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Frankenstein in Baghdad: A Novel Way of
Understanding the Iraq War and Its Aftermath

By: Hope Teggart

INTRODUCTION

What does war truly look like? What does it truly feel like? How can we gain a better understanding of war and its aftermath? In what ways can fiction be used to comment on reality, especially on reality that seems so distant to Western audiences, such as the conflicts in the Middle East? Ahmed Saadawi attempts to answer some of these questions through his 2013 novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. The novel explores the theme of war and its aftermath through gothic motifs to represent the actual Iraq War context: specifically 2005 US Occupied Baghdad. Saadawi employs a nuanced take on the Frankenstein trope to critique and comment on the anxieties, actions, lifestyles, and beliefs of those involved and living in postwar Baghdad. This paper argues that Saadawi adopts the particular monster, genre, and setting to emphasize five features of the theme of war and its aftermath drawn through my in-depth analysis of the novel as a whole, its characters, dialogue, and plot: the Gothic nature of reality, subjective justice, mutual complicity, the cyclical nature of violence, and gratuitous death; Saadawi strategically utilizes these five features to depict, through Gothic fiction, what he denotes as “the complex reality of Iraq.”¹

THE NOVEL AND MONSTER MOTIF

Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is set in 2005 Iraq, soon after the 2003 US invasion and its chaotic aftermath, where the characters live under foreign occupation. 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. An extensive amount of scholarly research has been done on the Gothic literary genre, but general consensus defines the genre as typically including desolate settings, the

¹ Quoted from Saadawi in Manchester Metropolitan University’s “Writers at Manchester Met” video interview.

macabre, and mysterious and violent incidents.² The primary storyline begins when Hadi, an alcoholic, lower-class junk dealer starts collecting spare body parts from various explosions and suicide bombings around the city. His goal is to create a composite body made of the various victims' body parts, and to present that body to the government in order to gain respect for the vast number of victims who were denied a proper burial or even proper acknowledgement. Eventually, his creature comes to life and escapes Hadi's possession, designated simply by the term "Whatsitsname." In a quest to "avenge the deaths" of the victims whose body parts constitute him, the creature begins a killing spree. First, he plans to target "proper criminals" such as an al-Qaeda leader, explosive suppliers, and bombing recruiters. Eventually, the creature's body begins to fall apart, and he realizes he must continue killing in order to stay alive and replace his deteriorating parts. The line between 'criminal' and 'victim' becomes blurrier to him, and his replacement body parts come from Iraqis whose past and actions he begins to question, and as he starts to feel guilt over the parts he possesses, doubting his own mission and the validity of justice and revenge. He even murders a seemingly innocent man for parts, failing to fully justify the act in his mind.

He nonetheless gains support from a diverse set of groups. The creature has a myriad of interpretations, seemingly being adopted as both an ally and an enemy for various political agendas. The novel follows the lives of multiple characters as this creature roams in Baghdad: a grieving elderly mother, a journalist seeking affluence, superstitious government officials, a corrupt real estate agent, and even a woman with the phone number of '666.' This Frankenstein creature, the Whatsitsname, serves a metaphorical and symbolic purpose. Saadawi is strategically using the novel's absurd, terrifying, and confusing setting and storyline to comment on Iraqi realities.

The Whatsitsname is never actually referred to as "Frankenstein" by the narrator. In fact, the majority of the characters have different names for the monster, who is only actually referred to as

² Merriam-Webster notes provide this definition of the Gothic novel.

“Frankenstein” twice in the novel. Nonetheless, as the novel’s title suggests, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein monster still serves as a motif to describe the nature of war. In a 2014 *Arabic Literature and Translation* interview with Al-Mustafa Najjar, Saadawi states “Frankenstein in this novel is a condensed symbol of Iraq’s current problems.” So, in order to understand how the Frankenstein trope is being adopted and employed in this context, it is vital to understand the Frankenstein trope itself.

Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein* in 1818. Almost 200 years later, Ahmed Saadawi adopted his own form of Shelley’s creature in order to articulate and present Iraqi realities. *Monstrous Progeny: A History of The Frankenstein Narratives* by Lester D. Friedman and Allison B. Kavey outlines the complexities of Shelley’s tale and why it remains so adaptable.³ In discussing various critical approaches to reading Shelley’s novel, the authors discuss how the trope of Frankenstein lends itself to a metaphor for society. “Over the decades, Shelley’s monster has frequently been adopted as a metaphor for a wide variety of social issues” (Friedman and Kavey 9). Many scholars have connected the Frankenstein monster to specific social issues of Shelley’s own era.⁴ Nonetheless, Shelley’s monster has been utilized in various adaptations to draw upon a range of cultural issues, some similar and some different than those Shelley originally intended. In Saadawi’s interview with Najjar, however, he makes it clear that his novel does not have the same central theme as Shelley’s (the pursuit of knowledge, natural versus artificial life, science and ethics, etc). His adoption of the Frankenstein monster, is utilized Kavey emphasize the horror of war and daily life in Iraq. Saadawi adopts the Western motif and genre of Frankenstein, but he seems to create a form of hybridization through his addition of cultural-specific issues and experiences.

After analyzing the various adaptations that have arisen from Shelley’s novel, Friedman and Kavey attempt to question how and why this monster and trope have remained so popular, and they

³ In this text, the two scholars trace the evolution of the Frankenstein trope, highlighting the employment of some of its themes in various filmic adaptations, and signify how some questions raised by the original novel are still permeated into modern societies today.

⁴ See Friedman and Kavey pages 9-10 for examples, including “an embodiment of... revolutions” among others.

conclude that the questions the novel raises are indeed universal (Friedman and Kavey 260). Saadawi's novel asks some of these questions, but specifically asks them in the context of the Iraq War and its aftermath. For example, some of these universal questions relate to the binary between hero and monster, the definition and devaluation of life, and what the meaning and purpose behind death even is. Ultimately, Friedman and Kavey's quote about the original work fits quite well in Saadawi's context: "Shelley provides a dynamic and ultimately influential tale of two lost and lonely beings who, instead of comforting and perhaps even loving each other, cause their mutual destruction" (Friedman and Kavey 207). This is exactly what Saadawi believes has happened in Iraq. In the war-torn, miserable, bloody, abused, occupied city of the novel, the citizens of Iraq do not seem to come together to support each other. Rather, they contribute to their mutual destruction. They have metaphorically created the justice-seeking, murderous, isolated, lonely, violent, desperate form of Shelley's monster, the Whatsitsname, and devastation in the novel inevitably ensues.

