



Dehumanization, Self- Fragmentation, and Trauma of Identity in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi

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Abstract

Referring to the works of Frantz Fanon, this study investigates how Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* represents the internalization of violence suffered by the colonized, as the struggle for justice comes with suffering from anger, confusion, and pain. Shesma, the stitched-together dead body at the heart of this book, a surreal presence, a figure who incarnates the fractured identity and collective trauma of a nation torn apart by the burden of war and colonialism. Shesma's body functions as a multifarious spot of confrontation and recovery due to typifying the dichotomy of the colonized subject's experience, struggling for freedom while concurrently dealing with the lingering threats of trauma. Moreover, this article inspects the themes of physical revulsion and phantom justice that pervade the novel, enlightening how Saadawi creates a story that disapproves of the basic grounds of radical violence. Saadawi also asks his readers to challenge the ethical uncertainties and moral predicaments encountered by people in a society where violence has become regularized and where the search for identity is tense with disintegration. By placing *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in the framework of Fanon's work, this study shows the close association between trauma, identity, and the sociopolitical situation of contemporary Iraq. Eventually, it contends that Saadawi not only blames colonialism and the constant violence that originates from it but also ratifies the Fanonian contradiction, demonstrating how the fight for freedom can be both a base of authorization and a foundation of suffering. Thus, this paper leads to a better understanding of the intricacies of postcolonial identity and the permanent influence of trauma in a world full of fight and displacement.

Key Terms: Dehumanization, Fragmented Self, Postcolonial Disorder and Moral Ambiguity, trauma of Identity, Violence.

النزعة الانسانية ، وتشظي الذات، وصدمة الهوية في رواية فرانكشتاين في بغداد لأحمد سعداوي
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الخلاصة

الإشارة إلى أعمال فرانسز فانون، تبحث هذه الدراسة في كيفية تمثيل رواية أحمد سعداوي فرانكشتاين في بغداد لعملية استبطان العنف الذي يعانيه المستعمر، إذ إن النضال من أجل العدالة يرتبط بالمعاناة الناتجة عن الغضب والارتباك والألم. يُعد الشيسمة، الجسد الميت المخيط والمكوّن من بقايا جنث، محور الرواية



وحضوراً سريالياً يجسد الهوية المتشظية والصدمة الجماعية لأمة تمزقها أعباء الحرب والاستعمار. يعمل جسد الشسمة كـ موضع متعدد الأبعاد للمواجهة والتعافي، لكونه يجسد ثنائية تجربة الذات المستعمرة التي تكافح من أجل الحرية بينما تواجه في الوقت نفسه تهديدات الصدمة المستمرة علاوة على ذلك، يتناول هذا البحث مواضيع الاشمئزاز الجسدي والعدالة الوهمية التي تسود الرواية، موضحاً كيف أن سعداوي يبني سرداً ينتقد الأسس الجوهرية للعنف الراديكالي. كما يدعو سعداوي قراءه إلى مواجهة الالتباسات الأخلاقية والازمة القيمية التي يعانيها الأفراد في مجتمع أصبح فيه العنف أمراً اعتيادياً، وأضحت فيه محاولة البحث عن الهوية متوترة ومهددة بالتفكك من خلال وضع رواية فرانكشتاين في بغداد ضمن إطار فكر قانون، تُبرز الدراسة الترابط الوثيق بين الصدمة والهوية والواقع الاجتماعي والسياسي للعراق المعاصروفي النهاية، تجادل الدراسة بأن سعداوي لا يكتفي بإدانة الاستعمار والعنف المستمر الناتج عنه، بل يؤكد كذلك المفارقة القانونية، مظهرًا كيف يمكن أن يكون النضال من أجل الحرية أساساً للتقويض أساساً للمعانات. تسهم هذه الورقة في فهم أعمق لتعقيدات الهوية ما بعد الاستعمار ولـ الأثر الدائم للصدمة في عالم يموج بالصراع والاقتلاع والتنجير.

