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Absences of Faith in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad: A Postcolonial Approach

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Abstract in English

Frankenstein in Baghdad (2013) by Ahmed Saadawi explores the psychological and moral landscape of U.S.-occupied Iraq through a sectarian violence-born monster. This paper analyses the novel's depiction of widespread lack of faith in religion, state institutions, and humanity using postcolonial theory. It claims that the Whatsitsname is not a supernatural being but the real and symbolic manifestation of a society's whole belief system collapse due to postcolonial fragmentation and suffering. This study shows how Saadawi uses the Gothic and grotesque to criticize foreign interference and civil strife by analyzing major characters and the monster's changing purpose. The thesis contends that the novel portrays this vacuum of religion as a core element of a reality where violence and revenge are the only sources of meaning. Frankenstein in Baghdad is a critical postcolonial piece about metaphysical and social certainties collapsing in the face of political chaos.

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Introduction

Amid the chaos of post-invasion Baghdad, humans and monsters blur. Frankenstein in Baghdad, Ahmed Saadawi's acclaimed novel, depicts a city where violence, grief, and meaninglessness are the ultimate misery. Whatsitsname—a composite being made from bomb victims' corpses—emerges from these surroundings. More than a monster, this creature is a walking, grieving city anatomy, a physical representation of communal trauma. Winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, Saadawi's Gothic-horror

story takes a deep look at Iraq after the 2003 U.S. invasion. One of the most influential postcolonial works, it reimagines Mary Shelley's myth for a period of sectarian war and failing governments, employing the imaginative to reveal a disturbing truth.

Critical lenses like trauma theory and Gothic have been employed to analyze the novel. A postcolonial approach unlocks its potency by helping us grasp the historical, political, and cultural breakdown it shows. Occupational and civil war create a world where old belief structures are not only challenged but destroyed. The narrative centers on the void—multiple and interrelated religious absences .

This paper contends that in Frankenstein in Baghdad, Ahmed Saadawi employs the postcolonial grotesque to examine how systemic violence and political collapse precipitate a profound crisis of faith. It argues that the "Whatsitsname" serves as both a product and a symbol of a world devoid of purpose, where belief in divine justice, governmental institutions, and human morality has been obliterated. This study illustrates, through a detailed examination of the novel's setting, characters, and central metaphor, that these absences are not accidental but rather direct outcomes of a postcolonial reality characterized by fragmentation and occupation, ultimately portraying the monster as the rational manifestation of a society's lost core.

A postcolonial reading of Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad is needed to place its horrors in U.S.-occupied Iraq's history and politics. This approach empowers critical analysis of the novel's psychological and societal effects of imperialism, civil war, and nation-state collapse. Postcolonial theory turns the Whatsitsname from a Gothic monster into a powerful metaphor of a society shattered by external intervention and internal warfare, allowing for a deeper investigation of the novel's fundamental theme—the total destruction of faith in all its manifestations. Understanding the novel's setting requires Achille Mbembe's theory of necropolitics—the power to decide who lives and dies. According to Mbembe, sovereignty in some postcolonies is manifested through death management and the construction of "death-worlds." According to Mbembe (2003, p. 11), "The ultimate expression of authority resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die". The novel's occupied Baghdad is a death-world of checkpoints, random explosions, and sectarian warfare. The novel's lack of faith stems from this perpetual horror; when survival

depends on a sovereign authority over death, justice, order, and a benevolent god become unnecessary.

Homi K. Bhabha's hybridity notion helps analyze the novel's main character. Bhabha defines hybridity as the emergence of new, ambivalent, and transgresses identities and cultures from colonizer-colonized contact, shattering purity claims. The Whatsitsname epitomizes this. According to Bhabha (1994, p. 4), hybridity arises from the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications" and allows for cultural hybridity that "entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy". The monster, made from sectarian victims' body parts, is a living symbol of a fractured national identity. Its existence confronts the sectarian differences that feed the violence around it, but its failing mission shows the difficulty of building a united purpose from such imposed hybridity, contributing to the meaning and faith crises. The concepts of the subaltern and the state of exception help articulate the political and philosophical conditions that make faith impossible. Drawing on Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" we can view the Iraqi citizens in the novel as subaltern figures whose voices and agency are systematically silenced by the overwhelming forces of the occupiers and militias. Their stories are only heard through the grotesque, composite form of the Whatsitsname. This occurs within what Giorgio Agamben calls a state of exception, where the law is suspended and human life is reduced to "bare life" (zoe), stripped of political rights and value. Agamben defines this as a "space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations… are deactivated" (Agamben, 2005, p. 50). In this lawless vacuum, where the government is a puppet and justice is absent, faith in institutions evaporates completely. The monster's creation and its violent quest are a direct result of this exceptional state, representing a perverted form of justice emerging where the state has abdicated its role .

