Trauma after War: A Postcolonial Study in Contemporary Iraqi Novels with Special Reference to *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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الصدمة بعد الحرب: دراسة ما بعد الاستعمار في الروايات العراقية المعاصرة مع إشارة خاصة إلى فرانكشتاين في بغداد

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Abstract

This study discusses post conflict trauma in contemporary Iraqi novels, centering on Ahmed Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* as a case. The study examines how Iraqi authors are coping with and speaking about communal trauma after decades of war, particularly since the United States invasion in 2003. Drawing on postcolonial trauma theory, the study examines how conventional Western models of traumatisation need to be modified in order to function effectively within Iraq where trauma is inflected by colonial history and ongoing geopolitical conflict.

Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a leading example of the trend: it's based on Mary Shelley's book about a very famous corpse monster, and turns it into a striking allegory for postwar Iraq. The monster in the novel is assembled from body parts of people who died in bombings. It is the shattered Iraqi soul and the trauma that a country so long savaged by war has to overcome. Saadawi adopts Gothic tropes of gloomy absurdism to reveal trauma that may not be expressible in realistic literatures. At the same time, she rounds on the occupation forces and sectarian violence.

The novel puts "*Frankenstein in Baghdad*" within the context of modern Iraqi war literature more broadly uses different narrative strategies to portray a human experience of

suffering. Iraqi literature offers unique forms of deploying and portraying trauma, which is influenced by the country's colonial history and volatile present. Trauma is experienced on individual as well as collective levels and acutely felt over generations.

That postcolonial inquiry of trauma in Iraqi literature is also a way to remind us that stories can be both the treatment and the medicine, at the same time. It also helps us to understand the loneliness, weakness and courage of the Iraqis. This analysis extends the trauma theory path by investigating how Iraqi authors give culturally-specific narrative strategies to represent trauma. It does so by acknowledging the complexities of non-Western experiences and the continuing impacts of colonial legacies.

Keywords: trauma theory, postcolonial studies, Iraqi literature, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Ahmed Saadawi

الخلاصة

هذه الدراسة تدرس الصدمة ما بعد الصراعة في الروايات العراقية المعاصرة ، مركزة على رواية احمد السعداوي فرانكشتاين في بغداد كحالة . هذة الدراسة تفحص كيف الكتاب العراقيين تحدث وتعامل مع الصدمة المجتمعية بعد عقود من الحرب، خصوصا" من الغزو الامريكي في ٢٠٠٣ . معتمدا" على نضرية الصدمة بعد الاستعمار. هذة الدراسة تكشف كيف النموذج الغربي للصدمة يحتاج ان يعدل ليوظف بفعالية ليناسب حالة العراق عندما الصدمة تتأثر بالاستعمار التاريخي والصراع الجيوسياسي المستمر.

يعد كتاب السعداوي «فرانكشتاين في بغداد» مثالًا رائدًا على هذا الاتجاه: فهو يستند إلى كتاب ماري شيلي عن وحش الجثث الشهير جدًا، ويحوله إلى قصة رمزية مذهلة لعراق ما بعد الحرب. يتم تجميع الوحش في الرواية من أجزاء أجساد الأشخاص الذين ماتوا في التفجيرات. إنها الروح العراقية الممزقة والصدمة التي يتعين على بلد عانى من الحرب لفترة طويلة أن يتغلب عليها. يتبنى السعداوي استعارات قوطية للعبثية القاتمة ليكشف عن الصدمة التي قد لا يمكن التعبير عنها في الأدب الواقعي. وفي الوقت نفسه، تتجول حول قوات الاحتلال والعنف الطائفي.

تضع الرواية "فرانكشتاين في بغداد" ضمن سياق أدب الحرب العراقي الحديث على نطاق أوسع، وتستخدم استراتيجيات سردية مختلفة لتصوير تجربة إنسانية من المعاناة. يقدم الأدب العراقي أشكالًا فريدة من نوعها لنشر وتصوير الصدمة، والتي تتأثر بتاريخ البلاد الاستعماري وحاضرها المتقلب. يتم التعرض للصدمة على المستوى الفردي والجماعي ويتم الشعور بها بشكل حاد على مدى أجيال.