IRAQI CONTEXT

In order to understand the messages in Saadawi's novel, it is vital to understand the specific historical, political, and cultural context it is set in. Additionally, understanding the novel and its themes can and will help readers learn more about the historical, political, and cultural context of Iraq in nuanced ways. The cultural and political context of Baghdad under US occupation, involves a complex series of international and local events, domestic and global warfare, leadership shifts and overthrows, and ethnic and sectarian divisions. Two extremely informative texts that outline the path of Iraq's complex history and culture in the past two centuries are *The Modern History of Iraq* by Phebe Marr and Ibrahim Al-Marashi,⁵ and *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* by Ali A. Allawi.⁶ Gaining a further understanding of the main events, themes, leaders, and

⁵ Both authors are scholars and historians who specialize in Middle Eastern studies.

⁶ Ali. A Allawi is an Iraqi scholar and politician.

structures that have existed and occurred in Iraqi history through these texts will readers to better comprehend the setting of Saadawi's novel and the allusions Saadawi is making in his narrative.

There are three distinct ethnic groups that have historically existed within Iraq: the Sunni Muslims, the Shia Muslims, and the Kurds. Iraq's history of tribalism and distinct ethnic, religious, and sectarian identities contribute to its struggle to find a unified national identity. According to Marr and Al-Marashi, the most serious demographic division in Iraq is linguistic,⁷ and the second most serious division is within religion, particularly the Sunni and Shia sects of Islam. Throughout the majority of the 20th century, the Shias have outnumbered the Sunnis in population, yet the Sunnis have overwhelmingly held political power (Marr and Al-Marashi 10). The division between these two groups has caused great tension in Iraq, as strife and dissent between these two groups has led to many violent acts, battles, abuses, and civilian deaths. Ethnic, sectarian, and religious divisions leading to meaningless and unnecessary deaths is a primary concern in Saadawi's novel.

Although the novel's characters live within the US occupation, the impacts of the 20th century government are still readily apparent and consequential. In 1979, Saddam Hussein, a member of the majority Sunni Ba'ath party, came to power and began his regime in Iraq. Just one year later, Hussein led the nation into the eight-year Iran-Iraq War. Marr and Al-Marashi describe this decision as marking "the beginning of a continual downturn in Iraq's fortunes" (145). The war had devastating effects on Iraq's economy but also on the preexisting sectarian divisions. Hussein's Sunni government deported many Shias due to suspicions of political opposition or supposed sympathy with Iran. Hussein's regime overwhelmingly targeted non-Sunni Iraqis. Some Kurds, therefore, decided to ally themselves with Iran. In the spring of 1987, the regime then began attacking the Kurdish population with a chemical weapon campaign attack known as "Anfal,"⁸

⁷ The linguistic division is primarily between the Kurdish and Arabic languages.

⁸ Al-Anfal literally translates to "the spoils of war." Find more information at https://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/iraq501/events_anfal.html.

killing between 50,000-100,000 Iraqi Kurds.⁹ Although Iraq's divisions were prevalent before the war, the divisions were solidified afterwards.

As ethnic and sectarian tensions in Iraq began to increase, death and destruction skyrocketed. In 1991, rebellions began against the regime, and the regime's response to these uprisings is described as "wanton slaughter" (Allawi 48). The government utilized bombs, opened gunfire on civilians, and forced exile on political opponents in order to remain in power and to suppress rebellion.¹⁰ This power struggle was evident to Iraqis and to other nations as well. One U.S. Department of State report on International Religious Freedom even draws attention to the explicit mistreatment of the Shia population by the Sunni government in Iraq.¹¹ Clearly, there was an obvious stratification of power and sects in Iraq, and people were dying and suffering for decades as a result.

The 1990's rebellions led to many deaths, as Marr and Al-Marashi claim: "Although those killed by the rebels can probably be numbered in the thousands or even tens of thousands, those killed by the regime may have been well over 100,000" (Marr and Al-Marashi 183). The infrastructure and economy in Iraq were dwindling. People were dying by the hundreds, many of whom were innocent of violent actions but were targeted simply due to their sectarian identity. The number of exiles was drastically increasing.¹² It was this societal, political, and cultural situation that led to the US involvement in Iraq (related to a variety of reasons, including misinformation about the local circumstances), which only provided another complex layer of violence, division, and strife.

After the September 11th, 2001 attacks on US soil, the "War on Terror" had officially begun, and Iraq and Hussein were implicated. The US government linked Hussein to terrorist plots and to weapons of mass destruction, without full proof of these facts prior to the invasion. The United

⁹ See Marr and Al-Marashi pp. 158 for more information on The Anfal Attacks.

¹⁰ Marr and Al-Marashi describe the aftermath of one regime counter-attack: "thousands of bodies were left in the streets."

¹¹ See US Department of State Official Report at <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2001/5693.htm>.

¹² Number of Iraqi exiles may have reached 3 million by the end of 1990's, see Marr and Al-Marashi pp. 199.

States, along with British support, invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003. In a three-week takeover, the US had officially removed Saddam Hussein from power and taken control of the nation.¹³ However, the US armed forces and international teams did not actually have sufficient knowledge of the political, cultural, or social structure of Iraq. A social and political vacuum emerged as a result of the US's lack of planning and "insufficient number of troops" (Allawi 91). The US disbanded all Iraqi security forces. When Baghdad fell in April 2003, looting, arson, and theft became rampant.¹⁴ Insurgencies against the US forces rose from various sects, leading to constant bombing, gunfire, and chaos. Militias fought each other for power, and simultaneously fought against the US forces as well. According to Allawi, some of the militias' motivations were actually fueled by the desire to force the government to lose control and to create a culture of fear.¹⁵ This perpetual anxiety and fear, constant threat of death, complex insurgent and militia movement: this was the setting represented in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*.