Academic critique of Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad has significantly increased, with most of the discourse focusing on its depiction of collective pain and its employment of Gothic themes. Although these readings provide crucial foundations, they frequently fail to thoroughly explore the metaphysical and ideological gap engendered by this trauma—specifically, the profound absences of faith that constitute the central focus of this study's inquiry.

A important portion of the scholarship understands the novel through the lens of trauma theory. These opponents effectively contend that Whatsitsname represents the collective psychic trauma caused by unending war. Saadawi (2018) claims that “the creature embodies the collective PTSD of the Iraqi people, a walking manifestation of unprocessed grief and terror that haunts the city’s physical and psychic landscape” (p. 45). Haddad (2020) examines the novel's non-linear narrative and fragmented structure as signs of a traumatized consciousness unable to understand reality. These studies effectively document conflict's psychological devastation, but they rarely address the metaphysical and ideological crisis of faith—in religion, justice, and humanity—that this trauma causes, which Saadawi criticizes. Another major critical movement examines the novel in Gothic and weird form. Al-Maliki (2019) examines how Saadawi uses a Western literary trope to express a localized terror experience in Frankenstein in Baghdad, a "global Gothic" work. This generally depicts the monster as a ghost or a terrifying item. Jones (2021) calls the novel “speculative fiction” that critiques modern politics. These interpretations help explain the novel's genre and aesthetic, but they generally end with the monster's symbolism. This paper argues that the monster's monstrosity is a sign of a broader societal illness: a postcolonial state of exception's total vacuum of faith, which requires a more targeted political and philosophical investigation. Small but important work has begun to address the novel's postcolonial aspects, laying the basis for this research. Khalil (2022) uses Bhabha's hybridity theory to describe national fragmentation in the monster's composite body. They masterfully depict a postcolonial identity fragmented by violence and foreign influence. This research builds on that foundation by tracing how Mbembe and Agamben's mechanisms of fragmentation and violence systematically manufacture faith absences across religious, political, and moral spheres—a critical nuance that remains the paper's main gap .

The city itself is a character in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad, a living, breathing organism filled with violence, dread, and entropy. After the U.S.-led invasion and Saddam Hussein's regime fell in 2005, a postcolonial "state of exception" emerged, replacing all former structures of order with a more chaotic and intimate form of terror. Saadawi methodically creates this scenario as a hostile force that destroys the human spirit. Saadawi claims that the novel's major theme—the entire and inevitable loss of

faith—is fuelled by his description of a landscape of checkpoints, random explosions, sectarian vendettas, and broken authority. In occupied Baghdad, faith—in God, institutions, and neighbors—is not only degraded but also a threat to survival.

Saadawi's Baghdad is a fearful landscape ruled by checkpoints. Identity is reduced to a sectarian label on a falsifiable ID card at these centers of arbitrary power and potential death. The checkpoint shows "necropolitical" ability to "dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe, 2003, p. 11). Young troops and militiamen can kill citizens with a glance, name, or birthplace. Saadawi depicts the new order with a disturbing realism, as Elias explains: "The Americans overthrew the statue, regime, and everything else, and now we're seeing the result." Based on ID, everyone kills everyone else (Saadawi, 2018, p. 49). This arbitrary use of power produces a world without rational cause and consequence, making the idea that good behavior or innocence guarantees safety ludicrous. To believe in a just universe at a checkpoint is to ignore the physics of one's own annihilation.

