

## The Maps of identity in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*: National Spectrum of Iraq in Post-2003

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### ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the English translation of Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018), emphasizing the direct connection between home and identity in Iraq against the backdrop of colonial Baghdad. Saadawi's text manifests a sophisticated and intricate allegory of Iraqi society in terms of identity and socio-political upheaval in the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Through the metaphor of "the Whatsitsname," which comprises different ethnicities of the Iraqi people, Saadawi questions the quintessence of Iraqi identity elucidated as fragmented parts of a human body with one soul. I argue that by relying on the metaphoric references, Saadawi establishes the Whatsitsname as a national figure by addressing Iraqi identity on multiple levels: linguistically, historically, culturally, and archeologically. To that end, I seek to underscore the direct relationship between 'home' and identity in Saadawi's text with emphasis on the linguistic designation of the Whatsitsname, the historical significance and cultural diversity of Baghdad, as well as the archaeological heritage of Iraq. In this way, Saadawi embodies the collective identity of the entire Iraqi community in a cogent spectrum and aims to reconstruct the Iraqi identity in post-2003, something that the Iraqi government has failed to establish or recognize. Here, Saadawi constructs Iraqi identity narratives in post-2003 by representing the entire spectrum of Iraq against the backdrop of sectarian violence, political decay, displacement, war, and occupation.

### INTRODUCTION

The Iraqi version of *Frankenstein* has emerged in Baghdad with a local narrative voice to capture a spectrum of horrific traumatic experiences in post-2003. The creation of *Frankenstein* is ascribed to an honorable motive to dignify the dead. Specifically, the monster comes to life by a miraculous touch when the main character, Hadi, collects the remains of innocent people killed in terrorist attacks from the street to give them proper burials. The monster initiates his mission by taking revenge on all the criminals involved in killing the victims whose body parts comprise of. However, when his body begins to melt, he starts to kill innocent people to ensure his own survival. At this juncture, the monster is totally transformed from a beacon of hope to a monster of terror. Here, the corruption of his actions represents a sharp critique of the Iraqi government, and the decaying of his body signifies the deformity of ongoing realities in Iraq.

De facto, the emergence of *Frankenstein* in Iraqi literature in the wake of the American-led invasion in 2003 offers a complex allegorical encapsulation of Iraqi society in terms of societal fragmentation and the identity crisis against the colonial background. Saadawi was severely

impacted by the traumas of colonialism and the abrupt violence unfolding around him in Iraq in 2003. Consequently, he confronts these tragic circumstances through a dystopian narrative from a perspective of a local writer. Through the fragmented body parts of "the Whatsitsname," which comprise different ethnicities of the Iraqi people, Saadawi questions the state of the contemporary Iraqi cultural identity, albeit with one soul. Here, Saadawi constructs Iraqi identity narratives in post-2003 by representing the entire spectrum of Iraq against the backdrop of sectarian violence, political decay, war, and occupation. Thus, this article aims to examine the representation of Iraqi identity in Saadawi's novel by highlighting the linguistic appellation of the Whatsitsname to denote the entire Iraqi society, the importance of archaeological heritage in preserving the identity of the country along with the historical significance and cultural diversity of Baghdad through artistic lenses.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Published in 2013, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* subsequently won the IPAF award (International Prize for Arabic Fiction) in 2014. Given that it elicits both local and global interest,