THE AUTHOR HIMSELF

Ahmed Saadawi, an Iraqi himself, grew up amidst these circumstances. The events he witnessed inspired him to write the novel. In a review of the novel titled "Ahmed Saadawi Wants To Tell a New Story About the War in Iraq," published by Grove Atlantic Literary Hub, journalist Zahra Hankir outlines the specific event that inspired Saadawi's writing. Before becoming a novelist, Saadawi was a journalist and reporter for BBC Arabic Service. Discussing his visit to a Baghdad morgue in 2006, Saadawi states that he actually witnessed an Iraqi man seeking his brother's corpse,

¹³ See Allawi pp. 89 for more information.

¹⁴ Important documents were destroyed nationwide as government buildings were ransacked and demolished, arson fires raged for days on end, and local tribesmen violently seized control of villages and towns as political and social structure collapsed. See Allawi pp. 94-95 for more information.

¹⁵ "The killing sprees targeted all manners of people...The aim was to force the government to lose control over the streets, and to create a sense of foreboding and perpetual anxiety." See Allawi pp. 181 for more information.

being told to “make himself a body” by a morgue worker.¹⁶ Saadawi not only faced, explored, and absorbed the harsh realities of Iraq as a journalist, though. Personal experiences with the Iraqi army affected his work as well. In an interview and public reading with the Manchester Metropolitan University Faculty of Arts and Humanities Writing Center event, Saadawi describes more of his past in Iraq. He lost an uncle in a previous war, two other uncles and his father were injured in combat, and even Saadawi himself served in the Iraqi army. He states: “All my life I have suffered from the consequence of war...The American invasion was just one event of this series of miseries and tragedies in Iraq.” Undoubtedly, Saadawi wrote his fictional novel to creatively depict the realities he lived through and witnessed.

THE MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF THE IRAQ WAR

The fictional, Gothic story of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is corrective when it comes to the pre-existing mediated view of the Iraq War and its aftermath. When it comes to obtaining information about Iraq, the primary source that Western audiences consume is news media. Although originally written in Arabic, Saadawi’s novel, translated into a variety of languages, provides an entirely new, unique, and creative way for Westerners to learn about and understand war and its aftermath, particularly in US occupied Baghdad. Mike Gasher’s essay “Might Makes Right: News Reportage as Discursive Weapon in the War in Iraq” published in *Bring ‘Em On: Media and Politics in the War in Iraq* (edited by Lee Artz and Yahya B. Kamalipour) discusses the US media in relation to the Iraq War. He studies the different strategies and outcomes of 2003 *Time* and *Newsweek* reporting on the Iraq War, emphasizing the sharp distinction these two magazines made between the US and Iraq, both in terms of weaponry and in terms of warfare methods. Moreover, their

¹⁶ Hankir quotes Saadawi: “I saw many dead bodies...Not just dead bodies, body parts.” This experience of Saadawi in the morgue mirrors the novel’s plot beginnings.

presentation of these distinctions became normalized and acceptable as truth.¹⁷ These representations by the media encouraged Western audiences to perceive the US invasion as necessary and just, as the US was displayed as the “good” force in a struggle between “good and evil” (Artz and Kamalipour 223). Saadawi, an Iraqi writer, forces readers to question these preconceived notions. In fact, distinctions between good and evil begin to blur in the novel. Saddam Hussein is rarely mentioned, and the US’s presence is somewhat elusive. Saadawi presents the Iraq War and its aftermath through a completely different lens than these two magazines do. He eliminates distinctions, and he subverts various ideas about the validity of a just war and, in particular, a binary between good and evil.

Another strategy often found in US media with regard to the Iraq War is explained in William B. Hart and Fran Hassencahl’s essay titled “Culture as Persuasion: Metaphor as Weapon” which is also found in *Bring ‘Em On*. These scholars specifically studied the use of metaphor in governmental speeches and in US editorials in reference to Saddam Hussein and the Iraq War. They emphasized the strategic use of metaphor, specifically in terms of the ‘enemy,’ to build political support for the war.¹⁸ In their content analysis, they found metaphors relating Hussein and the Iraqi military to snakes, barbarians, criminals, demons, and thieves. They analyzed how the use of these metaphors attempted to garner political support and present the US actions as rooted in justice, and in good-versus-evil. The scholars, however, emphasize that these metaphors ultimately fail in providing fully accurate and comprehensive information.¹⁹ Saadawi utilizes his own metaphor, the Frankenstein creature, in a completely different way. Instead of dehumanizing one specific enemy, whether that be

¹⁷ “The two magazines systematically elevated U.S. motives and military capabilities at the same time as they denigrated those of Iraq...these magazines provided a central site upon which information about the war became available to the public, and their interpretations of events were normalized as standard ways for understanding, discussing, and justifying the war effort” See Artz and Kamalipour pp. 219 for more information.

¹⁸ Hart and Hassencahl describe the use of metaphor: “as a means to build mass support for political violence. Definitions of the enemy as a stranger, an alien...metaphors are a ‘powerful legitimizer’ of governmental policy.” See Artz and Kamalipour pp. 86 for more information.

¹⁹ “Metaphors oversimplify complex situations. Metaphors can hide important facts.” See Artz and Kamalipour pp. 97 for more information.

the US, the Hussein regime, the militias, or an al-Qaeda leader, the Frankenstein metaphor attempts to actually depict the complexity of Iraq. His use of metaphor is not aimed at dehumanizing or rendering political support. He attempts to share information, garner understanding, and to diminish the conflict's complexity. His metaphor does not oversimplify, rather, it complexifies. Saadawi employs the Frankenstein metaphor in a completely new way, utilizing the Gothic and monster trope to outline the theme of war and its aftermath through the Gothic nature of reality, subjective justice, mutual complicity, cyclical violence, and gratuitous death.