المصطلحات الأساسية: نزع الصفة الإنسانية، تشظي الذات، اضطراب ما بعد الاستعمار والغموض الأخلاقي، صدمة الهوية، العنف

1. Introduction

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) is a significant literary answer to the violence, fragmentation, and moral disorder after the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Happening in a war-ravaged Baghdad, the novel mixes magical realism, political allegory, and horror in order to tell the story of a creature, Shesma, assembled from the body parts of bombing victims, who rises to look for justice for the dead.

The main character in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is Shisma, sometimes referred to as a "nameless" figure in Arabic or transliterated as "what-its-name." Shisma is a twentieth-century version of Shelley's Frankenstein's monster. In this version, a man called Hadi Al-Attag decides to create a corpse from the recently collected flesh of Baghdad victims of suicide bombings and sectarian violence, whose bodies were torn to pieces and never given a proper burial. If at all possible, he wants to give the corpse a respectable burial instead of being thrown in the street and treated like trash.

According to Elayyan (2017), after his flatmate, who lives in an old house with him, is killed in a suicide bombing, Hadi is forced to construct the monster, for he gets fed up with gathering his friend-shattered remains. His body starts to blend in with the bodies of other victims. As a result, he decides to follow up the bombing explosions to collect human body parts and get them stitched to form a monster dubbed by Frankenstein. He intends to grant the dispersed bodies a dignified burial (p. 160).

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the monster is actually created through the accumulation of body parts from victims of violence in the devastations of war in Baghdad. The character Hadi collects these body parts and stitches them together in order to create a complete body, which then comes to life as a vengeful being searching for justice for the victims.



This novel is thus about the effect of war and violence on human beings and communities and the idea of communal responsibility for the consequences of severe clashes. Now, this study is going to examine the novel by using Frantz Fanon's postcolonial views, concentrating mainly on how violence works as a reaction to occupation, and how identity and humanity are renovated in a disjointed postcolonial setting.

2. Statement of the Study

In postcolonial literature, the relationship between violence, identity, and justice is still a serious area of investigation (Loomba, 2015, p. 70). Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is regarded as a significant representation of these themes, yet its complications have not been analyzed aptly. The novel very well depicts the recurring essence of vehemence and the ensuing disintegration of identity faced by people in battle-weary societies.

Regardless of the rich theoretical framework provided by Frantz Fanon's work, there exists a gap in comprehending how Saadawi's story not only censures the socio-political circumstances of contemporary Iraq but also embraces deeper ethical questions on the subject of the restoration of identity and morals after dehumanization. This study means to fill this gap by benefitting from Fanon's visions to inspect the multifaceted tensions between colonialism and the quest for integrity, ultimately seeking to define the clashes and prospects of retrieving humanity in a fractured world.

3. Significance of the Study

This study is significant since by analyzing the novel's illustration of dehumanization, disintegration, and trauma of identity, this study will accentuate the enduring effect of colonial and postcolonial vehemence on individual and shared identities. Actually, the implication of this paper is attributable to its intention to disclose how Saadawi's novel goes beyond sheer political criticism and addresses more important matters of justice, ethics, and the renewal of identity in a background marked by misperception and anguish. By applying Fanon's insights, the study shows the repeated essence of vehemence and the psychological impacts of living in a shattered society.

4. Theoretical Framework: Fanonian Theory

Frantz Fanon, the most significant postcolonial intellectual, is renowned due to his books *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). His ideas typically focus on the cultural and psychological aspects of colonialism, specifically with regard to the identities of colonized peoples. For Fanon, colonialism creates an overwhelming experience of alienation and fragmentation for the colonized in their attempted negotiation between the



identities foisted upon them and their collective dehumanization as colonized subjects .

Fanon emphasizes the significance of reclaiming one's identity and agency through a process of mental decolonization and maintains that colonized people must actively contend with dismantling the hidden racism and inferiority complex initiated by colonial powers as a precondition for managing ontological freedom and self-determination. Additionally, Fanon argued in favor of the inevitability of violence in the struggle against colonialism, considering violence as a liberating means through which the colonized can claim their freedom and reestablish their sense of self. Fanon's ideas present a context for understanding the brawls of characters as they deal with the legacies of colonialism and the pursuit of self-identity.