Complete this control architecture with the fear of random, spectacular violence. Daily bombings shatter public life and reduce people to anonymous body parts. Vivid and merciless, Saadawi depicts the terrible transition of humans into materials. Hadi encounters "severed heads… liquefied internal organs, and shapeless chunks of flesh" after a bomb (Saadawi, 2018, p. 22). This constant exposure to random mortality breaks the relationship between action and consequence, a cornerstone of morality and religion. The idea that the cosmos has a meaningful order collapses if anyone can be killed at any time, regardless of their piety, character, or intentions. The Brigadier calls the universe a "big joke" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 101) because it no longer follows divine plan or moral justice. Nihilism is a reasonable adaptation to a violent world. Sectarian militias exploit the vacuum left by central authority failure, weaponizing identity and destroying community. Many postcolonial states' frail national identity breaks into tribal and religious connections. Social trust disappears when neighbors become enemies. Saadawi illustrates how sectarian thinking affects all aspects of existence. Faraj the real estate agent, the hotel owner where Hadi and others live, was “like many others who had started to introduce sectarian considerations into the simplest transactions of daily life” (Saadawi, 2018, p. 54). Micro-level suspicion reflects macro-level strife, turning the city into a panoptic on where everyone watches and categorizes

everyone else. When the man selling you food or renting you a room sees your sect, not your personality, as a justification for your removal, faith in a shared humanity or social compact becomes untenable. To survive in this climate, one must be wary and skeptical and reject trust as foolish.

As a result of arbitrary authority, random violence, and sectarian fragmentation, all authoritative structures that offer order and purpose crumble. The administration, mocked as the "puppets in the Green Zone," is unresponsive and unable to safeguard its population (Saadawi, 2018, p. 105). Police and military are corrupt, useless, or complicit. Even the invading soldiers are remote, sloppy, and disruptive, often causing bloodshed. In Agamben's (2005) "state of exception," the law is suspended and existence is devoid of political worth, becoming "bare life" (p. 1). In such a zone, the institutions designed to inspire faith—the government for order, the police for justice, the religious authority for meaning—are empty or malicious. The novel's protagonists' "absence of faith" is a sensible, adaptable response to their circumstances. Faith makes you vulnerable. Elishva's confidence in Daniel's return makes her a pity figure and a lure for the monster she unknowingly creates. Those that prosper or survive have completely embraced the new world's cynicism. Hadi's initial distrust of authority drives him to sew corpses together, a warped gesture of compassion that is nevertheless a reasonable response to a state that cannot properly bury its citizens. The journalist Mahmoud's steady decline from pursuing truth to being seized by terror shows how ludicrous violence crushes meaning. Saadawi says faith is the luxury of a safe and controlled existence in post-2005 Baghdad. It is the first war victim and last to rebuild. As a postcolonial environment administered by necropolitics and characterized by exception, the city promotes despair as the only rational way of being.

Governance, law enforcement, and military authority are not only degraded under Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad, but they actively contribute to the instability they are intended to avoid. The institutional failures create a climate where trust in any governmental power is not just naïve but also foolish. Saadawi argues that the postcolonial state, caught between a tyrannical past and a destructive foreign intervention, has abandoned its primary function of protecting its citizens through Brigadier Majid, a symbol of the rotting core of the former regime, and the impotent Iraqi government and destructive occupying forces. When the state turns from protector

to criminal or bystander, the social compact is irreparably destroyed and confidence in institutions is unattainable.

Saadawi's Brigadier Majid symbolizes the previous regime's decline. The Brigadier, a former Saddam Hussein security officer, obsesses about power's aesthetics—his beautifully preserved uniform, his historical theories, his bureaucratic procedures—long after its substance has departed. Khalil (2022) calls him "a ghost of sovereignty past, clinging to the rituals of control in a world that has moved on to new forms of chaos" (p. 88). He investigates the Whatsitsname to apply an old and obsolete order to a new form of chaos he cannot understand, not for justice. A state based on fear and control rather than civic trust, his ineffectiveness shows that the old form of power is shattered and unable to face the current reality. His notions about a Zionist or Ba'athist plot behind the monster are outrageously divorced from the grassroots violence caused by his institutional vacuum. The Brigadier's eventual inability to achieve anything of significance highlights a tragic truth: the pre-existing institutions were never established on trust, only obedience, and now they cannot even enforce that. New Iraqi government, supposedly sovereign, is even more pitiful and disconnected. Saadawi portrays it as a puppet administration trapped in the walled Green Zone, distant from Baghdad's population. They are mocked as "the big shots in the Green Zone" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 105), reflecting their insignificance. This regime lacks even the Brigadier's performance skills; it gives no security, justice, or hope. It acts as a state for foreign occupiers but provides no actual services to its citizens. In Mbembe's (2003) assessment of the postcolony, the state frequently acts as a caricature, simulating administration without ethics (p. 25). Faith in the government is ludicrous since it fails to deliver security, the most fundamental public benefit. Not being able to protect its inhabitants from being blown apart on the streets or snatched from their homes makes a state meaningless. Rousseau's social compact is null and invalid; people have no protection and owe no allegiance.