THE FIVE WAYS OF DEPICTING WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

#1: The Gothic Nature of Reality

The first way that Saadawi uses *Frankenstein in Baghdad* to depict the theme of war and its aftermath is by emphasizing the Gothic nature of reality. The novel's Baghdad features many Gothic elements unrelated to the Frankenstein creature. Before the Whatsitsname enters the scene, Saadawi's Baghdad is riddled with horror, and the specific depictions that Saadawi explores are actually based on real-life contexts. The environment of 2005 Baghdad was quite Gothic (desolate, macabre, violent), according to Saadawi. In the interview with Al-Mustafa Najjar, he states: "The Frankenstein-esque atmosphere of horror was strongly prevalent in Iraq during the period covered by the novel." This novel is ridden with suicide bombings. In 2004, suicide bombing in Iraq was rising. These bombs killed hundreds of people at once, quite often.²⁰ This was the environment the novel portrays. One of the primary ways in which Saadawi depicts the Gothic nature of war's reality is through his descriptions of Baghdad, for example as a city in which "death stalked the city like the plague" (Saadawi 6). Baghdad is "...a troubled city where the demons had broken out of their dungeons and come to the surface all at once" (Saadai 64). Baghdad has "...fear, death, anxiety,

²⁰ See Allawi pp. 233 for more information. Within a simple two month span towards the end of the year, there were over 30 car bombs reported.

criminals in the street, everyone watching as you walk past. Even when you're asleep, it's nightmares and jumping in fright all the time" (Saadawi 207). Iraq itself is described as "a country in flames all around you" (Saadawi 97). Saadawi overwhelmingly describes the city of Baghdad and the nation of Iraq with Gothic motifs.

Not only is the novel set in Baghdad, the novel is set in a very specific region of Baghdad: the Bataween District. This section of Baghdad in particular is ridden with a plethora of Gothic tropes. It is an extremely diverse neighborhood, featuring inhabitants of various religions and ethnicities.²¹ The characters, the inhabitants themselves in the novel, invoke even more Gothic elements. For example, Hadi, the Whatsitsname's creator, literally lives in a Gothic ruin, and his collapsing Gothic ruin (coined The Jewish ruin) was actually rebuilt with his late friend Nahem in the aftermath of the American invasion. The ruin he inhabits externally is connected to his haunting internally, as he laments over the death of his friend (Saadawi 25). Another Gothic element specifically existing in the novel's Bataween district is the character of Elishva, an elderly woman who refuses to leave her home. Saadawi associates her with two prominent Gothic tropes, female hysteria and superstition.²² Linked with these Gothic descriptions is her own mourning, as she grieves over the disappearance of her son. Demons, fire, fear, nightmares, ruins, mystery, anxiety, violence²³: all of these are elements typically associated with the gothic genre, and all of these elements are linked by Saadawi with the hardships and mourning occurring in the aftermath of the Iraq War. These Gothic elements are far from fictional; the constant fear of violence and death and the rampant anxiety, isolation, and danger are all non-fictionally existent in Iraq, and all contribute to the environment where a Gothic monster has come to life in this fictional novel.

²¹ "I felt the best place for Whatsitsname to emerge would be in Bataween, because of the multiplicity of communities that have lived there," Saadawi says, quoted in Zahra Hankir's review.

²² See list of Gothic tropes and terms at <https://resources.saylor.org/wwwresources/archived/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/engl403-1.3.1-A-Glossary-of-Literary-Gothic-Terms.pdf> for more information.

²³ See previous footnote.

Saadawi even chooses to depict a specific Baghdad catastrophe in his Gothic novel in order to solidly link Iraqi reality with Gothic realms: the 2005 Bridge of Imams incident, in which a fear-motivated rumor led to the death of over 1,000 people.²⁴ A prediction comes from the novel's government astrologer about the event, claiming to see "ghostly figures" on the bridge the night before the incident (Saadawi 110). Saadawi ties the Gothic nature of ghosts and fear to a historical event, perhaps implying that the supernatural and natural are not so distinct. The nature of fear typically found in the Gothic genre was permeated into Iraqi society; it allowed this type of horrific event to come about. A rumor such as this was easily plausible, and the Gothic nature of reality, the violence, the remoteness, the fear, easily led to panic. Saadawi braids even more exaggerated Gothic elements, such as fortune-telling and ghosts, into his narrative in order to emphasize the seemingly supernatural reality of war and its aftermath. In his interview at the Manchester Conference²⁵, he states: "I don't believe there is actually a split or divide between supernatural and real aspects of life." The supernatural and hard-to-believe terrifying nature of the gothic genre has come to realistic fruition in 2005 Baghdad. To Saadawi, the Gothic is not merely a fictional genre, the gothic has become reality due to war and its aftermath.

One final gothic and supernatural description of reality is found in the novel, and it is linked to the ways in which Iraqis were struggling to believe what was happening around them:

Dead people had emerged from the dungeons of the security services and nonexistent people appeared out of nowhere...There were people who had returned from long journeys with new names...There were people who had survived many deaths in the time of the dictatorship...The strange things that had come to light in the past three

²⁴ In August of 2005, over a thousand Shia citizens were crossing the Bridge of the Imams in Baghdad for a religious pilgrimage. Around midday, rumors were somehow spread that there was a suicide bomber on the bridge. Because of this, the people panicked and chaos ensued. Over a thousand people were either crushed, suffocated, or drowned to death. Yet no suicide bomber was actually ever identified or found. See Allawi pp. 431-432.

²⁵ See bibliography for link to entire video interview.

years were too many to count. (Saadawi 235)

After the regime's fall, "disappeared individuals" were found dead in hidden graves or alive and in hiding. Prisoners of war were released, exiles returned from afar; yet kidnappings, abductions, and rapes were at a rise (Allawi 144). Saadawi may tie in ghosts and astrologers to emphasize the gothic nature of actual Baghdad, but his use of the genre is no overstatement. The reality of Baghdad indeed seems supernatural because of war, because of the regime's cruelties, and because of the rise of militia violence due to the US's lack of preparation. Saadawi strategically uses the gothic genre to highlight the nature of life in 2005 Baghdad and to highlight the daily terror that Iraqis had to endure.

These hard-to-believe elements merged the fictional and the real; war and its aftermath had forced Baghdad to become a place of gothic horror. Sam Metz in his *Los Angeles Review of Books* review titled "Fiction of Dystopian Times: Ahmed Saadawi's 'Frankenstein in Baghdad'" outlines this very well. He writes: "The success of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is that, amid its unbelievable landscape — contemporary Baghdad — the presence of a sewn-together zombie seems hardly implausible." The nature of contemporary Baghdad itself is gothic, is horrific, is isolating, is terrifying. Metz coins the novel as "a fiction of dystopian times" emphasizing the fact that it masterfully ties together elements of horror and dystopia with contemporary 2005 Baghdad. Iraq itself has become a modern-day dystopia, or as Metz puts it: "a byproduct of several utopias gone awry." By conflating the everyday experience of the people of Baghdad with the gothic experience of horror, terror, isolation, fear, and violence, Saadawi is presenting Iraq in a way that we don't typically see through US media. Through this novel, we are able to learn about the daily realities of the Iraq War. Saadawi highlights this in one of the novel's final quotes coming from a journalist, Mahmoud: "Isn't life a blend of things that are plausible and others that are hard to believe?" (Saadawi 277). It may be hard to believe, but in 2005 Baghdad, the everyday routine has completely clashed with the unbelievable and horrific gothic. Because of war and its aftermath, the supernatural indeed has become the natural.

