

RETHINKING THE NATION WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD*

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Abstract:

*The aim of this paper is to identify the ways in which political interferences and military interventions in Arab countries by western powers are made possible through modern conceptual schemes, such as the nation. The paper examines Ahmed Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013), which depicts the atrocities of US imperialist venture in Iraq in the context of the 'war on terror'. The novel also investigates how news media in Iraq helps in modulating public perceptions in order to support in the exclusive interests of geopolitical powers, especially the United States of America. The paper draws on postcolonial theory and criticism of nation and nationality, bringing into conversation critical notions and Saadawi's articulations as implied in his novel under study. In addition, one of the preoccupations of this paper is to examine the alternatives that Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* offers particularly in relation to the concept of Iraqi nationhood.*

Keywords: *Iraqi nationhood, constructions, news media, alternatives.*

1. Review of the Literature

Anderson is a pioneering voice in debates about the nation. In his well-known book entitled *Imagined Communities* (1983), Anderson's starting point is a discussion of the nation as 'an imagined political community', where individuals share with one another a 'deep, horizontal comradeship'.² Anderson shows that the modern concept of the nation is in essence a 'cultural artefact', which results from "the spontaneous distillation of a complex 'crossing' of discrete historical forces".³ The phrase "complex 'crossing'" indicates a shift of 'political' emphasis from the premodern to the modern concept of the nation-state. As he notes,

It is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Coming to maturity at a stage in human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living *pluralism* of such religions, and the allomorphism between each faith's ontological claims and territorial stretch, nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state.⁴

The nation is a modern construct deployed by hegemonic patterns of thought in order to deconstruct religious traditions as incompatible with the principles of freedom and democracy. To put it a bit differently, the nation is a political category in which religion is irrelevant.

1. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. (London: Verso, 1983), p.6.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

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Gellner's book *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) posits nationalism as 'primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit be congruent'.⁵ According to Gellner, the nation is a product of modernity's new configurations, such as industrialism and nationalism, which supersede religion: "even religions which might be thought to have had little inherent potential for such 'protestant' interpretation, could nevertheless be turned in that direction during the age when the drivers to industrialism and to nationalism were making their impact".⁶ Gellner demonstrates how the nation is a modern construct which serves as a rhetoric for the consolidation of political visions at the expense of religious traditions, such as Islam. Gellner's main point is that the imposition of the nation (especially in nonwestern countries) ensures the continuance of the hegemony of Western powers on postcolonial states, in particular the Muslim, Arab countries.

Hobsbawm makes the claim that the nation is dependent upon the production and reproduction of national traditions. Hobsbawm holds the view that the nation is an invention of Western modernity.⁷ Yet, Hobsbawm elaborates on how the life and meaning of the nation is predicated upon the 'invention of traditions' and practices, such as the flag, national anthem, and icons.⁸ In other words, the invention of national symbols and festivals aids in the continuation of national unity.⁹

In his book titled *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Chatterjee criticises the nation as a derivative discourse of Western modernity, particularly in the postcolonial context of independent India.¹⁰ Chatterjee questions the wholesale adoption of nationalist ideology in the reconstruction of his country, because nationalism is borrowed from modernity, the colonial justifying epistemology: 'Nationalism produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' on which colonial domination was based'.¹¹ The uncritical reliance of anti-colonial nationalist movements on "the very intellectual premises of 'modernity'" implies that nationalism is just a reh of colonialism. A similar argument is put forward by Leela Gandhi vis-à-vis nationalism as derivative of Western colonialist thought, that postcolonial India is 'plagued by anxieties of imitativeness, by the apprehension that Indian nationalism is just a poor copy or derivation of European post-Enlightenment discourse'.¹²

5. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p.1.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

7. Timothy Brennan, in "The National Longing for Form", discusses how the novel as a Western invention helps in the consolidation of the modern concept of the nation.

8. Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger, (Eds.). *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-7.

9. Paul Gilroy, in *Small Acts* (1993), makes a similar argument regarding the construction and maintenance of the nation, stating that 'through elaborate cultural, ideological and political processes which culminate in [the individual's] feeling of connectedness to other national subjects and in the idea of a national interest that transcends the supposedly petty divisions of class, region, dialect or caste' (p. 49).

10. P. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*. (London: Zed, 1986), p.2.

11. *Ibid.*, P.30.

12. *Ibid.*, P.114.

