

Retelling Texts: A Deconstructionist Reading of Ahmed Saadawi' s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in connection with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

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قراءة تفكيكية لرواية فرانكشتاين في بغداد لأحمد سعداوي فيما يتعلق برواية فرانكشتاين لماري شيلي

نبذة مختصرة

تبحث الدراسة الحالية في رواية فراكشتاين في بغداد للكاتب احمد السعداوي في ضوء نظرية التفكيك ويُظهر التناقضات الثنائية في الرواية مثل الخير والشر والعدل والانتقام والسلام والدمار والحياة والموت والنظام والفوضى البراءة والاجرام والحقيقة والاكاذيب ، ويحاول الدراسة كسر حدود هذه التعارضات الثنائية لإظهار ان الفوضى تؤدي الى حالة العنف والاجرام ويختلط فيها مفهوم العدالة والانتقام مع بعضها البعض وبالتالي في مثل هذه الحالة من الفوضى لا يمكن التمييز بين الخير والشر عن بعضهما البعض يؤدي العثور على تناقضات الثنائية وكسرها الى مفهوم الاختلاف الذي يكشف كيف تأخر المعنى في الرواية من خلال سلسلة لا نهاية لها من الدوال . كما ان الدراسة تلتفت مركز القصة حيث تبين لنا بانه لا يوجد مركز في مثل هذه الحالة من الفوضى الى جانب ذلك يوضح كيف ان القصة لها علاقة نصية مع رواية فراكشتاين لماري شيلي . علاوة على ذلك يستكشف معنى الغموض الذي يغطي الرواية واثره على تفسير النص .

الكلمات المفتاحية : احمد السعداوي ، فراكشتاين ، فراكشتاين في بغداد ، ماري شيلي ، داريدا ، نظرية التفكيك .

Abstract

In the light of deconstruction theory, the current study examines Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (٢٠١٣) in relation to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. It shows the binary oppositions in the novel such as good and evil, justice and revenge, peace and destruction, life and death, order and disorder, innocence and criminality, and truth and lies. It attempts at breaking the boundaries of these binary oppositions to show that the disorder leads to a state of violence and criminality in which the concept of justice and revenge are mingled with each other. Consequently, in such a

state of disorder, good and evil cannot be distinguished from each other. Finding the binary oppositions and breaking them leads to the concept of difference which reveals how the meaning in the novel deferred through an endless chain of signifiers. The study also decenters the center of the story showing that there is no center in such a state of chaos. Besides, it shows how the story has an intertextual relation with Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (١٨١٨), since Saadawi has created his monster in the same manner and absurdity of Mary's novel. Moreover, it explores the sense of ambiguity that covers the novel and its impact on the interpretation of the meaning of the text.

Keywords: Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein*, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Mary Shelley, Derrida's Deconstruction theory.

١,١ Introduction

Derrida's Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida is a theorist, essayist, and a philosopher who has pioneered the implication of deconstructive criticism. Deconstruction is an approach to the interpretation of the interaction between meaning and text. During his career, Derrida has described the concept 'deconstruction' in various ways. It can be interpreted as a critique of Platonism in its simplest form, and it is a criticism for the notion of true forms or essences that take prominence over appearances. Deconstruction puts the focus on appearance, or implies that meaning is to be found in appearance, at least. The distinction is "undecidable", as Derrida thinks, it cannot be inferred in daily experiences. Deconstruction perceives language to be irreducibly fluid, unstable, or impossible to decide, particularly ideal concepts such as truth and justice are quite elusive and manipulative (Hartman vii-viii).

The American "Yale critics" took up these concepts and extended them to literary works in the ١٩٧٠s. The group includes many critics such as "Paul De Man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom". They led deconstruction to become quite popular and debatable by adapting Derrida's concepts into artistic fields. Generally, the deconstructionist approach of interpretation is both philosophical and artistic. Deconstruction is completely contrary to Structuralism as the latter seeks to uncover the fundamental structure of the text. The

deconstructive technique concentrates on a single work, similar to the “close reading” that defined by New Criticism. But the difference is that deconstructionists seek to understand literary texts by the way language creates or destroys meaning (Quinn ١١٠-١١١).