#2: Subjective Justice

The next feature of the nature of war and its aftermath that Saadawi chooses to emphasize in this novel is the idea of subjective justice. When the US invaded Iraq in 2003, there was a significant shift in power dynamics. The Sunni Arabs had lost their overwhelmingly majority power in the government, and the Shias and Kurds finally saw an end to the regime that systematically applied brutal force to their populations.²⁶ Once the regime fell, many Iraqi Shia militias rose to power for various reasons, revenge for their decades of mistreatment only being one of them. Additionally, mass graves were found soon after Hussein's fall, "crystalizing the reality of the crimes committed against the Shia and the Kurds," and sparking the desire for revenge and the hope for justice in the communities who had been abused for years (Allawi 141). Actions in the name of justice following the invasion, however, only sparked more sectarian hatred, as some Iraqi Sunnis now faced mistreatment, exile, and murder at the hands of those who had previously been discriminated against. Sectarian violence ensued, as militias strove for revenge against each other, revenge against the Hussein regime, and even revenge against the US occupying forces. The prevalence of justice and revenge in 2005 Baghdad was manifested in the mission of the novel's Whatsitsname.

In his interview with Najjar, Saadawi states: "The whats-its-name reflects our personal standards of justice, retribution, revenge, and punishment." The Whatsitsname himself describes his mission: "I am the answer to their call for an end to injustice and for revenge on the guilty...I will take revenge on all the criminals. I will finally bring about justice on earth..." (Saadawi 143). The creature completely merges the ideas of revenge and justice. In his mind, justice can only be found in by avenging innocent victims, and that avenging can only come about by murdering the criminals. Perhaps Saadawi saw this mindset mirrored in militia action, for revenge seemed to come about in

²⁶ See Allawi pp. 137 for more information.

the exact same way in the aftermath of the Iraq War. The Whatsitsname “was a composite of victims seeking to avenge their death so they could rest in peace” (Saadawi 130). Given the number of innocent victims at the hands of the Hussein regime, the US military forces, and the militia violence, a desire for revenge among Iraqis seems plausible. The decades of chaos and mistreatment that many have faced would inevitably spur a desire for peace, and violent actions paradoxically represented one way militias, and the Whatsitsname, hoped to attain that peace. The Whatsitsname’s composition was made up of those who faced horrifying violence due to war and its aftermath, and the Iraqi population itself seems to be made up of the same fabric.

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, however, the Whatsitsname’s actions are unable to actually bring about peace. In fact, his desire to bring peace to the victims who comprise his body becomes extremely unfruitful. Peace is never attained. He realizes that he must keep killing in order to stay alive; he must keep killing as the list of victims to avenge grows. He never reaches a place of complete objective justice, and this important plot point emphasizes the downfall of the desire for revenge and justice in Iraq’s political vacuum of 2005. One of the novel’s main characters, Mahmoud, even remarks on a theory of justice he believes to be true: “legal justice, divine justice, and street justice...however long it takes, criminals must face one of them” (Saadawi 173). Divine justice could come in the afterlife, legal justice could come through the government (or lack thereof in this setting), and that seems to leave street justice as the most popular option in Iraq. The Whatsitsname desires to enact street justice. As the Whatsitsname’s actions do not provide peace for those in Baghdad, however, as both criminals and innocent people begin to die at his hands, as suicide bombing continues to ensue, and as the government continues to show its inadequacy, Mahmoud questions whether his theory about justice was truly sound. “Mahmoud thought back to his theory about the three kinds of justice, but he wasn’t convinced it was valid. It was anarchy out there, there was no logic behind what was happening” (Saadawi 273). Mahmoud finishes the novel questioning whether true justice actually exists.

The Whatsitsname's noble mission is never completed, peace never comes, and the list of victims to avenge never ends. The mission behind his actions and the outcome of his actions contradict one another, as the creature begins to kill all kinds of people just to stay alive. His endeavor to avenge the innocent, procure justice, and attain peace becomes absurd and counterintuitive. Saadawi seems to be using the creature to emphasize the ways in which justice is perhaps more of a complex idea than most Iraqis seeking revenge choose to contemplate. Justice is never objective. Saadawi makes his opinions quite clear in Najjar's interview when he states: "What's justice for one group is injustice for another." Actions in the name of justice in Iraq seem to be overwhelmingly personal and even plausible. Yet Saadawi's Whatsitsname highlights the downfalls of these personal standards and strivings of and for justice. Sam Metz even states this quite plainly in his review, as he emphasizes the novel's overt message about justice missions always failing.²⁷ Perhaps the striving for genuine justice in Iraq is just as counterintuitive as the striving for justice by the Whatsitsname, seemingly unfruitful and dangerous for the whole of society and even for the justifier themselves.

#3: Mutual Complicity

The next way in which Saadawi uses the novel to emphasize "the complex reality of Iraq"²⁸ amidst war and its aftermath is through the monster as symbol of mutual complicity. Contrary to the messages often displayed in US media, the Iraq war is not a struggle merely between two competing binaries. The history of Iraq's identity struggle has come to a zenith in the novel's war-ridden Baghdad. Given Iraq's legacy of tribalism, various religious sects, and abrupt shifts in power, a cohesive national identity has not yet been cemented. Marr and Al-Marashi go so far as to say that

²⁷ To quote Metz directly: "If there's any parable embedded in the Whatsitsname's uncertainty toward his mission, it's that anyone who unilaterally attempts to impose justice, whether it be a man, monster, or North American superpower, will ultimately fail."

²⁸ Quoted from Saadawi in Manchester Metropolitan University's "Writers at Manchester Met" video interview.

this search for identity as been a century-long project.²⁹ The lack of cohesive identity has only exasperated militia violence, has only polarized civilians who would rather choose to remain moderate, and has caused “family, clan, and local ties [to] often take precedence over national loyalties” (Marr and Al-Marashi 16). Without a unified national identity, the Iraq War and its aftermath has appeared, if anything, to mirror a civil war over any other kind of conflict. Iraqis are killing other Iraqis, there is not one “good” group and not one “evil” group. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and in the life of the Whatsitsname, Saadawi implies that the majority of people living in the reality of Iraq are more complicit than it may initially appear.

