



BOOK REVIEW: The Question of Justice and Identity in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (J. Wright, Trans.). Penguin Books, US, 2018. Pp. 288. ISBN 978-0143128793 paperback

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Ahmed Saadawi's third and last novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* was originally published in Arabic in 2013 and has since been translated into several languages, including an English translation by Jonathan Wright in 2018. The novel, which won the 2014 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, is a heart-rending story of a country blighted by an unending cycle of war, violence, and misery. Saadawi's novel captures the mood of post-war Iraq and provides the readers with one of the most vivid descriptions of mayhem and terror in Middle Eastern literature. The title of the novel is more misleading than clarifying. Apart from a couple of passing references and a superficial similarity in creating a patchwork monster inflicting terror and violence, Saadawi's novel has almost nothing to do with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818).

Set against the backdrop of war-torn Iraq in 2005, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* recounts the story of an eccentric junk dealer named Hadi, who is locally known as a heavy drinker and a compulsive liar. Rummaging around in the charred ruins of the city, Hadi collects pieces of lifeless bodies torn apart by bombs and explosions. He goes on stitching together the dismembered body parts of victims, resulting in the creation of a terrifying humanoid creature. Once reanimated, the creature, as the creature is known, sets out to exact revenge on those who killed the people whose parts make up his body.

War, terror, and unrest are all inextricably intertwined with the context of the novel, as are they with the lives of Iraqi people. It has been ages that pain and suffering have been the most frequent words in the book of their lives. Embittered by the miseries of war, people are in desperate search of justice and identity, which seem to have already begun to fade away. Somewhere in the novel, the creature complains of the negative public reaction to his arbitrary acts of retribution, saying "What's worse is that people have been giving me a bad reputation. They're accusing me of committing crimes, but what they don't understand is that I'm the only justice there is in this country" (103). That a monstrous, cold-blooded creature represents himself as a justice defender is both ironical and metaphorical. The bitter irony is that things are getting to the point where an evil monster feels obliged to put an end to injustice only by resorting to brutal violence. On the other hand, the very monster, as he himself claims, may

stand for the long-sought-after integrity of the country. “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,” the creature maintains (112).

The question of identity is prevalent everywhere in the novel. Saadawi seems to suggest that loss of individual identity will certainly be an inevitable consequence of war if the national identity is damaged by the very individuals who not only fail to stand but also refuse to unite against injustice. Under such circumstances, it is more than likely the boundaries between right and wrong are blurred and it would be hard to differentiate the innocent from the guilty. Although initially dedicated to taking vengeance and doing justice, the Whatsitname’s mission soon goes astray and, just like the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, begins to target innocent victims as he needs new pieces to maintain his existence. As the novel goes on, Saadawi seems to imply that victims, too, are not always entirely blameless. As long as people sit around and do nothing for justice, there always will be someone else, an outsider, who takes the opportunity and stirs the pot of identities.

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Javad Khorsandi is a postgraduate student of English Literature. He finished his M.A. studies in English Language and Literature at Azarbaijan Shahid Madani University, Tabriz, Iran in 2017. In 2018, he co-authored an article with Dr. Ahad Mehrvand entitled “‘Anonymous Collectivity’ and ‘Sly Civility’: Postcolonial Defiance in a Satirical Short Story by Aziz Nesin” that was published in *GEMA Online® Journal of Language Studies*. His research interests include Renaissance Literature, Modernism, World Literature, and Postcolonial Studies.