Western thinking and society, according to Derrida, are organized around unstated assumptions that, on the one hand, shape meaning, and on the other hand, come to constrain it. These assumptions appear to be self-evident facts that exist outside of the linguistic system. “The human spirit,” for instance, is a word that suggests the presence of a higher power, as do expressions like “God” or “consciousness”. This belief in having an exterior meaning is referred to as Logocentrism. In contrast to the logocentric view, Derrida claims that meaning is created not by "extralinguistic presence", but precisely by its absence (Quinn ١١٠).

There are usually two main objects when it comes to deconstructing literary texts. These two purposes could be both at work in any specific deconstructive reading: (١) to expose the undecidability of the text and/or (٢) to reveal the complicated operations of the ideas and beliefs from which the text is constructed (Tyson ٢٥٩). If one deconstructs the novel *Great Gatsby* of Fitzgerald “the reading must proceed as follows. First: one should establish a New Critical reading of the text- and then ask; what is the core tension in this novel at work, and how is it resolved in the unified development of its key theme in the novel?”

The text acquires an autonomous nature once a work has been written. Deconstruction aims to demonstrate how the text spreads, instead of uncovering the secret meaning in the text. There is no significance to be found in the text. The meaning is delayed from one text to another. In the comprehended work, traces of meaning appear and the (trained) reader can see how these traces of meaning are exposed or concealed and how meaning is finally delivered. The text can be seen as a system of signs, Derrida claims, and there were no extra-textual realities or extra-linguistic evidence to refer to. Nothing was 'over there' but a game of signs (Hendricks ٢).

Such reading would be resting on a binary opposition where one member of the pair is favored over the other. This binary resistance is generally the answer to the ideological framework of the text (or at least one of the ideological frameworks of the text). The next step to this would be to deconstruct the binary opposition on which the reading rests: that is, discovering

the forms in which the contradicting elements in the work interact or if they are not really contradicted. This is how one can think about the weakness and limitations of the idea that the writer calls for (consciously or unconsciously) (Tyson ٢٦٢). According to deconstruction, fiction is conducted via language, thus, it embodies the beliefs, traditions, and orientations that the culture follows. Fiction is capable, therefore, of presenting the different ways in which the ideologies operate and create the perception of the world. "In other words, fiction doesn't represent the world as it really is; it represents the world as we perceive it to be. And for deconstruction, the world as we perceive it to be is the only world we know" (Tyson ٢٧٨). Sadaawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* provides a valuable data for deconstructive analysis since this novel is written to address Iraqi social and political troubles by providing it with the tools of fantasy. This echoing reality that is mixed with fantasy in the novel creates a fertile ground for the existence of binary oppositions and deconstructive analysis that makes the connection among the main lines of the work.

١,٢ A Deconstructionist Reading of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

Frankenstein in Baghdad is a ٢٠١٣ novel by Iraqi writer Ahmed Saadawi. It has been translated into English in ٢٠١٨. Saadawi confirms the truism that war is dreadful but may lead to certain forced advancements in medicine and other fields. In ٢٠٠٣, U.S.A army led an invasion on Iraq; the novel transfers Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (١٨١٨) from eighteenth-century Bavaria to Baghdad during the invasion (Webster ٤٣٩). Saadawi reinvents Frankenstein's monster as a creature formed out of murdered Iraqi people all over Baghdad when the city was on the verge of a sectarian conflict in ٢٠٠٥.

Ahmad Saadawi entered the finalists for the prestigious International Booker Prize for Arabic Novel in ٢٠١٤, and went on to win the prize for *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. With the release of this novel, his third published novel, the Iraqi author gained instant recognition (Najjar, ٢٠١٨). However, Ahmed Saadawi is not only a novelist, he is also a poet and a scriptwriter, he has a volume of poetry, *Anniversary of Bad Songs* (٢٠٠٠), and other well-known novels, *The Beautiful Country* (٢٠٠٤) and *Indeed He Dreams or Plays or Dies* (٢٠٠٨).