The invading forces, an external, destructive power with impunity and crippling indifference, fill this local authority vacuum. Americans have immense authority, yet they use it to increase dread, unlike the Brigadier or Green Zone administration. Not evil masterminds, but a faceless, mechanical force with devastating, unexpected repercussions. These checkpoints cause arbitrary deaths, raids based on poor

intelligence rip families apart, and their existence promotes insurgency and sectarian violence. In Saadawi (2018), a character states, “The Americans... they toppled the statue, the regime, and everything else, and now we’re seeing the outcome” (p. 49). Saadawi believes the occupation is the ultimate necropolitical actor, dictating life and death without understanding or accountability to the people it governs (Mbembe, 2003). The Baghdadis cannot believe in such a power because it caused their precarious situation. Their high-tech weapons and armor symbolize not security but an unbridgeable power and comprehension divide, and the occupants cause the unrest. This trio of failing authority—the ghost of the old regime, the puppet of the new, and the disruptive outsider—erodes institutional trust. In a state that is either violent or indifferent, citizens are reduced to "bare life" (zoē), deprived of political rights and safeguards (Agamben, 2005, p. 1). This condition of exception, where the law is continually suspended, makes institutional absurdity daily. This is why Hadi's bizarre but reasonable solution—stitching together a corpse-avenger to create his own terrible, extrajudicial justice—is portrayed. He does it because he knows formal justice channels are useless. A citizen-led, DIY attempt to restore order after the state failed, the Whatsitsname is a terrible example of institutional failure. Its existence is the ultimate government, police, and occupier indictment. The monster would be useless if order-keeping organizations worked.

Saadawi depicts a world where institutional religion is diseased, not dumb. A state that cannot do its most fundamental task should be met with skepticism, self-reliance, or despair. In postcolonial Iraq, where the state is either a harsh relic, an impotent puppet, or a foreign imposition, the novel posits that a protected social compact is a mirage. Distrust in institutions is the chaos's main symptom and the only logical inference from daily living. This deep disenchantment creates a moral and civic vacuum where monster solutions can thrive because no one believes anyone else can help.

In Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad, the Whatsitsname becomes the novel's fundamental intellectual core, a living, crying incarnation of a great metaphysical problem. The creature's makeup and function reflect this catastrophe, caused by institutional and divine organizations’ inability to control chaos. It is the appropriate emblem for a society where all fundamental ideas have disappeared since

it lies between life and death, justice and revenge, meaning and nonsense. By moving beyond a sectarian reading to a universalized metaphysical one and intricately weaving religion into its doomed quest for purpose, the creature becomes a tragic figure who questions faith, justice, and coherent identity in a world abandoned by God and state.

The earliest and strongest symptom of metaphysical dissolution is Whatsitsname's materiality. The “sovereign” entity is “made up of the parts of people from all the different sectors, sects, and ethnicities of Iraq” (Saadawi, 2018, p. 204). Bhabha's postcolonial lens illuminates this literal hybridity's philosophical purpose. The monster symbolizes truth fragmentation. Each component has a sectarian identity and the metaphysical weight of a human story—unfinished business, personal loves, and regrets. Johns (2021) claims that the monster becomes a "palimpsest of unresolved lives," with no single narrative and no cohesive purpose (p. 157). Its battle to maintain a stable shape as pieces deteriorate and need replacement symbolizes the impossible endeavor to preserve a stable belief system in a violent world. The creature's body is a nation, but its mind is schizophrenic, pushed in many ways by its constituents' aspirations and traumas. Since its existence depends on a multiplicity of selves, it cannot answer the fundamental question, “Who am I?” Internal fragmentation renders confidence in a coherent, purposeful self-impossible, mirroring the experience of citizens whose identities have been destroyed by forces beyond their control, leaving them in existential vertigo with no one reality. Crisis of the ego is tied to metaphysical crisis—the failure of theodicy, or trying to reconcile a benign, almighty God with evil and suffering. The novel's occupied Baghdad, where market explosions kill innocents, defies divine order. In this metaphysical vacuum, the Whatsitsname claims divine intention to “achieve what the government and the law and the occupying forces hadn’t: justice” (Saadawi, 2018, p. 94). It poses as God's absent agent, a false avenger trying to forcefully end wickedness. From the start, their purpose was a warped type of religious faith—imposing a moral framework where none existed. This “divine” duty is quickly tainted by a harsh physical necessity: the creature must murder to survive. Its justice effort becomes indistinguishable from the cycle of violence it purports to end. This dilemma shows that its goal and divine justice cannot be achieved using mortal or horrific methods. Instead of acting, the creature shows God's deafening stillness. Its entire endeavor becomes a dismal parody of religious judgment, showing how any

