ruins, journalist’s affairs with prostitutes, superstitious government officials, and a fictional agency called Tracking and Pursuit Department seeking the aid of astrologers to arrest criminals. Embezzlement, looting, and arson have become rampant. Ali Allawi’s *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* recounts how “prisoners were released, kidnappings, abduction, and rapes were at a rise” (2007: 144). War absurdity, an “organized nonsense stands behind all the crimes committed” (Saadawi, 2018: 361). Baghdad is physically and politically wrecked as poetically featured in the Arabic front cover design for *Frankenstein in Baghdad*.

The front cover design illustrates the violence-torn Bataween district in sepia tone and dark shades depicting dilapidated buildings and a disarray of wires. A ghostly, mysterious figure, probably What’s-its-name, appears at the end of the alley facing the sunlight, which signifies some hope against ugly, bitter, and sour realities. The contrast between the shadowy and the bright tones raises the ethical question of evil and goodness, justice and moral rottenness.

Allegorically, the English front cover design communicates the prevalent state of political disintegration through the depiction of stitches in Gothic typeface.

The large and bold script on a plain background underscores the theme of monstrosity. The front cover design also celebrates the winning of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, marking the rise of “Baghdad’s new literary star” in Gothicism. Saadawi transgresses rationality to embrace the Gothic supernatural as an artistic scheme integrated into the materiality of contemporary chaotic Iraqi politics. Supernatural Gothic is a poetic strategy of resistance to give a voice to the marginalized to express horror and to attain a metaphorical salvation from despair and alienation.

The association between the Gothic and war-torn Iraq is deliberately intended to magnify the horrifying realities in Baghdad which are beyond belief; after the decline of the ruling regime, “disappeared individuals were found dead in hidden graves” (Allawi, 2007: 144). Saadawi, a BBC reporter, chronicles a real historical catastrophe in Gothic terms: “the 2005 Bridge of Imams incident, in which a fear-motivated rumor led to the death of over 1,000 people” (Allawi, 2007: 431). A rumor about “a suicide bomber among the pilgrims had caused panic, and some of the pilgrims were trampled to death while others threw themselves in the river and...
drowned” (Saadawi, 2018: 302). The government’s soothsayers claim that they can see “ghostly figures on the bridge the night before the accident” (Saadawi, 2018: 303). Horrifyingly, the motif of dehumanization reveals the hideous fact
that even dead body parts are too meagre to be buried; Elishva’s son’s grave is empty, Hasib’s family only buries his “burned black shoes, shredded, blood-stained clothes, and a few small charred parts of his body” (Saadawi, 2018: 102). Killed in a car bombing, Nahem’s flesh cannot be separated from the horse (Saadawi, 2018: 77). This physical disintegration is so Gothic and turns the storyline to the supernatural to arouse emotional shock and fear.

Saadawi deploys the Gothic tropes to highlight “corporeal vulnerability” (Butler, 2004: 19) of all the Iraqi victims, to denounce moral filthiness and the beastliness of man’s violence. The detailed descriptions of the mutilated bodies and the real accounts of the funerals of the corpses contribute to the macabre aesthetics of Postcolonial Gothic politics. The racialized/ethnic body, as a signifier of corporeal horror, embodies the traces of subjugation, trauma, and physical torture. Thus, bodily corporeality depicts abject and grotesque bodies as well as dismembered corpses to evoke fear, nausea, and disgust. This corporeal horror is eventually materialized in the creation of a vengeful zombie who rises from haunted ruins and his colossal body carries the traces of military violence and domestic war. He furiously roams the streets to unmask the ruthlessness of the totalitarian regime and counter the American interventionism in Iraq.
The Abject Frankenstein

The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject [is an] imaginary uncanniness and a real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (Kristeva, 1982 [1980]: 4)

Baghdad is “a troubled city where the demons had broken out of their dungeons and come to the surface all at once” (Saadawi, 2018: 178); a horrified atmosphere dramatized at the threshold of the fin de siècle and Frankenstein’s body is caught up by a realm of degeneracy in which he is seen as “ab-human” (Hurly, 1996: 3). What’s-its-name’s crude stitches, croaky voice, sticky body “as if it was smeared with blood or tomato juice” (Saadawi, 2018: 238) and a “fresh nose coated in congealed, dark red blood” (Saadawi, 2018: 79) make a dreadful appearance, with a mouth like “a gash right across the jaw” (Sadaawi, 2018: 242):