إن هذا البحث في الصدمة ما بعد الاستعمارية في الأدب العراقي هو أيضًا وسيلة لتذكيرنا بأن القصص يمكن أن تكون العلاج والدواء في نفس الوقت. كما أنه يساعدنا على فهم شعور العراقيين بالوحدة والضعف والشجاعة. يوسع هذا التحليل مسار نظرية الصدمة من خلال التحقيق في كيفية قيام المؤلفين العراقيين بإعطاء استراتيجيات سردية محددة ثقافيًا لتمثيل الصدمة. وهي تفعل ذلك من خلال الاعتراف بتعقيدات التجارب غير الغربية والتأثيرات المستمرة للموروثات الاستعمارية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية الصدمة ، دراسات ما بعد الاستعمار ، الأدب العراقي ، فرانكشتاين في بغداد ، أحمد سعادوي ، أدب الحرب ، الصدمة الجماعية

1. Introduction

Trauma after War: A Postcolonial Study in Contemporary Iraqi Novels with Special Reference to *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

Assistant Lecturer: Ihab Mohammed Mahdi

Decades of war, repression and foreign intervention have weighed heavily on contemporary Iraqi literature. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its aftermath loom large over a generation of Iraqi writers who have struggled to illuminate the trauma their country has faced. This paper examines the representation of trauma in contemporary Iraqi novels from a postcolonial perspective, drawing on Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013).

For the analyst of Iraqi war literature, the packaging of trauma theory and postcolonial studies offers a gift. Traditional Western trauma theory has been accused of both being Eurocentric and not very useful in non-Western settings. This theory stems from Freudian psychoanalysis, and was primarily developed in the reading of Holocaust literature. Other scholars, including Stef Craps and Irene Visser, argue that trauma theory needs to be "decolonized" in order for it to accurately address the experiences of those who have lived in postcolonial societies (Craps 2013; Visser 2011). This essay remains open to these critiques and suggests a more productive way of looking at trauma in Iraqi literature that is less insensible to cultural distinctions.

It is very difficult to study postcolonial trauma in Iraq. This is hardly surprising given that there have been numerous colonial and neo-colonial interventions in its recent history, from British rule following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire to Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist dictatorship and the US invasion of 2003. All these eras have left their footprint on Iraqi culture and memory (Davis 2005). This complex history is echoed in contemporary Iraq literature, which tends to blur the horrors of past and present.

Since 2003, writers in Iraq have processed their trauma in various ways. Sinan Antoon, Hassan Blasim and Ahmed Saadawi are some of the writers who have employed utterly different narrative strategies to render visible what seem realities of war and postwar life that can't be shown. Some of the techniques here are tripartite plots, magical realism, Gothic themes and dark absurdism. What all these varied approaches have in common is an attempt to voice popular trauma and challenge the dominant narratives of recent Iraqi history (Truslow, 2019).

Frankenstein in Baghdad by Ahmed Saadawi is a genuinely original way of trying to address Iraq's harrowing recent past. The work won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction and has been lauded by critics worldwide. first published in Arabic in 2013 before being translated into English in 2018. By placing Mary Shelley's seminal Gothic novel in post-invasion Baghdad, Saadawi serves a powerful allegory for a country fragmented by sectarian strife and foreign intervention (Raheem, 2024).

The novel follows Hadi, a trash dealer who scavenges maimed limbs from victims of bombing and sews them into a complete corpse. The motive behind this is he wants to give the dead a proper burial. When the corpse is animated by the ghost of a hotel guard who died in a suicide bombing, it turns into ``the Whatsitsname'' or ''Shesma,'' a creature that seeks vengeance on those whose body parts have been used to create it. While the monster fulfills its

vengeful mission, it must continually replace the pieces that have rotted with fresh ones harvested from new victims. And it becomes difficult to distinguish between who the victim is and who is the monster (for Hassan, 2024).

In this story, Saadawi examines the continued violence in Iraq after the invasion of 2003 and how identities among Iraqis are becoming less and less whole. And the monster, a body cobbled together from citizens of all religions and ethnicities, is transformed into "the first true Iraqi citizen." This is the trauma that has shaped the nation, and it alludes to concept of shared identity through suffering. The animate cadaver, indistinction between life and death and the fear evoking environment in the book are all instances of Gothic themes which serve well in portraying a trauma that may be impossible to represent in realistic fiction (Abed, 2024).