Saadawi's novel describes Baghdad terrifyingly in the aftermath of U.S. invasion. In the city, armored vehicles — usually US Military Hummers — search the streets while the corpses spread around like garbage. Numerous car bombs used to leave behind them a scent of melting plastic combined with roasted human flesh of the dead bodies. The irritating noise of American apache helicopters interrupts people's meals as they fly over their houses. Not only have many inhabitants fled the city, but those who have stayed are completely separated. As a result, the promised justice of the American occupation turned up nothing more than a dismal wasteland (Metz, ٢٠١٨). Thus, the wreck and psychological devastation of characters frame the main motivation and reasoning behind their actions in the novel.

Hadi al-Attag, Saadawi's equivalent of Mary Shelley's Dr. Victor Frankenstein, lives in the midst of Baghdad's devastation. Hadi is a chatty antiquities merchant with protruding eyes. He reeks of booze, and whose ragged clothing is littered with cigarette burns. Hadi can be seen drinking ouzo, flirting with prostitutes, or wandering the city looking for antiques to sell out. He lives in a collapsing ruin of a home where he enjoys exaggerating stories at the local coffee shop near his house. So what actions does Hadi take to become Dr. Frankenstein? He recovers bits of ripped bodies left on the road, then he starts gathering the parts left behind from bombings and other acts of violence, as if they were valuable antiques. In what appears to be a partially artistic piece, he stitches the parts together to make a whole human body, which eventually awakens and becomes alive (Metz ٢٠١٨). This act of gathering dead body parts is a direct reference to the dead bodies that have rallied from crimes and terrorists' attacks in Iraq after American invasion.

To give this novel a deconstructionist analysis, it is important to see the binaries on which it was based. For instance, the binary of life and death constitute intricate pair in both novels by Shelley and Saadawi. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is mostly about the Abject and bloodshed, which are the story's main elements. Different from the original novel in which the beast is formed by a scientist in his laboratory, this gloomy recounting of *Frankenstein* offers a monster created by a waste-picker, Hadi Al-atag sews together obtained human parts distorted by daily bomb attacks into one body on the roof of a ruined house. This entity is called "shesma," an Iraqi Arabic term that means "what is its name" (Jani ٣٢٢). Farid Shawaf is one of the most important characters in the novel since he is a media analyst and he links many parts of the story together. He reveals

the novel's central points by commenting on a real event renowned as the Imam's Bridge Event which took place in ٢٠٠٥. In this unfortunate act of terrorism, over a thousand Shiite visitors ended up dead on a bridge in Baghdad when someone warned of a suicidal terrorist, causing a rampage that pushed many to jump:

[A]ll security incidents and tragedies we are experiencing have one source which is terror. The innocent people died on the bridge because of their terror of death. Every day we die fearing death itself. [...] We will witness more and more deaths because of terror.
(*Frankenstein* ١٣٧)

This demonstrates that the dread lies at the heart of the battle, which has been amplified and made into a monster. According to Saadawi, this monster "is made up of parts taken from Iraqis of different races, sects and ethnicities," and thus "represents the whole Iraqi human" (Saadawi, quoted in Jani ٣٢٢). To put it differently, the 'what'sitsname' is a unique case of identity blending.

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, on the other hand, presents a totally different creator in a completely different tone. Victor Frankenstein would become the maker of a humanoid creature; he dubs the monster numerous infamous and terrifying titles because of his fascination with sciences, notably chemistry, biology, and philosophy. He posits concerns about life, death, and eternity. Frankenstein's fascination in science goes all the way back to the time he was thirteen years old. He did extensive self-study in the sciences and read scientific works by Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus, Magnus, and Paracelsus with great care. Interestingly, when he turned fifteen years old and staying at a house near Belrive, he happened to notice a terrible thunder storm approaching from the Jura Hills at night. As he puts it, the tremendous storm struck his imagination with its intensity, dread, and greatness:

as soon as the dazzling light vanished, the oak had disappeared, and nothing remained but a blasted stump. When we visited it the next morning, we found the tree shattered in a singular manner. It

was not splintered by the shock, but entirely reduced to thin ribbons of wood (Shelley ٣٣).