Seeing the reflection of his face in the glass. It rather surprised him—this was the first time he had recognized himself. He ran his finger over the stitches on his face and neck. He looked very ugly. (Saadawi, 2018: 153)

Abjection is a “jouissance and an ambivalent affective state” (Kristeva, 1982 [1980]: 2) as it draws the abject monster towards monstrosity where meaning collapses and where the self dissolves into a zombie-like avenger. Abjection is “immoral and sinister [wherein a certain] ego [merged with] an abject superego” (Kristeva, 1982 [1980]: 2). Being condemned to vengeance, What’s-its-name has launched an endless cycle of bloodshed and the grotesque body signifies a disruption of the dominant coherent empirical system. What’s-its-name’s abject monstrosity creates “a sense of vertigo” (Weinstock, 2020: 3) that questions the “epistemological worldview” (Weinstock, 2020: 3) to rebuke restrictions and borders. This foregrounds the paradoxical feelings of loathing, physical ugliness, and the envy of having absolute freedom; a provocative space between fear and charm. The lure and repulsion duality literalizes the horror genre as cathartic; pity and revulsion provide a critique of the fin de siècle fragmented nation that has reached the point of grotesque absurdity as projected in a disfigured monster.

What’s-its-name anchors abjection within a wild grotesque body and a fearful face full of stitches. Abjectness is actualized in the ugly large nose that Hadi has snatched “before a powerful jet of water could blast it down the storm drain” (Saadawi, 2018: 67) and in depicting a mouth like a gaping wound. As a grotesque zombie-like being, What’s-its-name’s abject monstrosity identifies the politics of Gothic for the “Gothic is a process, not an essence; a rhetoric rather than a store of universal symbols; an attitude of the past and the present; not a free-floating
fantasy world” (Mighall, 2003: xxv). Abjectness is linked to “Otherness” and ethnicity through the grim revisiting of Frankenstein. What’s-its-name is an overt manifestation of Butler’s term “a precarious life” (2004: xviii) to address the monstrous fears with no signs of sublimity, but moral degeneration and physical disintegration. What’s-its-name signifies a continuous vicious cycle of terror and fear as dramatized in the sewn rotten body parts that fall apart and have to be replaced by fresh criminals’ organs to survive.

What’s-its-name’s corporeal fluidity can be described as “defilement” and “the most sickening of wastes” (Kristeva, 1982 [1980]: 3). He is figured in repulsive and disgusting terms: “a naked body with viscous liquids, light in color, oozing from parts of it. There was only a little blood—some small dried patches on the arms and legs, and some grazes and bruises around the shoulders and neck. It was hard to say what color the skin was—it didn’t have a uniform color” (Saadawi, 2018: 78). This “sickening vortex of abhumanness” (Hurly, 1996: 50) describes “the prospect of the terrible and thrilling reconfigurations of identity and meaning that may emerge from the vortex” (Hurly, 1996: 50). Ghostliness is not a simple horror; on the contrary, it is an inquiry about the American imperial interventionism and surveillance apparatus; thus, it is not a matter of cleanliness that causes abjection, but what challenges borders, political systems, and social norms. Being an undead body, What’s-its-name is a zombified figure, a grotesque creature, and an anti-hero. Aesthetically, What’s-its-name is given some human attributes; having a father, a god-mother, a name, human-like motives, and identity dilemma; what is more, he possesses a sense of ethics as he questions his intentions: “I am the answer to their call for an end to injustice and for revenge on the guilty. I will take revenge on all the criminals. I will finally bring about justice on earth” (Saadawi, 2018: 390). What’s-its-name’s noble mission shifts from “restitutions of (impossible) justice and (irreparable) mourning to obeying a logic of (perpetual) war and infinite terror” (Botting, 2019: 21). “The process of mutual Postcolonial abjection”, David Punter notes, “is one that confronts us every day in the ambiguous form of a series of uncanny returns” (2000: vi). As such, the vengeful zombie returns to expose Baghdad’s absurd war politics, moral decay, loss of identity, and physical disintegration in an outrageous representation.