the novel has been translated into several languages. Dozens of studies, articles, and reviews have explored various aspects of the narrative, such as violence, grotesqueness, magical realism, dystopia, identity issues, and comparison between Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Saadawi's text. However, there is plenty of scope to undertake further exploration regarding the paradox of identity in post-2003, especially its symbolic and political relation to archaeology since it is yet to garner adequate scholarly attention. In his study, Mohamed Faleh Al-Jubouri argues that Saadawi's novel "declares the birth of a new cultural awareness inspired by global experiences to search for identity through theology" (2018, p. 59). Al-Jubouri implies that despite being influenced by a Western metaphor, Saadawi artistically uses theological narrative for reconstructing an identity that is applicable for the entire country. On the other hand, Sinéad Murphy opines that the Whatsitsname's fragmentary body is a key metaphor for instrumentalizing human contemporary violent situations. Besides analogizing the lives that are at risk amid such conditions, Murphy investigates the processes that lead to the manifestation of these conditions in the first place (2018, p. 278). In the same context, albeit differently, Ian Campbell observes that the "image of the monster as the first true Iraqi citizen" is a reaction to the colonial project in Iraq, insofar as the interventions succeeded in overthrowing the old regime, but they have failed to replace it with a new democratic government (2020, pp. 9–10). Annie Webster presents a different account by arguing that Saadawi's text corresponds to various elements of the literal biomedical salvation whilst revealing the disconcerting realities in Iraq after 2003 (2018, p. 440). Webster builds her argument on Jennifer Terry's concept of *biomedical salvation* to illuminate how Saadawi's text is an essentially imaginative story of supernatural influences as opposed to a scientific exposition that documents the history of violence that has destroyed the country's medical infrastructure. In doing so, she demonstrates "the literal biological significance of the Whatsitsname's anatomy and the medical logic of the text" (2018, p. 442). Although these studies do assume significance, my study goes a step further by addressing the issue of Iraqi identity through the Whatsitsname's body; the diverse representation of Bataween neighborhood; the linguistic designation of naming the Whatsitsname to denote the entire Iraqi community; and the archaeological significance of Baghdad both symbolically and politically. These elements are important as they are directly connected to home and identity. Accordingly, Saadawi interweaves these threads in his narrative to build the Iraqi fragmented identity in one national spectrum.

### The Radical Transformation of Frankenstein

*Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a dystopian novel set in Baghdad in 2005. Saadawi's story focuses predominantly on the Bataween, a historic district in Baghdad. It is a diverse neighborhood where the novel's major events take place, including frequent explosions, suicide attacks, and the rise of the Whatsitsname, etc. It is also the place where the main

character, Hadi lives and narrates his "extraordinary story" in Aziz coffee shop (Saadawi, 2018, p. 25). After losing his friend Nahem in a car bomb, Hadi is deeply devastated, and he determines to collect the dismembered corpses he finds in the streets of Baghdad in the aftermath of frequent explosions. As a result, Hadi begins to collect the scattered body parts and sew them together into one complete corpse to honor the dead.<sup>1</sup> However, an entire corpse goes missing the day after he completes it. It turns out that after a suicide attack on the hotel that occurred in the neighborhood the night before, the soul of Hasib, the hotel's security guard inhabits the corpse, and then the monster comes to life. The monster is woken by the voice of Elishva, the elderly Christian woman, who lives next door. She shouts, "Get up Danny, come along, my boy" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 53). Elishva, or Umm Daniel, adopts the monster, thinking that he is her lost son, Daniel, who never came back from the Iran-Iraq War.

Initially, the Whatsitsname intends to bring justice and remedy the situation in Iraq. "He was composite of victims seeking to avenge their deaths so they could rest in peace" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 125). The monster becomes a vigilante to achieve justice. Additionally, he has many followers who believe in him and demand a reformation of the social and political conditions in Iraq and putting an end to violence. Accordingly, the Whatsitsname continues to clean from the country the radicals and mercenaries who are involved in escalating the violence. In the Whatsitsname's words:

I killed the Venezuelan mercenary in charge of the security company responsible for recruiting suicide bombers who had killed many civilians, including the guard at the Sadeer Novotel, Hasib Mohamed Jaafar. I killed the al-Qaeda leader who lived in Abu Ghraib and who was responsible for the massive truck bomb in Tayaran Square that killed many people. (Saadawi, 2018, p. 153)