This unforgettable experience, along with the era's scientific interest, prompted him to enroll at the University of Ingolstadt to study and research under the guidance of eminent academics Waldman and Krempe. Thus, the monster and its creator are in a safe and even beautiful zone with nothing terrifying or shocking, unlike the case with Saadawi's narrative (Mahmood ١٢١).

The second pair of opposites to be explored in Saadawi's novel is the binary of peace and conflict. The novel uses gothic elements to examine the topic of war and its aftermath in order to portray the real Iraq War context: especially, Baghdad. Saadawi uses a sophisticated take on the Frankenstein concept to analyze and remark on people living in postwar Baghdad; their fears, actions, lives, and ideologies. Saadawi uses a specific monster genre and place to stress aspects of the war and its aftermath (Teggart ٢). While *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a work of fiction, it is based on the reality of invasion in Iraq. Although hundreds saw suffering and pain under the Ba'ath Regime's oppression, this city was always bright and beautiful, yet it lost that in the post-invasion era. Explosions, religious wars, terroristic attacks, and political and economic instability have replaced the beauty of this capital as the country claimed thousands of life loses. According to a study titled "Violent deaths of Iraqi civilians, ٢٠٠٣-٢٠٠٨: analysis by perpetrator, weapon, time, and place," it is concluded that:

We analysed the Iraq Body Count database of ٩٢,٦١٤ Iraqi civilian direct deaths from armed violence occurring from March ٢٠, ٢٠٠٣, through March ١٩, ٢٠٠٨, of which Unknown perpetrators caused ٧٤% of deaths (٦٨,٣٩٦), Coalition forces ١٢% (١١,٥١٦), and Anti-Coalition forces ١١% (٩,٩٥٤). (qtd. in Hicks ١)

Sadaawi's novel turns these numbers and catastrophic disasters of deaths and random attacks and turns them into one complicated figure that causes horror in its surrounding. This dramatic treatment of the absurdity and randomness of death is an attempt to highlight the gloominess of Iraqi life at that time by giving it shape and meaning.

Because of the transformation after ٢٠٠٣, Baghdad's people had stopped thinking about a sophisticated and wealthy existence with developments in knowledge, technology, and

civilization. The country, which has long been regarded as one of the most important cradles of human growth and progress, has been converted into a horrible scene of bloodshed and chaos (Mahmood ١٢١-١٢٢). In Shelley's novel, the sense of peace and conflict do not extend on such nation-wide level. Rather it is confined to the life of the monster, its creator, and the people around his creator. The creature discovers its abnormality after being cruelly abandoned by his creator and the others who see him, who are chasing him down. "Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned" (Shelley ٩٣), it asks, reflecting on its image. Interestingly, the reader sympathizes with the monster as it accepts its deformities and seeks comfort in the woods. The beast says, "Half surprised by the novelty of these sensations, I allowed myself to be borne away by them; and forgetting my solitude and deformity, dared to be happy" (Shelley ٨). This sense of alienation causes the monster to go hunting his creator and the members of his family, he distorts the peace they once had and drags them all into a maze of escapes and deaths.

Reality and fantasy are another significant pair of opposite in Saadawi's novel. The realistic components of Frankenstein in Baghdad are anchored in the very real, horrifying violence of ٢٠٠٥ Baghdad. Saadawi said in an interview about the novel that he wanted it to be a chance to "deal with reality in an untraditional way." He explained, "The element of fantasy adds a touch of joy to the work, mitigating its cruelty" (quoted in Metz ٢٠١٨). This is especially true for English-language audiences, who benefit from the addition of Whatsitsname, which gives them a break from the restricted way in which Iraq is typically depicted in the United States and Europe (Metz, ٢٠١٨). As a result, Saadawi employs real-life elements to depict the apocalyptic environment in this novel (Alsaedi ١٢).