Although Hadi is the creator, Elishva is the animator; “with her words the old woman had animated this extraordinary composite—made up of disparate body parts and the soul of the hotel guard who had lost his life” (Saadawi, 2018: 148). What’s-its-name’s delineation is a deliberate act of double estrangement to “make a critique of political and social conditions in post-invasion Iraq” (Campbell, 2020: 9) and to provide an appalling mirror interpreted beyond the mundane and familiar reality. More significantly, the novel depicts violence upon Iraqis by Iraqis, yet subtly “the Americans are an absent presence in the novel, hovering in
the background as an implicit check on the ambitions of any sect or group to dominate the others” (Campbell, 2020: 8). This double estrangement technique is apt to ease the monster’s mission; the Gothic nature of What’s-its-name empowers him to uncover the national pitfall and to expose America’s ugly political maneuver in the Arab world.

Mahmoud’s journalistic articles on What’s-its-name’s deeds attract many followers. The Magician, the Sophist, the Enemy; three supernatural madmen whose reciprocal enmities are strong enough to kill them all: “Each of my three madmen promoted his own idea of me to his clique” (Saadawi, 2018: 421), as What’s-its-name contemplates. They are a manifestation of interwoven Gothic reality and fantasy in a hellish city. They serve as planners, guides, and schemers; the Magician represents vengeance, the Sophist signifies morale, and the Enemy symbolizes police intelligence. What’s-its-name’s other enthusiastic entourage are the young madman, the old madman, and the eldest madman; the eldest believes that What’s-its-name is a “savior” while the old madman claims that the monster is a tool of “mass destruction”. Interestingly, the youngest madman provides a unique interpretation: “[He thinks] I’m the model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce, at least since the days of King Faisal I. I’m made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds—ethnicities, tribes, races, and social classes—I represent the impossible mix that was never achieved in the past. I’m the first true Iraqi citizen” (Saadawi, 2018: 401). To be regarded as a savior or a superhero or even as the “first true Iraqi citizen” is to enhance the double estrangement technique to unearth the sectarian terror since he is indulged in an endless cycle of violence to survive and not decay. Eventually, What’s-its-name finds himself “at a loss for what to do. He knew his mission was essentially to kill, to kill new people every day, but he no longer had a clear idea who should be killed or why” (Saadawi, 2018: 547). The American policy has incited the “creative chaos” scheme to assert the Western presence in the Arab region through sectarian divisions and institutionalized violence. Aesthetically, the poetic strength of the writer’s use of multiple perspectives stimulates the reader to follow the narrative through the use of digital audio recording, emails, magazine articles, TV news, stories narrated in coffee shops, and official reports by the Government Intelligence Committee.

On the other hand, TV programs depict him as an elusive “Criminal X” (Saadawi, 2018: 571) and “fear of What’s-its-name continued to spread. In Sadr City they spoke of him as a Wahhabi, in Adamiya as a Shiite extremist. The Iraq government described him as an agent of foreign powers, while the spokesman for the U.S. State Department said he was an ingenious man whose aim was to undermine the American project in Iraq” (Saadawi, 2018: 728). What’s-its-name fulfills Jeffrey J. Cohen’s perception of the “monster’s body as a cultural body” (1996: 4): “The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroad, as an embodiment of a
certain cultural moment of time, a feeling, and place. The monster’s body quite literary incorporates fear, desire, anxiety and fantasy” (Cohen, 1996: 4). As such, What’s-its-name is a projection to signify “something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again” (Cohen, 1996: 4). What’s-its-name is a dramatization of a postcolonial uncanny whose monstrous killings occur when the status quo conditions are static, in order to open new arenas of interrogation. This establishes the Gothic Postcolonial “back-and-forth dialogue” (Wester, 2019: 54) to destabilize the colonial unified sense so as to redress imperialist ideologies of racial Otherness. What’s-its-name, beneath the veil of monstrosity, articulates a perpetual state of violence and fear to disturb the neo-colonial practices. What is more, the postcolonial uncanny exemplifies the victim–villain tension; What’s-its-name’s double-sidedness coexists and flows through each other to display both innocence and vengeance. The abject/savior dichotomy questions What’s-its-name’s identity to reflect Iraq’s political trauma.