This research considers *Frankenstein in Baghdad* within the broader landscape of contemporary Iraqi war literature and examines how it utilizes Gothic and fantastic themes to represent suffering through a postcolonial prism. By employing narrative strategies specific to the culture, this kind of modern Arabic fiction (and Saadawi's novel) pushes back against Western tropes about trauma and healing head-on by showing how complicated life is in Iraq.

It further broadens our ability to comprehend trauma theory, as we examine how in Iraqi narrative fiction writers engage the representation and articulation of communal trauma. It does this by giving weight to the lived experiences of those who are from non-Western cultures, but also to the long tail of colonialism. It demonstrates how literature can record trauma from the past and be used to respond to it, too. It's a window for us into how cultures cope with the aftermath of war and violence.

The piece begins with an assessment of the theoretical foundations of postcolonial trauma studies, emerging in and expanding upon traditional Western trauma theory. It also offers an overview of contemporary Iraqi literature, concentrating on books that address the trauma of war and occupation. The primary material of research consists of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, how Saadawi makes use of Gothic themes and postcolonial criticism to reveal Iraq's shared sorrow after the war. Finally, the study seeks to investigate what postcolonial traumata, memories and narratives may be learned from Iraqi war literature.

1.1 Research Question

How can the Gothic of Postcolonialism in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* depict and challenge a collective trauma in post-invasion Iraq, and what does this uncovers about the inadequacy of Western trauma theory outside of the West?

1.2 Research objective

To examine how the post-2003 Iraqi novel, and *Frankenstein in Baghdad* particularly, make use of unique narrative strategies to represent collective trauma after a period of war and occupation -important for understanding theories of trauma that account for the complexities of postcolonial experience.

1.3 Significance of the Study

The current study fills an important void in trauma studies by attending to how Iraqi literature challenges and extends Western-centric trauma theory. Investigating the major narrative features employed by Iraqi writers to represent collective trauma, this study contributes to the decolonization of trauma theory and reflects on writing as a therapeutic instrument and a

Trauma after War: A Postcolonial Study in
Contemporary Iraqi Novels with Special Reference to
Frankenstein in Baghdad
Assistant Lecturer: Ihab Mohammed Mahdi

political tool in postcolonial conditions. The findings have implications for understanding how communities move through shared trauma across cultural lines, and the role of literature in promoting healing and reconciliation following violence.

1.4 Limitations of the Study

This study deals with a translated text from Arabic to English, it focuses on one main text *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. It places Western theoretical contexts that are appropriated through a postcolonial perspective.

1.5 Methodology

This research addresses the representation and imagination of collective trauma in Iraqi literature considering Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. The study is humanistic, using literary analysis and critical theory to investigate complex cultural systems rather than measurable data. This method is justified by the subjective and complex character of their texts and the connection between these texts and historical aspects of human experience, psychological reality .

2. Design of Research

The design of the researchers is based on text analysis, which critically looks at some literary works. This style enables an overall investigation of narrative strategies, thematic issues as well as cultural specifics in the texts. The research is located in a postcolonial framework and seeks to critically examine trauma theories that currently restrict their applicability, through an analysis of the distinctive context of post-invasion Iraq.

That is to say, this involves asking questions about the Eurocentric biases common in normative trauma studies and prioritizing how colonial histories and contemporary geopolitics inform Iraqi collective memory.

2.1 Primary source

The primary book under consideration is Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013; tr. 2018). This book was picked because it had received a lot of positive reviews, it offered a fresh look at a Western Gothic classic set in Iraq and it addressed the themes of war, brutality and shattered identity in Iraq following 2003 on an extremely profound level.

Using Gothic elements and black absurdity, the novel is built upon an original narrative structure that opens a window to unutterable aspects concerning collective trauma (Saadawi, 2018).

2.2 Secondary sources

Drawing on a variety of recent Iraqi war literature and key texts in postcolonial trauma studies, the study positions itself against the corpus in order to create an elaborate framework for its own analysis. For a more comprehensive understanding of the context it must be noted that there are

at least two other Iraqi writers to whom reference is made: Sinan Antoon (The Corpse Washer, 2013) and Hassan Blasim (The Corpse Exhibition, 2014) (Antoon, 2013; Blasim, 2014). The texts offer various narrative strategies for representing the traumatic and challenge Western attitudes toward trauma and healing by highlighting culturally specific ways of understanding (Hanoosh, 2013).