human-made system of ultimate justice becomes ugly, greedy, and nonsensical without divine will. Compared to Elishva, the religious theme is addressed. Her strong Christian faith in divine intervention and resurrection is typical. She believes the monster is her returning son Daniel, giving it a fleeting sense of serenity and purpose. Saadawi sees this as a sad hallucination, not religious validation. Elishva's earnest religion gives the monster a brief home and identity, fuelling his savagery. While soothing, her religious system is dated and dangerously removed from the metaphysical crises around her. She represents a religion that can only endure by willful blindness to the absurdity of the present, and her pain as the monster goes shows that her conventional faith cannot heal the wounds of the modern world. Her tale demonstrates that classical religious belief becomes detrimental or unimportant in the face of such enormous, pointless pain.

The Whatsitsname's meaning is the gap it represents and makes apparent, not the justice it fails to bring. Its strongest point is its cyclical nature—disintegrating at the novel's end to reveal a new monster. This cyclicality argues that the metaphysical vacuum—the lack of answers to basic justice and meaning questions—is the sole permanent situation. Monsters are symptoms, not solutions, of this gap. It embodies a collective, crying question to a silent heaven. The monster—the symbol of lost faith—is the only thing left to trust in after mosque and state failed. The Whatsitsname is Saadawi's most deep critique: war's greatest horror is the disintegration of religious, moral, and existential frameworks that give human existence purpose. Its mix of absences makes the monster hybrid the real and horrifying emblem of its period.

Conclusion

Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad is a philosophical exploration of the conditions that make believing impossible. The novel painstakingly records the systematic construction of absences of faith—in institutions, divine justice, and the basic integrity of the human self—as a direct result of the necropolitical reality of occupied Baghdad, according to postcolonial theory. The investigation showed that roadblocks, random explosions, and sectarian violence are active catalysts, making religion abandoning a pragmatic survival strategy rather than a moral failure.

The Whatsitsname's tragic effort to become a heavenly vengeance reveals the absolute inadequacy of theodicy, illustrating that in the face of ludicrous violence, every man-made system of ultimate justice becomes horrific. The creature's broken, hybrid body is the ultimate expression of this disintegration, a physical depiction of a collective identity so shattered that a stable, believing self cannot join together. Saadawi's work provides neither atonement or faith restoration. The cyclical climax, hinting at the monster's return, argues that this paper's absences are permanent elements of a postcolonial world in continual crisis. Thus, the novel's most dramatic and frightening creation is the Whatsitsname, a creature produced from a catastrophic failure of meaning, not science. The proof that when a city loses its institutions, god, and soul, the monster becomes the only thing to trust in.

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Abstract in Arabic

"رواية (فرانكشتاين في بغداد) (2013) لأحمد سعداوي تستكشف المشهد النفسي والأخلاقي للعراق في ظل الاحتلال الأمريكي من خلال وحش وُلد من رحم العنف الطائفي. تَحلُل هذه الورقة البحثية تصوير الرواية لانتشار انعدام الإيمان بالدين ومؤسسات الدولة والإنسانية باستخدام النظرية ما بعد الاستعمارية.

تدعي الورقة أن "المسمى" (الشسمه) ليس كائناً خارقاً للطبيعة، بل هو التجسيد الحقيقي والرمزي لانهيار النظام الاعتقادي بالكامل في مجتمع ماء، والناجم عن التمزق والمعاناة في الحقبة ما بعد الاستعمارية. تبيّن هذه

الدراسة كيف يستخدم سعداوي عناصر القوطية والغرابة لنقد التدخل الأجنبي والصراع الأهلي من خلال تحليل الشخصيات الرئيسية والغرض المتغير للوحش.

تجادل الورقة البحثية بأن الرواية تصوّر هذا الفراغ الديني على أنه عنصر أساسي في واقع حيث أصبح العنف والانتقام المصدرين الوحيدين للمعنى. تُعتبر (فرانكشتاين في بغداد) عملاً نقدياً مهماً في الأدب ما بعد الاستعماري، يتناول انهيار اليقينيات الميتافيزيقية والاجتماعية في مواجهة الفوضى السياسية."