The first way that Saadawi outlines the theme of mutual complicity is through the makeup of the monster itself. The monster is not wholly American, wholly Shia, wholly Kurd, or wholly Sunni. “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 147). The makeup of the monster (given the fact that he is initially comprised of bombing victims) implies that people from all over Iraq have fallen victim to war and its aftermath. The monster hopes to avenge all different kinds of people, for he is comprised of victims from various tribes and sects. The Whatsitsname represents the mutual victimhood of all Iraqi citizens, along with all of those involved in the war effort, yet what comes about as a result of this fact? The subsequent mutual complicity of all Iraqi citizens, all of those involved in the war effort, who allowed this diverse victimhood to come about. This “first true Iraqi citizen” is a vigilante. The creature’s noble mission goes awry, and in fact, he realizes that innocence and criminality may not exist in some idyllic binary. He soon realizes that the victimized body parts that make up his body are not completely innocent: “...because the criminals and the victims were

²⁹ “Iraq’s present borders incorporate a diverse medley of peoples who have not yet been welded into a single political community with a common sense of identity. The search for identity has been a shared, if elusive, project of all Iraqi governments” see Marr and Al-Marashi pp. 9.

entangled in a way that was more complicated than ever before...This was the realization that would undermine his mission - because every criminal he had killed was also a victim” (Saadawi 214-215). The Whatsitsname does not represent good fighting against evil, rather, he subverts these very notions. The creature’s body parts are not wholly innocent, and those the creature chooses to enact revenge upon are not wholly criminal. In her *Literary Hub* review, Zahra Hankir describes what she coins as the ‘not-so-subtle’ intention of Saadawi: to emphasize the complicity of all those involved with Iraq, directly quoting Saadawi himself when he says “People tend to view themselves as saints...and others as terrorists...In truth, no one’s innocent.” The Whatsitsname’s identity is comprised of victims who are not wholly innocent, and those he chooses to kill are not wholly criminal. The reality of Iraq, according to Saadawi, may be quite similar: a nation comprised of citizens who are encompassed by a complicated mix of both victimhood and criminality.

Saadawi also emphasizes the mutual complicity of Iraqi citizens, the occupying forces, the former regime, and the 2005 government through the characters’ appropriation of the Whatsitsname for various political agendas. The Whatsitsname does not have one cohesive interpretation. In fact, members of various political parties, militias, and tribes choose to adopt and manipulate his actions for their own gain and their own plans. He is interpreted (by various militias, by ‘madmen,’ by the US forces, by various tribes) in a myriad of ways: as a long-awaited savior, an Angel of Death, a new future for Iraq, a terrorist, an agent of foreign powers, an extremist, and even the image of God. His followers, who all interpret him differently, end up starting their own civil war, for “Each of my three madmen promoted his own idea of me to his clique” (Saadawi 154). His enemies, the astrologers working for the Iraq government’s Tracking and Pursuit Department (whose entire goal was to capture and kill the Whatsitsname), even end up taking advantage of his power and exploiting him for their own personal motives. The monster does not have one mission and one tribe that he is seeking to avenge as a moral necessity; the monster is instead appropriated by various tribes for

various reasons. He becomes ambiguous, and the chaos and violence he represents is taken advantage of.

The novel shows that three superstitious rebels (coined as madmen), the government, and even the US occupying forces all choose to interpret the monster's actions in ways that benefit their own causes. They seem indeed to view themselves as "saints" and choose to view the monster's actions as somehow confirming that. The monster's ambiguity and the appropriation of this ambiguity simply implies that there is not one single militia, one single tribe, or one single force that is responsible for the violence in Iraq. All are responsible, and all may use the conflicts and terrors in Iraq for their own political purposes. No one involved in the Iraq War is innocent, and no one involved in the Whatsitsname's life is solely innocent or saintly, either. In Najjar's interview, Saadawi states that the novel's "madmen" (who interpret the monster for their own gain) are quite symbolic, and perhaps serve to display the manipulation of conflict and violence by real-life key figures in Iraq for various political agendas. The Whatsitsname does not display one group triumphing over another. His actions, whether interpreted negatively or positively, are taken advantage of. He "was looking for believers who would facilitate his work and wouldn't use their belief in him for their own purposes" (Saadawi 185). He never finds this. The Whatsitsname does not represent the reality of the good-versus-evil or the innocent-versus-guilty, but rather represents "the evil we all have inside us" as a filmmaker in the novel states, "we are all criminals to some extent...we have all been helping to create the evil creature that is now killing us off" (Saadawi 227). Whether that contribution is due to fear, appropriation, personal motives, revenge, political gain, intense hatred, bigotry, or a thirst for power, Saadawi makes his point clear: no one involved in the Iraq War and its aftermath is innocent. All are complicit in some way or another.

#4: The Cyclical Nature of Violence

The fourth way that Saadawi depicts the theme of war and its aftermath through this novel and through the Frankenstein trope is by emphasizing the cyclical nature of violence. In his interview with Najjar, Saadawi states: “The Iraqi Frankenstein is made up of the body parts of victims who belong to different groups, each of which views the other as its enemy. Therefore, this Frankenstein will end up killing itself. In other words, the what’s-its-name is the fictional representation of the process of everyone killing everyone.” By tracing the narrative behind the Whatsitsname’s composition, creation, mission, actions, and eventual existential confusion, a clear message about the recurrent violence in Iraq is being presented. Hussein’s regime was overwhelmingly violent, suppressing opposers through mass killings and chemical attacks. The US, in March of 2003, invaded Iraq in an attempt to alleviate violence. However, the US actually exercised violence in order to combat the regime: air campaigns, ground offensives, and tank forces (Marr and Al-Marashi 206). In response, various militias rose up in violence against the US forces, against former regime members, and against each other. Violence was an action taken by the regime, by the occupying forces, and by the militias: all as a reaction to prior violence taken by different groups. None of these responsive violent actions, despite their motivations, worked to put an end to violence and chaos. In fact, the cycle of violence was only perpetuated as time went on, leading to fear, anxiety, and a lack of safety.