3. Theoretical Framework: Postcolonial Trauma Studies

The work is informed by the field of postcolonial trauma studies. This is important in light of the decolonisation project which traditional Western trauma theory has been accused of, a critique motivated by its Eurocentric focus and by its lack of applicability to "non-Western" literatures (Craps, 2013; Visser, 2011). Scholars, such as Stef Craps and Irene Visser (2011), stress the importance of extending trauma theory towards non-Western cultural, historical and religious contexts, considering that trauma in postcolonial settings is often collective, anchored in colonial histories and perpetuated through structural violence (Craps, 2003; Visser, 2011). The study draws on scholars like Yasmeen Hanoosh (2013) whose understanding of the emergence of Iraqi literature pursues the relationship between modern Iraqi writing and its entanglements with the tumultuous political history of Iraq in a manner that is accessible to others (Hanoosh, 2013).

The theory of trauma history arose late in the 20th century, a way to reckon with what it means when traumatic events enter the minds of men and women, how hard it is to make narratives from them. Pioneers on this new work included scholars like Cathy Caruth 1996), who was among the firsts to write about conventional trauma theory. It relies heavily on Freudian psychoanalysis and has largely been constructed in investigation of Holocaust literature and testimony. But, as postcolonial critics have suggested, this view of non-Western trauma through a Western lens has serious problems.

As Stef Craps (2013) argues, conventional trauma theory has marginalized or underestimated the traumatic experiences of non-Western or minority cultures. To this end he identifies several problems with conventional trauma theory, in which the body and space are occluded by focusing on Western events or people, and even by prior notions of self, psyche(s) and trauma; as well as a privileging of modernist aesthetic techniques to represent trauma — along with an erasure of the fact that "trauma continues" (19) in postcolonial settings, where violence tends not be event but structure.

Irene Visser (2011) likewise critiques trauma theory as Eurocentric and calls for its "decolonization" (xv). There is a need, she writes, to extend trauma theory to authors from cultural, historical and theological contexts other than the Western. The standard trauma theory thesis that trauma can't be represented, refuses narrative closure — that may not work in cultures with different views of stories and of how to heal, Visser says.

Trauma theory aims to circumvent this problem by adapting the concept to the specific needs of postcolonial nations. This approach acknowledges that trauma within the context of postcolonial nation- states is not encapsulated in one individual alone, but shared among many; and it is informed by the histories of colonialism but also perpetuated through institutionalized violence and inequalities (Luckhurst, 2008). It also acknowledges that people from different

cultures may have their own ways of addressing trauma, making sense of it and healing from its impact.

Nations/States When focusing on Iraq, such a postcolonial trauma studies should consider the country's complex heritage of colonisation, tyranny and foreign intervention. It also has to recognize that the trauma affects entire Iraqi communities, not just individual Iraqis. This is because whole communities have been damaged by decades of conflict and sanctions, along with sectarian violence. It must be mindful, as well, of the unique cultural, religious, and literary traditions through which Iraqis understand and describe their lives (Masmoudi 2015).

4-The Representation of Trauma in Modern Iraqi Literature

The problem-prone history of Iraq's politics has greatly affected the development of contemporary Iraqi literature. Iraqi literature has undergone many changes over the years, states Yasmeen Hanoosh (2013): between the period of the Hashemite monarchy (1932–58), Qasim's rule (1958–63), Ba'th Party rule (1968–2003) and the embargo years of 1991-2003 after which came post- occupation in 2003. Each of these eras has impacted the Iraqi literary scene by changing how writers relate to the government, how public sphere operates or what is behind cultural projects.

Realism, which was the successful aesthetic of the 1960s and '70s (as in the work of writers like Gha'ib Tu'mah Farman, Mahdi 'Isa al-Saqr and Fu'ad al-Takarli), returned after 2003 as well, though with significant shifts in mimetic norms. Two instances of these changes may be found in Luay Hamza Abbas's minimalist impressionistic short stories and Hassan Blasim's brutal, unbelieving portraits of human-inhumanity (Hanoosh 2013).