Now, the present research will benefit from Fanon's theories. In his books and particularly *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon discusses the ways by which a black is referred to and socially identified by the white based on their race or skin color. What is remarked in *Black Skin, White Masks* depicts the challenging experiences undergone by Fanon himself as a black man living in a world controlled by white people. This issue enables the white community to enforce a racial image on black people (p. 83). This image which is established by the white man's eyes (Fanon, 1952, p. 84) has its origins in colonialization. In fact, and as mentioned before, this problem is not only about black people, but also includes any non-white colonized subject.

The Wretched of the Earth (1961) is another significant book by Fanon, published in 1961, which presents a powerful critique of colonialism and imperialism. The book focuses on decolonization itself and the armed struggle that often defines it. Colonialism, for Fanon, is not merely an apparatus of political and economic domination; it is a splitting apart of cultural oppression that gnaws at the colonized's sense of self and independence. He feels that colonialism creates a duality between the colonizer and the colonized and that only by violence can the colonized reclaim their pride and power.

5. Discussion

5.1. Violence as a Response to Colonial Oppression

Colonialism, as Fanon describes, brings about dehumanization, where the colonized folks are lessened to unseen and ignored individuals. This repression produces a break in identity, as the colonized have to deal with a world that refutes their humanity. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the character of Shesma, the stitched-together corpse, is a touching allegory for this dehumanization (Murphy, 2018, p. 274).



Shesma's scrappy body mirrors the dissolution of national identity and the trauma imposed by violence, both exterior and interior. The violence undergone by people in war-ravaged Iraq is not just bodily but also mental, resulting in a communal trauma that is revealed in numerous ways such as societal discontent and individual misery. Saadawi (2018) says,

Where had these two men come from? No one gave much thought to the question because the area had plenty of outsiders who had moved in on top of each other over many decades; no one could claim to be an original inhabitant. (p. 27)

Fanon believes that violence can be a purifying reply to the misery caused by colonial authorities. It is a tool through which the colonized can proclaim their presence, retrieve their identity, and defy the domineering constructions that aim to overpower them. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the violence portrayed is both a reaction to the instantaneous revulsions of war and an image of the historical heritage of colonialism and imperialism. The novel demonstrates how the characters cope with their identities in a setting blemished by violence, where regaining one's body and freedom often includes challenging the threat of violence itself. Teggart (2019) refers to the setting and says,

The novel's Baghdad is a complex mixture of the natural and the supernatural, featuring rampant suicide car bombings, souls searching for bodies, storytellers meeting for coffee, nights filled with gunfire, journalists meeting with prostitutes, streets filled with dead bodies, families grieving their lost ones, government officials employing astrologers, and many other contradictory, Gothic, violent, and even sentimental moments. (p. 2)

Shesma's search for equality is representative of this fight. As a figure born from violence, Shesma stands for the unsettled anger of a society that has been recurrently mistreated. The act of sewing together different parts of bodies signifies the effort to build a unified identity from the disarray of disintegration. This violence, though, is not without its costs; it reveals the cyclic nature of violence that Fanon defines, where the oppressed may become the oppressor in their search for self-determination. This is why it is noted,

There were serious things happening, and Hadi was merely a conduit, like a simple father or mother who produces a son who is a prophet, a savior, or an evil leader. They didn't exactly create the storm that followed. They were just the channel for something that was more powerful and significant than themselves. (Saadawi, 2018, p. 89)

Fanon refers to the irony intrinsic in radical violence. Whereas it can act as a means of deliverance, it can also preserve violence that weakens the objectives



of the revolution. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Saadawi shows this contradiction through the character of Shesma, whose reality as a violent entity leads to questions about the ethics of looking for justice through violent ways. The story makes the reader think about the inferences of violence as a reaction to repression: can it actually result in freedom, or does it only reproduce coercion it pursues to pull apart?