The culture of fear and anxiety that existed in the social and political vacuum of US-occupied Iraq forced citizens into a state of panic. Anxiety and fear were rampant. In order to protect themselves from violence, citizens were often forced to (explicitly or implicitly) participate in some type of violence, which often involved supporting a militia.³⁰ This pressure to contribute to the sectarian and militia violence in order to protect oneself is made manifest through the commentary by a journalist in the novel:

³⁰ “Ordinary civilians living in this atmosphere essentially made the choice either to affiliate with a sectarian militia for protection or to leave...” see Marr and Al-Marashi pp. 238.

The groups that have given shelter and support to al-Qaeda have done so because they are frightened of another group, and this other group has created and mobilized militias to protect itself from al-Qaeda. It has created a death machine working in the other direction because it's afraid of the Other...The government and the occupation forces have to eliminate fear.

They must put a stop to it if they really want this cycle of killing to end. (Saadawi 123)

Saadawi emphasizes the violent downfalls of the culture of fear that exist in Iraq. Fear leads people to commit violent acts. These violent acts, often completed out of fear, only seem to stem new fear in another group. Violence, drawn out of fear, only continues. Fear and violence go hand in hand, and as long as one exists, the other seems soon to follow in the novel and in Iraq.

The Whatsitsname himself is perhaps the clearest indication of the cyclical nature of violence in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. His motivations are clear: he wants to avenge the deaths of his body's composite victims in order to bring them peace (Saadawi 130). So, in an attempt to find this peace, he kills. He murders. A few murders are not enough, though. In fact, in order for the Whatsitsname's mission of justice through violence to continue, he ends up needing more flesh to survive (Saadawi 135). His life and his mission is dependent on death. His body's creation was the result of violence, his mission involves contributing to violence, and his desire to live necessitates 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 267). The monster's violent actions could not halt at just one killing. He could no longer even find justifications for his murders, as he finds himself killing just to stay alive and just to end up killing even more. Once his violent surge and mission begins, it cannot be stopped. His survival warrants a cycle of violence in his name, and the survival of the chaos in Iraq seems to necessitate the same thing. His violent actions are never done in isolation, they are never terminal. One violent act simply leads to another. Through the monster's life, Saadawi may be implying a larger idea about violence in general: it is never terminal. The Whatsitsname could never commit one "final" violent act, for his life was legitimized through

violence alone. The chaos and situation in Iraq may not be so different. The chaos, the sectarian divisions, the militia strife: all of this, perhaps, is legitimized by violence. Whether it was done by Hussein, the US, or a militia, all responsive violent acts in Iraq have failed to end the culture of violence. Peace in Iraq and peace in this novel does not come about as a result of violence. Violence comes about as a result of violence. Violence is not the solution in Iraq or in the novel, rather, violence only seems to prolong the crisis.

#5: Gratuitous Death

The fifth and final way that Saadawi depicts war and its aftermath is through the concept of gratuitous death. As a result of war and its aftermath, as a result of the first four features mentioned, gratuitous death ensues in the novel.³¹ This kind of unnecessary death and violence, death that seems to have no logical cause (and could have therefore been avoided), is the kind of death the novel displays as occurring in Iraq. The mere statistics of Iraqi deaths as a result of the invasion is astounding and horrifying. “The Human Cost of War in Iraq: A Mortality Study, 2002-2006” is a study conducted by a diverse team of Iraqi and American health researchers about this very topic.³² According to this study, over 650,000 people have died as a result of the conflict within this four-year span. When it came to household interviews, family members were often unaware of who caused their loved one’s death, as many of the deaths were attributed to unknown sources. Over half a million people died violent deaths, and many of these deaths were so illogical and unwarranted that their explanations and causes were not even apparent. Because of the conflict-ridden, gothic, violent, despairing situation that existed in Iraq, gratuitous death was the obvious result. These deaths were

³¹ The terms “gratuitous” here is being used in form with the Merriam-Webster definition: “not called for by the circumstances, not necessary, appropriate, or justified.”

³² Researchers conducted a cluster survey of Iraqi families and households in 2004 and 2006, in order to assess death rates and causes of death in post-invasion Iraq. This study was published by the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University and The School of Medicine at Baghdad's Al Mustansiriya University.

not inevitable, though. They were a result of the conflict, and they don't seem necessary or justifiable in the least.

Both Saadawi and Shelley's novels feature many deaths that would not have occurred if the novel's monster had never come into being. In Shelley's novel, William, Henry, and Elizabeth all die because of the Frankenstein monster's thirst for revenge, despair, and loneliness. The monster and the creator both die as well. These deaths were not justified, not necessary, and not inevitable; they came about because of the monster and the chaos he created. Avoidable and unexplainable death is a recurring theme in Saadawi's novel, as well. Although the Whatsitsname's mission seems initially justifiable, the results of his mission are not. There are many characters and people who die solely because the Whatsitsname exists. He kills in order to obtain new body parts and in order to stay alive. If he (and the chaos/problems in Iraq that he represents) didn't exist, many deceased people would still be alive. The description of the aftermath of the civil war that occurs between the Whatitsname's followers is a concrete example of gratuitous death, as dead bodies are haphazardly found and dispersed in absurd positions and locations.³³ The majority of the monster's followers kill each other. The novel's Baghdad is a "festival of death" (Saadawi 163). The monster kills people who cross his path solely for their body parts or solely because they offend him. These deaths seem anything but appropriate or explanatory; they are gratuitous. These deaths are not attributed to one explainable or uniform source, and neither were the majority of deaths in the aftermath of the Iraq War. The absurdity of these deaths is described rather well in one character's quote: "Organized nonsense stands behind all the crimes committed" (Saadawi 131). This organized nonsense seems to encapsulate Iraqi conflict, the novel's conflict, and death as a result of war and its aftermath in general. Death in the novel and death in the Iraq War and its aftermath seem to be understood in the same light: rampant, nonsensical, and gratuitous.

³³ "The next morning, I went out to inspect the area. There were bodies everywhere - on the street, on the sidewalk, some propped up against the walls, others slumped over balconies" (Saadawi 163).