However, after taking revenge on all the murderers responsible for the deaths of victims whose body parts made him, his body starts to melt, and the dissolved parts need to be replaced with new flesh. Consequently, he starts killing innocent people to ensure his survival. Eventually, the Whatsitsname shifts his ethical orientation from saving the other to devouring the other for his own survival. Such a radical transformation translates into his actions and becomes utterly corrupted. He transforms from being pure to becoming guilty of his own crimes. Therefore, he ceases to distinguish between good and evil, and he starts killing anyone just to ensure his survival. The transgression of the Whatsitsname's actions is apparently replete with a fixation on violence. He has completely deviated from his original quest of saving innocent people to killing them. "Consequently, his monstrosity haunts him, interrupts his task, and thereby causes him to abandon his responsibility towards the Other. Saadawi's Frankenstein shows that when the monster loses his humanity, he murders his human side or spirit inside him and that is why his monstrosity overwhelms him" (Alhashmi, 2020, p.101). At this juncture, the lines between humanity and monstrosity get blurred in Frankenstein. This insanity totally transforms his actions from being a beacon of hope and a symbol of justice into a predator of terror and a monster of horror. As such, it can be interpreted as an analogy

of societal deterioration—through the disfigurement of his body parts when he depends on criminal corpses supplied to sustain his body. In other words, the implication of the Frankenstein body starting to decompose can be seen as a striking metaphor for the corrupted political landscapes and the absence of justice since no one seems to be accountable nor responsible in their actions in such lawfulness conditions.

### THE PARADOX OF IDENTITY IN IRAQI SOCIETY IN POST-2003

The upheaval in Iraq in the new millennium, especially after the fall of the Baath regime, the American-led Coalition intervention in 2003, and the ISIS invasion of the Northern region in 2014, has resulted in serious societal issues, including sectarian violence, war, occupation, trauma, and terrorism. Consequently, these prevailing circumstances have profoundly demolished the State of Iraq causing massive destruction, countless death, mass displacement, and leading to the current crisis of identity. Against this backdrop, Saadawi is deeply concerned with the grisly circumstances that have torn apart his country, especially that of Iraqi identity and fragmentation of Iraqi society. Ian Campbell (2020) argues that Saadawi's text "poses migration and exile as the rational choice for anyone who can afford to leave. In an Iraq where the response to a wrecked and occupied country is to try to enforce a univocal national identity, exile is a matter of survival for religious and ethnic minorities" (p. 2). Here, Campbell explains how some Iraqi people were forced to flee from their country in search of safety elsewhere for their survival. In "Writing the Dismembered Nation," Bahooora comments on Saadawi's novel and other Iraqi works that deal with the narratives of war in post-2003 that "Iraqi identity raises a series of questions about the role narrative fiction plays in constructing a history and experience of structural violence for which there has been no political, legal, or historical accountability" (2015, p. 188).

Saadawi explicitly engages with the paradox of Iraqi identity by highlighting its substantial aspects through religious multitude, cultural diversity, and multiethnic groups. He comments on his novel: "I wanted to shed light on several issues with this book ... One was the paradox of identity diversity in Iraq, and how people understand themselves. All my characters are from different backgrounds" (Hankir, 2018, para. 10). To that end, Saadawi's narrative presents various characters from different backgrounds who live in one district in Baghdad to reflect the diversity of Iraqi society. Moreover, Saadawi intentionally compiles the body of "The Whatsitsname" from different backgrounds and multiple ethnicities for the sake of representing all groups, tribes, and sects of Iraqi society to show the reader the complexity of Iraqi identity, especially within the context of war, violence, terrorism, and occupation. Against this background, the essence of the Whatsitsname's body is fundamental in the construction of the contemporary Iraqi identity as an archetype of Iraqi citizens that the Iraqi government has failed to establish. As is articulated in the novel: "'I'm the model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce, at least since the days of King Faisal I'" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 146).