2. Analysis and Interpretation

Ahmed Saadawi (born in 1973) is a contemporary Iraqi poet, novelist, script-writer, and reporter for a number of local and international news networks like the BBC (2005-2007). Saadawi has earned several awards, such as the Arabic-Booker Prize for *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in 2014, and the Festival of Iraqi Journal for Reportage in 2004. He has written novels, such as *البلد الجميل* [The Nice Land] (2004), *انه يحلم، أو يلعب، أو يموت* [He is Dreaming, Playing, or Dying] (2008), a story-collection entitled "اللعب في الغرف المجاورة" [Playing in Next-Door Rooms].

Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* recounts the terror crimes of a monster-like individual in Baghdad, known as Al-Bataween. Rumours spread, and American and Iraqi forces seek to lay hand on the perpetrator by deploying agents and carrying out investigations. The "terrorist" manages to go on with his acts of murder, and is able to rebuild his body with spare-parts taken from his victims. Despite the strict security measures and intensive surveillance, the murderer is shown to be observing the arrest of another character who is taken and shown on T.V. as the "terrorist". The captured convict, however, happens to be the one who reassembles scattered human bodies and puts them together in the making of the monster of the 'what's-his-name'.

In what follows, I demonstrate the ways in which Frankenstein in Baghdad addresses the human predicament in Iraq after the dominance of the US forces and the establishment of the new interim coalition government in April 2003.

2.1. Cycles of Violence

Frankenstein in Baghdad offers a detailed portrayal of the ways in which Iraqis are caught between two opposing worldviews. On the one hand, the novel offers glimpses of the oppressive practices of the US troops and the existing government. On the other hand, the novel depicts ordinary Iraqis carrying on with their lives and relating to one another. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* depicts a series of murders committed by a character referred to as 'shesma', an Iraqi word meaning 'what's-his-name' and signifying 'an unidentified source of terror.'¹³ The 'what's-his-name' is a hybrid of human remains which have been reassembled and reconstructed into a monster at the hands of Hadi Al-Attaq, a scavenger.¹⁴ The 'what's-his-name' returns to life with the mission of avenging the victims whose remains are parts of his body and soul. He has associates (magician, sophist, and foe) who set up his schemes and advises him on the best course of action. The 'what's-his-name' represents the nation and its experiences and advisors. The imagery used with reference to the monster's advisors signifies dramatically-divergent experiences, ranging from the superstitious practices of magic and deceptive deployments of language to anti-social positions. Not only are these experiences in clash with one another, they are also unreliable sources of guidance. The magician, sophist, and foe are devoid of the professional expertise and strategic vision that are prerequisite in the advisory board of the modern state. Herein lies the subtlety of the novel's imagery, which implies that the crisis of Iraq is, partly, caused by its stark lack of scientific apparatuses and modern systems of governance. The critique of the age-old practices of the Iraqi government is a suggestion for the need to reconstitute the entire body of the government so that it can run along the technocratic path of modern states.

The expose of the internal system of the government is supplemented by an interrogation of simplistic understandings and native practices in Iraqi society. The 'what's-his-name' has associates (Little Madman, Great Madman, and Greater Madman) who alternately see in him the archetypal Iraqi citizen, anti-Christ, or the saviour (pp. 160-161). These partisans seek salvation through the monster ('what's-his-name'); they project their fond hopes onto him. Just as Said questions nationalism as a replica of

13. Bushra Juhi Jani, 'Violence as the Object in Iraqi Literature: Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*', *IJHCS*, 1:4 (2015), pp. 321-36 (322-26)

14. *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, pp. 34-144.

colonialism, Saadawi calls into question ideological projects that stir public sentiments towards causes of narrow imperatives. Saadawi's critique of ideological projects is congruent with the Western scepticism towards grand narratives. This is simply because these macro-structures or grand narratives are motivated by hidden agendas that serve the interests of the few dominant powers while ignoring the rest of society. Saadawi's main point, however, is that the lack of awareness among Iraqi masses is the cause for their blind conformity to their leaders.

Saadawi establishes incidents and characters of his novel against the background of the war on terror. The centrality of this war to Iraq is shown in relation to consequences incurred through foreign invasions. The war is depicted as catastrophic to the entire fauna and flora, leading to the collapse of the whole country into chaos:

More than ever before, public conditions were intensely deteriorating. TV broadcasts political infightings as well as street guerrilla wars, with bombs, assassinations, explosives, a car and its passengers were hijacked, and the change of night into a jungle for criminals. All this was happening while the elites and the media officials were preoccupied with such issues as whether we were heading towards a civil war, we were already in a civil war, or we were in an unconventional civil war. (p. 199)

The unprecedented scale of crisis in Iraq is expressed here in terms of a vortex of confusion and mayhem, vandalism and looting, murder and violence. The intensity of the crisis is further deepened by the distortions circulated in and by intellectual circles and news media; institutions of knowledge and information are obsessed with polemical wrangling over issues of little relevance to the existing conflicts. Saadawi's contribution, thus, is to show how the War on Terror itself is the ground of the deteriorations and violence in Iraq.