In Shelley's work, this sense of fantasy is also kept to the minimum as it is introduced with the monster's creation alone. Everything in Shelley's book is narrated with sharp sense of reality. Victor narrates his tale, starting with his pleasant upbringing in Geneva with his rich family, his passion with learning about natural philosophy, his university studies in chemistry, and eventually his horrible creation of the monster and its catastrophic repercussions. The reader is abruptly introduced to another frame: the creature's story, as a result of this complicated framework. Captain Walton's letters to his sister at the end of the story flesh out the nested

narrative (Nasr ١٠). After observing Walton's passion and preoccupation with scientific research, Victor Frankenstein chooses to give him his sad story as a moral tale that cautions of “how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge” (Shelley ٤٢). Thus, the plot addresses real life issues and uses traditional narrative outline of presenting a story for the purpose of warning. However, the story is more complicated and frightening than a simple preaching tale, as fear is essential element of Mary's novel.

Fear and safety are critically presented in the two novels. The first few sentences of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* draw dread and fear in the readers. Saadawi begins with the following tragic incident, which was a frequent occurrence in Baghdad in ٢٠٠٥. It depicts an accurate vision of a groaning nation filled with terror, death, explosions, horror, and panic. It is the embodiment of all the evil that exists in the world: Elishva, the old lady called Umm Daniel, or Daniel's mother, got on the bus two minutes before the blast. On the bus, everybody turned around to see what had happened and they saw all the dead burning bodies. Cars crashed into each other or into the center reserve as young people rushed to the site of the explosion. The drivers were terrified and perplexed as they were bombarded with car horns and people yelling (Saadawi ٥). In his work, Saadawi effectively captures the true fear, when everything is in chaos and ruin (Alsaedi ١٢-١٣). Fear in Sadaawi's work is used to support the elements of fantasy and makes it more realistic. The monster figure in the novel is always surrounded with fear and danger that makes people avoid it and makes readers highlight its presence in each scene.

In Shelley's novel, the fear is not introduced from the beginning but in the middle when the creature is created and left. After he abandons and discards his creation, Frankenstein runs into the streets, while the creature he made flees into the woods and vanishes. Shelley shows the natural and unavoidable results of Frankenstein's and his unnatural mastery of "forbidden knowledge". However, as it is more rejected and tormented, the monster begins to doubt the unfairness it is subjected to and feels sorry for itself: “I, the miserable and the abandoned, am an abortion, to be spurned at, and kicked, and trampled on” (Shelley, ١٩٩٣, p. ١٦٩). After giving up on his creator and the possibility to find love or acceptance he vows to vengeance. The creature kills Henry Clerval, Frankenstein's closest friend, and on the night of Frankenstein's wedding, he

kills Elizabeth, Frankenstein's adored cousin and wife (Nasr ١١-١٢). These atrocities lead Victor to begin an actual and relentless hunt after the monster, to take revenge and to stop its evil.

The hunting of monster after Frankenstein leads to another pair of binary opposites; these are subjective justice and injustice. “[The body] is made up of parts taken from Iraqis of different races, sects, and ethnicities,” Saadawi said in an interview. When the tale progresses, readers find that as the body regains consciousness, it embarks on a great mission of vengeance, killing every evil criminal responsible for the murder of the body's constituent parts (Nasr ١٧). The Whatsitsname, inhabited by the guard's spirit, begins murdering for justice and vengeance because "justice had to be done here on earth, with witness present" (Saadawi ٨٣). Surprisingly, when it begins to murder bad people, pieces of its body begin to fall off and decay. Furthermore, in order to fulfill its 'noble mission' and replace the fallen pieces, it will have to kill more of guilty individuals in order to obtain some 'spare parts' (Saadawi ١٥٠).