5.2. The Fragmented Postcolonial Subject

As stated before, in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Saadawi depicts a gripping investigation of the fragmented postcolonial subject through the perspective of trauma, identity, and the permanent impacts of colonial and existing violence. Fanon's work maintains that colonialism not only overcomes countries but also strongly affects the soul of the colonized people. The fragmented postcolonial subject appears as a direct result of this mental and communal displacement (Hudis, 2015, pp. 62-98).

Owing to colonial coercion and constant battle, people often find themselves dealing with diverse identities, fragmented experiences, and a feeling of estrangement from their own selves and societies. Saadawi (2018) refers to this issue by stating, "Not many people came back looking the same as when they left" (p. 50). This disintegration is not only an individual calamity; it echoes more important social ruptures that stem from historical traumas, cultural displacement, and the violence of both colonial and postcolonial systems.

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the character of Shesma is assumed as an accurate and figurative depiction of fragmentation. Shesma's body, made of diverse disjointed parts, signifies the communal trauma of a country torn apart by war, religious violence, and foreign attack. Each piece of Shesma denotes a different story, a different identity, and a different experience of misery, revealing how the postcolonial subject is often a mixture of incongruent and incompatible identities.

Shesma's existence causes diverse questions regarding the nature of identity in a ruptured society. The act of sewing together the body echoes the despairing effort to establish unity from confusion, stressing the brawl to retrieve freedom and identity in a world that has dehumanized people (Teggart, 2019, p. 2). This process of recovery is awash with brawls, as it includes challenging the troubled traumas that dawdle to interrupt both the personal and the shared.

Colonialism's psychological magnitudes, according to Fanon, cause the colonized subject to experience an intense alienation and internal conflict. In the novel of Saadawi, this disintegration is expressed in the strife of the characters with themselves and with others, "We try to avoid meeting one another,



although we are moving around in search of one another" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 117). The physical and mental violence that they are subjected to creates a world where belief and allegiance are challenging. The novel's characters are prone to fight with feelings of anger, misperception, and depression, echoing the suppressed violence Fanon writes about.

Regardless of the distressing spirit of fragmentation, Saadawi's novel also displays the power of the postcolonial people. Shesma's exploration of autonomy is a crucial metaphor for the fight to recover identity while getting through dehumanization. The character epitomizes the desire to defy the violence that has affected their life, looking for not only integrity for the dead but also a sense of fitting and pride for the living. This pursuit for uniformity in the middle of fragmentation is an important subject in Saadawi's text.

5.3. Dehumanization and the Struggle to Reclaim Humanity

In the selected novel, Saadawi has linked the themes of dehumanization and the fight to retrieve humanity. Fanon claims that colonialism leads to objectification, where the colonized are regarded as "the Other," stripped of their personality, and without the full scale of human experience. This dehumanization is not just psychological because it is also palpable in social structures and the real experiences of people.

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the violence and anarchy caused by war and foreign attack result in dehumanization. The characters, primarily Shesma epitomize the suspicions of a society that has been torn apart by war. Shesma's life is a symbol to the loss of individuality; it shows the trauma of a whole country and the restriction of personal identities in the middle of the ferociousness of war. The act of producing Shesma from dismembered parts signifies the obliteration of humanity.

The psychological outcomes of dehumanization are grave and multifaceted. Fanon highlights that the internalization of repression causes a crisis of identity amidst the colonized. In Saadawi's story, characters struggle with feelings of inappropriateness, separation, and despair as they confront the ferocity that has besmirched them. The omnipresent atmosphere of terror and suspicion also aggravates their struggles as verified in this quote, "Every day we're dying from the same fear of dying" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 101).