At its gist, the Whatsitsname embraces the identity of the Iraqi community wherein each part of his body embodies an aspect of modern Iraq. Namely, the body highlights the relation of a part to the whole, signifying an individual to collective representation. The Whatsitsname is a self-conscious figure who incarnates the Iraqi people. Accordingly, he builds a nest of foundational identity to represent all Iraqi people as one true citizen. Such an archetypal citizen holds a strong faith in Iraq, thus reflecting symbolic diverse unity and pluralism. Through the assembly of his body, he constitutes a hybrid identity from singular to plural—a society from within. Specifically, the collective role of the Whatsitsname is a part-for-whole relationship thereby representing a national metaphor for the viability of Iraq's cohesive body and "the possibility of its very national continuity" (Bahooora, 2015, p. 189). Thus, the Whatsitsname establishes the Iraqi identity in one cohesive body and builds a constructive vision of the national identity of Iraq.

Linguistically, Saadawi names his monster in Arabic by an Iraqi dialect, *Shisma*, which literally means "what's his name." By this designation, Saadawi pronounces the fragment position of Iraqi identity in a meaningful linguistic accent that calls all people in Iraq by one name. Jonathan Wright translates the name into the Whatsitsname; perhaps he deliberately opts for this translation choice because it captures the fragmented nature of the Whatsitsname, assembled by Hadi into one collective body. Additionally, it stands dialect for dialect in this particular instance. The original meaning of the name implies when one forgets someone's name. Therefore, the linguistic association of the Whatsitsname denotes a forgotten name as opposed to an anonymous one. It is noteworthy that Hadi is serious about naming his creature rather than leaving him an unidentified corpse. To substantiate this further, when people ask Hadi about his story at the coffee shop to: "tell us the story of the corpse" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 84). Hadi firmly responds, "The story of the Whatsitsname, you mean" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 84). Evidently, Hadi "insisted on correcting them, using the name he had given his creation. It wasn't really a corpse, because 'corpse' suggested a particular person or creature, and that didn't apply in the case of the Whatsitsname" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 84). The Whatsitsname, therefore, can be regarded as a symbol of the forgotten people who died due to the explosion of sectarian violence and the ramifications of colonialism. With such a name and recollection, Saadawi attempts to remember and honor all Iraqi victims by denoting them in the name of the Whatsitsname. In another way, Saadawi wittingly opts for a dialect term, *Shisma*, to associate it with the entire Iraqi community, regardless of their religious multitudes and cultural backgrounds. Through the designation of the Whatsitsname, Saadawi consciously names all the Iraqi sects: Arab, Kurdi, Turkmen, etc., without favoring any particular group, wherein all of them are equally represented by the Whatsitsname. In this manner, the Whatsitsname becomes a synonym of *Iraqiness*. It is imperative to point out that "many Iraqi intellectuals and academics ... emphasize the identity factor, oftentimes described as 'Iraqiness'" (Kirmanc, 2014, p. 9). Therefore, the name of the Whatsitsname in itself becomes a national emblem to identify all Iraqi people



wherein the name maps the existence of their nation, and metaphorically calls them race by race, linguistically names them name (sect) by name (sect), and collectively remembers them piece by piece—all unified in one name, body, and soul.

Furthermore, the social relationship between the self and the other at the national level is dynamically represented through the Whatsitsname's fractured body parts comprising different ethnicities of Iraqi people. In this vein, Bahoora argues that while the fragmented nature of the Whatsitsname symbolizes a fractured country, it is a unified body typifying the identity of Iraq. As he puts it: "the corpse is a metaphor for the fragmented and injured nation. Its body composed of Iraqis from various sects and ethnicities, the characters in the novel see the 'Shisma' as representing various incarnations of Iraqi identity" (Bahoora, 2015, p. 196). In this sense, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* situates the mix of Iraqi identity in a fragmented human body, albeit with a unified soul. In his words: "*Because I'm made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds — ethnicities, tribes, races and social classes — I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. I'm the first true Iraqi citizen*" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 146 [italics added]). Hence, the Whatsitsname becomes the national iconic figure of all Iraqi people, with sufficient gravity to attract all sects of his society from south to north and east to west into one cohesive body. Accordingly, he is the nested figure of the Iraqi community, which the political body of the Iraqi government has utterly failed to create or recognize. Thus, the statement of "the first true Iraqi citizen" illuminates deeper meaning at its core, as it entails a direct attack on the political spectrum of the Iraqi government while invoking nostalgia of a glorious past. As such, Saadawi alludes to the historical continuity of his nation while concomitantly confronting horrific experiences in the here and now.