Saadawi depicts a nightmare reflection of the “biomedical imaginary”—that is, a fanciful fabric of medical thinking and innovation created during Iraqi war with military troops surrounding it. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* portrays the battle as an event that set off a cycle of crippling violence. The innovative imagination of Saadawi's novel presents a medical fantasy by giving life to dead body parts; however, this medical fantasy is lost within a context of grotesque war (Webster, ٢٠١٨, p. ٤٣٩). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, also presents the fantasy of medical creation by the brilliant scientist Victor Frankenstein. Victor explores natural and biological facts in order to regenerate a human body. The Frankenstein creature is made up of various human parts too. In spite of his terrible appearance, he can't avoid the basic human need to feel loved. Many literary scholars think that Shelley created the work as a warning tale cautioning of what may occur if one pushed it too far with scientific research (Lee, ٢٠١٨). Science itself is not the source of danger here, rather it is the use of science to the mere satisfaction of human curiosity with little or no actual noble purpose behind it.

Purpose and purposelessness are at the heart of the monster's action in both novels. While it is Victor who gives the life to the creature in Shelley's novel, in Saadawi's novel, Hadi the trash trader is not the one who gives the Whatsitsname a life or a purpose. Things do become obvious once the Whatsitsname encounters the widow Elishva. When the Whatsitsname comes up to

her house, she believes Daniel, her lost son who was snatched from her by battle, has come back to her. After hearing her narrative, the Whatsitsname seeks vengeance on the barber who pushed Daniel to go to war. The Whatsitsname starts to listen to other parts that were used to build him, each of which has a unique tale to tell. The Whatistname transforms into a Middle Eastern Erinye out for revenge on those who have mistreated him. Thus his purpose in existence resembles the purpose of Shelley's Monster, that he wants to do anything to arrive at inner peace (Lee, ٢٠١٨). The fact that both monster is gradually turned into revengers shows that the gift of life cannot be actually a 'gift' when the person is created in a surrounding that brings pain and fear to one's own being. This is used by both writers to attack their own social contexts, Mary Shelly shows the ugliness of her social reality and so does Sadaawi. Therefore, their monsters do not pursue noble aims only personal and vengeful ones.

In Saadawi's work, the notion of innocence of body, mind, spirit, and conduct is not only questioned, but also fiercely attacked. The Whatsitsname shifts from protecting the innocent to murdering innocent civilians for more body parts. The concept of having one proper side to follow is steadily perverted. In our modern world, binaries are rarely talked about. Consider the concepts of gender and ethnicity, to mention a few, the world does not want to put things in black and white any more. However, it is still a useful way to detect the construction of things sometimes. Saadawi's story looks at how mankind sees, values, and organizes itself based on binaries, such as "good/evil, black/white, Muslim/Christian, East/West, wrong/right, liberal/democrat," and so on. The writer presents these contradictions within a grotesque description of war and death to let readers know that everyone is loser and a criminal in war no matter what side they fight on, this is clearly shown as the Whatsitsname, organizes its own destruction in the end (Lee, ٢٠١٨). The writer, Sadaawi, has brilliantly linked these atrocities of civil work in Iraq with the novel and monster of Mary Shelly who had lived and died ages ago in different society. however, the link and similarities between these two novels created the possibility of this analysis to show how deconstructive reading can bring to light the complexity of intertextual works.

Conclusion

Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a modern recreation of Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*. He merely alters the landscape of the original novel and adds excessive levels of violence and political implications to the philosophy of Shelley's work. The binary opposites presented in the novel aim to show the themes around which the plot is centered, also they show the striking similarities between Saadawi's and Shelley's works. However, both novels have a purpose to reach from creating the monster. While Shelley's purpose was to warn from the dangers of scientific ventures, Saadawi's tale warns from war and its consequences. Furthermore, Saadawi gives a portrayal of Iraqi war and its aftermath consequences that differ from the descriptions found in western media. Unlike the stories that shows the American hero or European savior who saves helpless victims with victory and happiness prevailing at the end, Saadawi takes the background of these stories and focuses on them to show the actual pain, destruction, and death this 'hero' leaves behind as he rescues one victim. Saadawi's work has employed various elements from Shelley's work. He has also drawn on actual events in Iraq to make his novel more authentic in addressing Iraqi social and political problems.

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