Conclusion

Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* follows multiple storylines, characters, locations, and dilemmas. It is confusing, it is comical, it is violent, it is gothic. Yet this novel addresses real issues and actual events. At the heart of the novel is the muddled motivations and actions of the Whatsitsname, the Frankenstein-esque monster created from various victimized body parts. In the introduction to his anthology *Contemporary Iraqi Fiction*, Shakir Mustafa notes that recent Iraqi fiction has tended to blend elements of the real and the unreal, purposely utilizing the fantastic in order to present the absurdity of reality in Iraq.³⁴ Saadawi utilizes magic realism/fantasy in a similar way, to represent the uncanny and terrifying nature of war and its aftermath. The overall gothic nature of the novel's setting, including the mysteries, disappearances, and fear ingrained into the novel's society, are just one way Saadawi uses this Frankenstein trope. He also depicts war and its aftermath through the subjective nature of justice, particularly in presenting the Whatsitsname's mission as stemming from a thirst for reasonable revenge but eventually veering towards confusion in whether revenge and justice can ever truly be attained. Saadawi mirrors this with the revenge and politically motivated killings that were so rampant in Iraq post-invasion, and emphasizes that these quests for justice will never actually be fruitful. In the novel and in Iraq, justice and the attainment of justice, for any group or any character, never seem to solve the overall despair of war and its aftermath. Supernatural elements are utilized to emphasize the absurdity of this fact.

Saadawi also depicts war and its aftermath through mutual complicity and the cyclical nature of violence. These two elements, both embodied in the Whatsitsname, go further in highlighting the absurdity of violence in the Iraq War. As the monster himself is a composite of different body parts, some who are innocent and some who are criminal, the Whatsitsname learns that, perhaps,

³⁴ See Ferial Ghazoul quote on claiming that Iraqi fiction has "veered towards the fantastic, the surrealist...not out of renunciation of the real, but out of verisimilitude" on page xiv.

victimhood and criminality are not two binary categories. Saadawi doesn't blame one group, one militia, one government, or one nation as the force behind the Whatsitsname. The force behind the Whatsitsname is instead a plethora of forces, all people involved in the Iraq conflict, for all have contributed in some way or another to the nature of war and its aftermath. Additionally, Saadawi seems to present the violent actions taken by these warring groups as completely cyclical. Violence in the novel never solves or ends an issue, it only stems more violence. It only stems more death. Yet violence, from various parties involved in Iraq, seems to be a recurring action.

What Saadawi does so masterfully in this gothic novel is subvert. He subverts the ideas of good and evil presented in Western discourse on the Iraq War. He also subverts many gothic motifs about war and about the Other. In *The Gothic, Postcolonialism, and Otherness*, Tabish Khair actually highlights how many recent writers have utilized the gothic to engage with The War on Terror. Yet he believes many of these texts have failed, as they posit terror/terrorism as either simply evil or simply understandable.³⁵ He sees many gothic texts as simplifying the Other, the terrorist, or the supposed enemy. Two of the most common simplifications he outlines are concretely aligning the terrorist with an absolute notion of the non-European Other and/or concretely aligning the terrorist with an absolute notion of the mirrored European Self. In both of these cases, the terrorist is not allowed agency or even identity outside of the European perspective. Saadawi avoids these errors. His monster, unlike many monsters in the Gothic (including Shelley's *Frankenstein*) is not one specific Other and not one specific Self, his monster is rather a composite of many different forms of Self in Iraq, in the West, and in any other nation complicit in the Iraq War. His monster is not solely linked with European identity, but with Middle Eastern and global identity as well. The Whatsitsname, unlike many other Gothic engagements with the Middle East mentioned by Khair, is

³⁵ See Khair pages 3-4 and 173-175 for more information on the gothic and its commentary on the Other in terms of terrorism and The War on Terror.

not wholly evil or even wholly comprehensible (the monster is not fully made sense of), for Saadawi presumably believes that the nature of war and terror is not either.

Interesting enough, the novel ends in a somewhat ambiguous manner. Hadi, the monster's creator, takes responsibility for the Whatsitsname's actions, and faces the punishment for the monster's crimes. Other characters are reluctant to believe Hadi actually committed all the crimes associated with the monster, but they ignored their beliefs, for "what the government said must be true" (Saadawi 279). In the final pages, the inhabitants of the Bataween district dance and celebrate in the street, extremely happy that the cause of their recent distress has been (apparently) eradicated. Yet this belief is clearly a falsity. For overlooking the celebration is presumably the monster himself, watching the people through a window as he smokes, petting a cat. The monster is very clearly not eradicated and is very clearly not 'the Other.' The monster is present. He still exists and thrives, whether the characters choose to accept or ignore that fact. The monster, as Saadawi himself says, is a symbol of Iraq's problems. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* does not present an Iraq with problems that have been wholly eliminated, but as an Iraq with problems (and monsters) that persist.

Lastly, Saadawi depicts war and its aftermath through the idea of gratuitous death and gratuitous violence. The characters in the novel start to see the monster and the militia violence as illogical. The deaths become unjustified. As a result of the gothic nature of reality, subjective justice, mutual complicity, and the cyclical nature of violence, gratuitous death emerges. If the Whatsitsname wasn't created, many deaths could have been avoided. Many people died simply because of the Whatsitsname, for various reasons: to keep him alive, to maintain power over him, to be avenged for their wrongs. But these deaths do not necessarily seem to 'make sense.' Saadawi, I believe, uses the notion of gratuitous death in the fictional novel to mirror the unnecessary deaths as the result of the Iraq War and its aftermath as a whole. Many of these deaths could have been avoided, if it wasn't for desires for justice and revenge, if it wasn't for fear ingrained into society, if it wasn't for the cyclical nature of violence and the gothic nature of kidnappings, disappearances, and constant anxiety.

When it comes to reality in Iraq, Saadawi's novel forces us to ask some thought-provoking questions. Does the actual Iraq War, and the deaths and violence involved in the war, actually make sense, actually seem real, actually seem logical? Or, does the actual Iraqi context (militia fighting, revenge murder, plethora of civilian deaths, escalating fear) actually seem a bit mystical and gothic? Are the deaths in Iraq, particularly in the aftermath of the occupation, warranted, defensible, and justifiable? It seems that the Whatitsname's actions surely are not. War and its aftermath may perhaps be more gothic and horrific than the Western world has grasped thus far in history, and *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is just one text attempting to illustrate that harrowing truth.

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