Modern Iraqi literature, Hanoosh writes, is a "binary shape," originating from both the "inside" and the "outside" sensibilities and cultures. This has happened because, over the past 50 years, many intellectuals have been obliged to emigrate from Iraq for political or other reasons. Even when they don't live in Iraq, Iraqi writers are caring for how war and violence turn Iraqi society sour.

There are many modes in which Iraqi writers speak of themselves and their country. Abd al-Khaliq al-Rikabi and Mahmoud Saeed on the mundane life during the Iraq-Iran war in a plain style; Ali Bader on what it is like feeling as a solider fighting this war, Hassan Blasim on moral choices amidst violent situations. Other writers, such as Luay Hamza Abbas, focus on the individual and collective traumatic effects of the post-war experience, Sinan Antoon on the terror that endures from violence and war, Sargon Boulus evokes pre-modern symbols and images (Hanoosh 2013).

"The Corpse Washer" (2013) by Sinan Antoon is a strong indication of how modern Iraqi literature has grappled with trauma. It's about Jawad, a young man who doesn't want to but must assume the job of washing and shrouding dead people that his father did. The novel examines how being around death and violence all of the time affects people's minds, with the

2003 invasion and its aftermath as a backdrop. Antoon channels Jawad's experiences to demonstrate the trauma that has befallen Iraqi society in its entirety. He also considers how difficult it is for others to maintain a sense of who they are and what their purpose becomes when so much has been stolen (Habeeb, 2015).

The Corpse Exhibition (2014) a collection of short stories that presents trauma differently, by Hassan Blasim. Blasim takes surrealist and absurdist approaches to demonstrate how violent and bewildering war can be. His plots commonly twist together reality and nightmare in the way trauma does regular cognition and narrative coherence. Blasim takes the limit of believable detail to demonstrate how an old-fashioned, naturalistic storytelling is inadequate for conveying just how awful Iraq's recent experience has been. Fahmy (2018) pushes against realist representation of Segue Blasim to show that 'realism' can't do justice to just quite how awful Iraq's recent history has been.

These and other works of modern Iraqi literature are pushing back on the way the West thinks about trauma and healing. They do not see trauma as an isolated event that shatters what otherwise is a stable life; they see it as an enduring condition that shapes everyday existence. They also say that trauma in Iraq is not just individual, and frequently harms entire communities for decades. They also prove that trauma can be represented in ways other than the Western, fragmented non-linear stories favored by trauma theory. Instead, they employ Arabic literary archaisms and regional cultural references (Kilito 2008).

5- *Frankenstein in Baghdad*: A Postcolonial Gothic Novel

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a crucial text of post-war trauma literature emerging from Iraq. Saadawi transforms Mary Shelley's classic Gothic tale into a brilliant parable of a country plagued by war and oppression, moving it to modern-day Baghdad. The novel leverages Gothic elements to illustrate how war affects culture, and it also offers a postcolonial critique of the power relations that have structured Iraq's recent past.

Marwa Essam Eldin Fahmy Alkhayat (2022) argues that Saadawi's novel can be considered as a form of "postcolonial gothicism" in which the monster is used to speak about the political situation following the invasion in Iraq. The creature, constructed entirely from body parts taken from bombing victims, serves as a metaphor for how Iraqi society has been dismembered during the invasion. But it does signal that Iraqis can unite at least as one to a certain extent, because it includes bits of many religious and ethnic groupings. As the book puts it, it is "the first true Iraqi citizen."

Sonakshi Srivastava (2023) holds that the novel's treatment of trash and disposability are part of its postcolonial critique. Hadi, the protagonist, is a trash dealer and the monster is constructed from discarded body parts — actual human waste in hand-me-down human material that kind of forms as a result of cruelty and occupation. This focus on waste is an index of how Iraqi lives have been rendered trash during the war and occupation. "It echoes through the work," said Srivastava, from the junk truck driven by a suicide bomber to outdated technology that hints at how Baghdad's landscape is transforming.

The novel also deals with Foucauldian notions of biopower and governmentality. The novel's framing device, a report from the clandestine "Tracking and Pursuit Department," puts me in mind of the manner in which occupying governments watch for troublemaking. It is not

dissimilar to the operation of biopower in an occupation, and this was established with who lives who dies (Abu Shehab, 2022).