For example, the characters' relationships often divulge their internal fights and the weight of disturbing trauma. The violence they suffer can end in weakness, where the fight for survival exceeds the aspiration for self-assurance. This internal conflict is demonstrated through the character of Shesma, who, irrespective of being a creation of violence, seeks to assert justice. The longing



to retrieve humanity becomes a dominant theme, as characters cope with their disjointed identities in a world that refutes their reality.

The attempts to repossess humanity are prevailing motifs in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Saadawi describes this struggle as both an individual and collective struggle. For the characters, retrieving their humanity embraces challenging the violence that has shaped their life and seeking admiration in a society that has made them invisible. Shesma's journey is a metaphor for this restoration. Saadawi also underscores the implication of community and solidity in the fight to recuperate liberty. In a disjointed society where trust is uncommon, the characters are supposed to deal with their relations with one another to find a sense of fitting.

5.4. Moral Ambiguity and the Collapse of Ethical Systems

Moral ambiguity indicates situations where the variance between right and wrong is unclear, leading to ethical dilemmas and irresolution in moral judgment. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the chaos of war and violence generates a setting where traditional ethical outlines are opposed. The characters often contend with a world where their movements can be observed as both correct and morally suspicious. For example, the main character, Hadi, tries to create a creature from the body parts of victims due to a longing for freedom. This act can be considered as a response to the dehumanization enforced by war.

The disintegration of society in post-invasion Baghdad leads to an erosion of moral expectations. The citizens are forced to make decisions that would otherwise be immoral, for instance, disloyalty, cruelty, or involvement in massacres. The erosion in moral expectations aligns with the internal conflict people experience when societies where there is a distinction between right and wrong disintegrate.

Using Fanon's work, mainly his theory of decolonization and the psychology of the oppressed, it is possible to argue that the morality of the characters comes as a result of their trauma and alienation. Fanon speculates that colonized people consistently struggle with their identity in a world humiliating them, and bending their morality. In Saadawi's work, this can be observed in how characters justify their actions within a context filled with repression and violence.

Additionally, in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the regularity of life is devastated, resulting in a society where survival often overcomes moral concerns. It can be concluded that the formation of the "monster" is a metaphor for the magnitudes of ethical failure. The monster actually echoes the monstrous nature of a world where human life is reduced to mere parts in a cycle of violence.



Shesma himself is regarded as the clearest symbol of the cyclical nature of violence. His incentives are clear: he means to revenge the deaths of his body's composite victims so as to bring them peace (Saadawi, 2018, p. 130). Therefore, in an attempt to find this peace, he kills. A few murders are not enough, though. In fact, in order for Shesma's search for justice through violence to continue, he ends up needing more flesh to endure (Saadawi, 2018, p. 135).

His life and his mission are reliant on death. His body's creation is the outcome of violence, his mission includes contributing to violence, and his yearning to live requires more violence, "Nothing in me lasts long, other than my desire to keep going. I kill in order to keep going.' That was his only justification" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 267). This agrees with Fanon's view that the repressed can become the oppressor in their search for identity and liberty. As a result, Saadawi's narrative means to discuss what is moral in a world lacking ethical rules.

6. Conclusion

To put it briefly, Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is considered an influential novel that captures the thoughtful themes of dehumanization, fragmentation, and trauma of identity in the framework of postcolonial violence. By using Frantz Fanon's theories, this study has depicted how the novel not only disapproves of the socio-political realities of contemporary Iraq but also explores the ethical magnitudes of identity restoration after systemic callousness.

By showing the cyclic nature of violence and its emotional consequences, Saadawi's text agrees with Fanon's declaration that the colonized subject is often left in confusion, struggling with a broken sense of self. The characters' brawls to retrieve their humanity in the middle of turmoil emphasize the vital necessity for justice and ethical lucidity in a fragmented society.

Finally, this paper stresses the implication of literature as a tool for analyzing the convolutions of the human experience while going through difficulty. By placing *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in the outline of Fanon's theories, we reach a reflective understanding of the long-term effects of violence and the strength of the human soul, which confirms the dynamic role of narrative in affecting our perception of justice, morality, and the likelihood of a restored identity in a splintered world.

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