Conclusion

Postcolonial Gothic politics marks the unique maturity of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* through the brilliant tackling of the Frankenstein trope. Ahmed Saadawi’s Iraqi zombie is a critique of Mary Shelley’s English Frankenstein whose vengeance is only personal; on the contrary, What’s-its-name can be envisioned as the “destabilizer of orthodoxy”—to borrow Muhsin Al-Musawi’s expression (2006: 54). The Iraqi writer’s literary enterprise proves that “adapters are first interpreters and then creators” (Hutcheon, 2006: 18). The transposition of Frankenstein from the colonial West to postcolonial Iraq signifies the Other’s threat of revolt and uprising. Saadawi’s postcolonial imaginaries depict a horrific national tragedy that breaks the boundary between the real and the unreal since “it implicitly attempts to abolish the ethnographic literary authority of Western representation” (Faris, 2004: 4). As such, monstrosity is a discourse to mock ethnic conflicts, neo-colonial practices, and the American military culture of terror, blood, and death.

Trauma neurosis structures Elishva’s mourning and Hadi’s storytelling to problematize the imposed interpretations of the colonizer’s worldview. Both Elishva and Hadi have become post-traumatic identities as a response to the American invasion and its aftermath. The questions arise. When does a war Frankenfiction emerge? And who has the right to communicate war themes? On writing about war, Stacey Peebles notes, “there may be no separation between home front and the front lines” (2011: 22). Herein lies the vibrancy of Postcolonial Gothic to crush neo-colonial hegemony beneath the weight of violent emotions experienced by a tortured nation. Thus, Postcolonial Gothic is a form of ghosting—the history of the
past lingering alongside the present through untamed imagination, frenzy passion, horror motifs, and provocative war themes.

As a zombie genre, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* ends as it has begun with a calamity, to deny an aesthetic closure for “the zombie is an aesthetic for the deepest despair because it chokes on a meaningful story. It pushes us into a metanarrative and then withholds the metanarrative from us” (Vervaeke et al., 2017: 26). The twenty-first-century zombie explodes into zeitgeist and has become a pervasive cultural symbol that constantly shifts its hermeneutical reference. The association between zombies and bleak human states is an enduring sign of human defilement, alienation, and weariness. The potency of the zombie zeitgeist revives the joy of enigma and suspense. What’s-its-name is paradoxical; he is living and non-living, natural and supernatural, to defy the sense of realness. Being a zombie, What’s-its-name can be interpreted as a display of “sub-Nietzschean” (Greene and Mohammad, 2010: 38) and the emotional identification with him can be regarded as a “cynical self-loathing, and on the other hand, as a creative negotiation of our transformation from human to posthuman” (Greene and Mohammad, 2010: 38). As such, the appeal of What’s-its-name as a zombie zeitgeist resides in his dreadful appearance and bodily movements to manifest a living-dead grotesque existence in a manner akin to real-world terrors.

The profundity of a zombie narrative is rigorously enriched through the use of the Kristevaian notion of abjection to examine a culturally/politically contaminated presence. What’s-its-name is created from dead flesh to represent “garbage humans” (Balibar, 1998: 15) who have been robbed of dignity and human status in the global capitalist world seen as a dystopia. The question arises: can a monster bleed into the real world? What’s-its-name, a living-dead, is a metaphor for the dehumanized exploited nation at the periphery of the American global empire. America’s central position in the global imperialism is maintained by violence, terror, and exploitation. In this sense, zombieism is a discourse of transgression and Otherness that marks chaos and political disruption.

Finally, the corporeality of the monstrous body is merged with the horror narrative itself to create either “this textual-materiality of monster, or the monster-as-text” (Ng, 2004: 176) in order to problematize both the text and the corporeal body. What’s-its-name’s recording is described as being “sensational and shocking” (Saadawi, 2018: 388). It is set in the first-person viewpoint to clear his reputation. He is no longer an object which is being written and spoken about, but the monster interviews himself to defend his noble mission and to speak of his motives; he sees himself as a savior and ultimately called to establish justice. Thus, What’s-its-name is not merely the subject matter, but the monstrous bodily horror merged with the Gothic politics to question what is aberrant and to deconstruct brutal ideological imperative.
GOTHIC POLITICS IN AHMED SAADAWI’S FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD

Note


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