Saadawi significantly stresses the importance of human attributes, social fabric, cultural unity, and historical continuity through the Bataween neighborhood. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that "Al-Bataween" is a real place in Baghdad and hence Saadawi opts to specifically name the location in his narrative. In addition, the realistic and diverse characters in the neighborhood, with regard to their names, titles, and social interactions with each other, constitute a national agency of community and symbolic diversity in modern Iraq. Interestingly, this neighborhood is inhabited by many people of diverse backgrounds, thereby representing modern Iraq. The residents include Hadi, the central character, Mahmoud, the journalist, Abu Anwar, the owner of Orouba hotel, Aziz the Egyptian and the owner of the coffee shop, Faraj the realtor, Elishva or Umm Daniel, among others. These characters mirror the diversity of Iraqi society. The spirit of community is vital, insofar as it involves unity and reflects the cultural diversity of contemporary Baghdad. Besides its location in the heart of Baghdad, the Bataween neighborhood holds a historical significance, religious ethnicity, and cultural diversity of all Iraqi sects, including the Jews, Christians, and Muslims coexisting in one district. In doing so, Saadawi reveals the dynamics of his community by representing them in one diverse district, Bataween.

Moreover, the spectrum of the Bataween district mirrors a mosaic of a ruined infrastructure due to frequent explosions. In one example, a car explosion destroys one of the historic sites in the capital city as in the case of demolishing a segment of the wall of Abbasid Baghdad, which is considered "the most important discovery in Islamic archaeology in Baghdad for many decades" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 265). Here, Saadawi refers to the legacy of Iraqi archaeology while highlighting the danger of multiple explosions in erasing the identity of the city, and the risk of deforming it to a colonial museum of ruins, so to speak. In fact, some archaeological sites were utilized into military bases by the American army such as the ancient city of Babylon. Simon Jenkins aptly notes, "Babylon is being rendered archaeologically barren" (para. 6). In a meeting held on September 29 at UNESCO's Paris Headquarters, the French ambassador to UNESCO, Philippe Lalliot states: "Because the destruction of heritage that carries with it the identity of a people and the history of a country cannot be considered as collateral or secondary damage that we can live with. It is on par with the destruction of human lives" (A Call to Save Iraq's Cultural Heritage, 2014, para 3). In the same meeting, Qais Hussein Rashied, Director of the Baghdad Museum, affirms that Daash exacerbates the situation in Iraq since one of the radical extremist groups "has undertaken digs to sell (objects) in Europe and Asia via middlemen in neighboring countries," Rashied continues, "These sales are financing terrorism" (A Call to Save Iraq's Cultural Heritage, 2014, para 7). Consequently, the loss of archaeological treasures impacts the Iraqi identity in that the loss of Iraqi identity symbolizes the destruction of archeological sites and heritage. Ergo, archaeological sites, artifacts, and museums are more than a national property that belongs to Iraq, they are also the cultural heritage that is an integral part of Iraqi identity.