Frankenstein in Baghdad constitutes a heavy post-invasion trauma in Iraq, by virtue of its Gothic elements and critical postcolonialism. The monster's revenge quest, which sustains the chain of violence even as it seeks justice for vortexes of harm that ensued from its trauma, suggests how traumas can perpetuate more harm if they're not given proper airing. The novel's blurring of the boundaries between victim and perpetrator queers simple tales of guilt and innocence in conflict (Fahmy, 2018).

As well, the book's employment of the supernatural, including the animated body and the ghost of the hotel guard, as well as that old Christian woman who thinks monster is her long-lost son, demonstrates how trauma alters normal reality and makes it difficult to hold on to. These supernatural segments allow Saadawi to display aspects of trauma that may not be accessible in realistic fiction (Alkhayat, 2022).

Rami Abu Shehab (2022) remarks that *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a good example of how the Neo-Colonialism shaping Iraq when US occupation took it over by 2003. The book imagines how life was lived after colonialism in Iraq and the impact of invasion on Iraqi culture and identity. This postcolonial reading of the book argues that it does more than just present trauma; it also critiques the power structures delivering that trauma.

It is cultural hybridity in postcolonial literature as seen through *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, a Western narrative tool being used to express and relate an Iraqi story. The novel undergoes, as Christina Phillips (2023: 2) suggests, "multiple semantic and symbolic shifts" from Arabic into English. That goes to show how complex cultural translation can be in postcolonial society. The novel's genre is a blend of Gothic horror, political satire and magic realism.

6. Conclusion

The study explored trauma in Postcolonial Iraqi novels an analysis of Hamed, Agaaby and Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Iraqi literature teaches us — as this book has shown — new things about how trauma occurs and manifests itself in postcolonial conditions, something that counters and complements traditional Western trauma theory.

Frankenstein in Baghdad and other recent Iraqi books don't portray trauma as a brief aberration — the odd maguffin out of place that sends an otherwise pacific life looming this way and that — they rather imply that trauma is simply a property of life, day by day, year upon year, when there has been war and foreign manipulation for decades. They depict trauma as something that can be shared by whole communities and that can be suffered for generations. They also bring to bear an array of storytelling methods, from social realism and Gothic horror to magical realism, in order to capture experiences that are possibly too horrific or profound to be conveyed in words.

This study's postcolonial understanding of trauma takes into account the concrete and general structures of colonial and neo-colonial power that historically shaped Iraq. It foregrounds the fact that it is politically legitimate to say that trauma in postcolonial settings can only be understood on the basis of a history of colonization and a geopolitical reality. It also shows how literature can function as a kind of record for historical trauma — and even a means to process it, giving us glimpses at multiple cultures working through the collective effects of war and violence.

This study explicates trauma theory and interprets how Iraqi writers are grappling with, representing and recuperating collective trauma in their fiction. It accomplishes this by recognizing the nuances of non-Western experiences and the lasting effects of colonialism. It suggests that trauma theory needs to be "decolonized" in order to understand the experience of those who are living with postcolonial trauma and that it can only do so if it acknowledges their multiplicity in terms of culture, history and religion.

The exploration of trauma in Iraqi literature can also inform us a little about how stories can help to mend people. Conventional trauma theory often seems to talk about the difficulty of understanding or dealing with traumatic experiences. But Iraq's literary heritage is a testament to the fact that stories can be extremely useful for handling collective pain and inventing new ways to think about the future. Through this contribution to the work of witnessing and justice being done, Iraqi writers make visible experiences that have been erased or suppressed.

So, first of all it evidences how useful a postcolonial approach can be to speak trauma in Literature. By looking at the various contexts and methods in Iraqi literature it endeavors to instruct our understanding of how trauma is represented in fiction. That's more than Western trauma theory can offer. It also shows us how important it is to pay attention to other voices and the stories they tell, if we want to comprehend and begin healing some of those war wounds/colonial scars.

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Trauma after War: A Postcolonial Study in Contemporary Iraqi Novels with Special Reference to *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

Assistant Lecturer: Ihab Mohammed Mahdi

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