Fundamentally, archaeology is paramount in developing the Iraqi identity. In this vein, Magnus Thorkell Bernhardsson (2006) links the importance of building the Iraqi identity through an archaeological enterprise. Namely, the archaeological heritage of Iraq is associated with the political and cultural history of archaeology and thus is related to the constitution of Iraqi identity.<sup>2</sup> For Bernhardsson, the archaeological sites are connected to the bone of Iraqi society as it becomes symbolic to the ongoing issues of war whereby the archaeological heritage may provide an objective promise in constituting Iraqi society. In his words: "Eventually, archaeological artifacts became intrinsically linked to the execution of the war and perhaps symbolic of the difficulties ahead in the reconstruction of Iraq" (Bernhardsson, 2006, p. 2). Bernhardsson contends, "Archaeology, therefore, played a significant role in helping promote nationalism in the age of decolonization of Iraq and provided tangible objects for defining the nation in the era of a strong, centralized nation-state" (2006, p. 18).<sup>3</sup> This line of thought aligns with Saadawi's narrative wherein he bridges an archaeological arc by reference to historical records (legacies of past accomplishments of Baghdad) and cultural diversity between multiple ethnicities and various groups in the Bataween district. By doing so, the author establishes an authentic association to the place through historical continuity, archaeological

heritage, and cultural diversity, thereby creating a national sense of belonging for all Iraqi citizens to their home.

## CONCLUSION

The legacies of occupation, war, violence, trauma, and terrorism have caused grave ramifications that deeply impacted Iraqi society in the new millennium, especially identity crisis and society's fragmentations. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Saadawi plays a key role in representing Iraqi national identity in post-2003 through an artistic lens while grappling with proxy states of affairs. In doing so, he engages with important components that pertain to Iraqi identity through the inclusive affiliation of the Whatsitsname to the whole Iraqi community and their cultural diversity, as well as their historical and archaeological heritage. Additionally, through the metaphor of the Whatsitsname, the author incarnates the collective identity of the entire spectrum of the Iraqi community. Specifically, the different human body fragments of Frankenstein's composite are inhabited by an innocent soul, Hasib, who gives a new, hybrid meaning to Frankenstein's body; namely, life and unity of the community. At its heart, the Whatsitsname is not an orphan of Baghdad; rather, he reflects a consciousness of reality, continuity of history, cultural diversity—survival—and an ultimate example for all tribes and sects in the Iraqi society. Hence, he is considered a powerful metaphor of a true Iraqi citizen—belonging to his country and relating to his people. In this light, the organic relationship between the self and the other is manifested dynamically through the Whatsitsname's fragmented body with one soul to highlight the issues of a complicated identity of Iraqi society in post-2003. Saadawi's reanimated corpse created from the ashes of violence, smokes of war, and the body parts of different ethnic groups denotes a meaningful gesture and urgent need for unity. Importantly, the dynamic manifestation of the Iraqi people in one body crystallizes their experience of the world, patterns of their culture, history of their past, breath of their surviving, and continuation of their nation. As such, it catalyzes the Iraqi society to cope with radical changes taking place in their country while struggling to deal with the colonial power and its ramifications. Equally important, with his collected body fragmentations, the Whatsitsname bridges that arc across the grand expanse of Iraqi cultural identity. By this representation, the Whatsitsname plants the flag of Iraq in its land.

## END NOTES

Note 1. "Hadi was shocked to see that the bodies of explosion victims were all mixed up together and to hear the mortuary worker tell him to put a body together and carry it off—take this leg and this arm and so on. Hadi collected what he thought was Nahem's body, then went to the Mohamed Sakran Cemetery with Nahem's widow and some neighbors. But Hadi was changed after that. He didn't speak for two weeks, after which he went back to laughing and telling stories, and when he told the Whatsitsname story at Aziz's coffee shop, Aziz and some of those sitting there knew that Hadi had written

Nahem out of it and put the Whatsitsname in his place" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 222).

Note 2. Bernhardsson argues that "archaeology entered Iraqi politics in a profound manner, thereby laying the foundation for archaeology and nationalism to intersect and thus become inseparable in Iraqi politics in succeeding decades" (2006, p. 12). He goes further and stresses "how intertwined archaeology, imperialism, and nationalism have been in the modern history of Iraq" (pp. 12–13).

Note 3. For more information, read Magnus Thor-kell Bernhardsson's *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq*, 2005.

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