Frankenstein in Baghdad exposes the US so-called 'war on terror' as to liberate Iraq from terror and Saddam, and shows how such claims aid in legitimating the US invasion and control of Iraq. The novel depicts how the arrival of one element of the American military police at Al-Bataween is a cause of panic to all the residents. Faraj, a well-known broker in the neighborhood, happens to be present where the forces arrive. When asked by the American officer via an interpreter about the ownership of a certain house, Faraj is shown as trembling with fear so that his response is hardly heard. In his inward eye, a thought reminds him that American troops can 'act as completely independent, and no one can hold them accountable for whatever they do, and they can cast anyone behind the clouds as soon as their mood changes' (pp. 79-80). Faraj's thought is used as a literary device in order to question the legitimacy of the unqualified freedom of the US forces in Iraq. Colonel Majeed, who is one of the remnants of Saddam's regime and an intelligence agent with the current system, sums up the aim of the War on Terror as to 'attain more control' (p. 87). The significance of the Colonel's statement is that it brings out the agenda behind the War on Terror: 'more control' over power resources and the world over. The War on Terror is but rhetoric for fulfilling America's hegemonic ambitions. Hence, Saadawi's highlighting on the War on Terror as a reinforcement of American superpower illustrates the political interests behind imperialist discourses.

In addition, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* questions the either/or politics of the US war against terror. The novel undermines the ways in which the imposition of this politics causes further divisions. This critique passes through the mind of journalist Mahmoud Al-Suwadi in a meeting between his boss Ali Bahir Al-Saeedi and Colonel Majeed: 'There are two fronts now [...] the Americans and the government on one hand, and the terrorists and the various militias on the other. Anyone fighting against the government and the Americans has only one label'(p. 91). The phrases 'two fronts', 'fighting against', and 'one label' give clue not only to the disintegration of Iraq into mutually exclusive entities but also to the exclusionary practices of the dominant powers ('the government and the Americans') to suppress counter-forces by

means of the 'one label' rhetoric of terror. That this criticism occurs in the psyche of a character (Al-Suwadi) is indicative not only of the presence of the specter of terror but also of the modern fallacies of freedom of speech and human rights. Therefore, Saadawi's aim is to remark the effectiveness of modern systems of classification to the neo-colonisation of Iraq.

2.2. Media and Public Deception

Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* investigates the role of the mass media in deepening the crises of Iraq. In this novel, news agencies produce images of Baghdad as fallen into mayhem, destruction and horror: 'Not a single day passes without at least one car bombing' (p. 118). To produce horrifying images and exaggerate the extent of conflicts help the media to form public perceptions so as to applaud the practices of the system as legitimate and necessary. Moreover, in its unrelenting depictions of the destruction of lives, assets, infrastructures and heritage, news media ascribe it all to 'Qaeda elements and remnants of the former regime' (pp. 38, 91), as well as to the newly-emerged terror of the 'what's-his-name' (pp. 126, 137, 332). While turning blind eye to the practices of the occupying forces, the media foregrounds terrorist activities as an illustration of Iraqi conditions. However, Said's critique of the media's coverage of Islam is echoed in Saadawi's pronouncements on the diabolical role of the media that not only distorts but also destroys relations among individual Iraqis: 'On TV screens, breaking news report the death of scores on "Imams Bridge" due to a rumour about a suicide bomber among the visitors. Out of panic, some died being crushed under feet while others died for casting themselves into the river' (p. 123). Targeting "Imams Bridge" (a link between two sectors of Baghdad: Sunni-majority A'zamiah and Shiite-majority Kazimiah) as a site for spreading fabricated yet deadly stories reveals the complicity of the media in igniting sectarian clashes.

The counter-hegemonic discourse of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is conspicuous in its depictions of individuals as torn apart and mentally disturbed. The search of the intelligence forces for the 'what's-his-name' as the prime agent of all terror acts in the city culminates in the announcement of his arrest. The perpetrator is identified by the government as Al-Attaq, however. The public is reported to experience a momentary shock: 'But when the criminal spoke in the recordings about his confessions, this unsettled Aziz Al-Misri, for the voice sounds like Hadi's, but how could he be a murderer?' (p. 347). In spite of being completely convinced that the criminal shown on T.V. could not be Al-Attaq, Al-Misri, the café maid and a close friend of the convict, suspends disbelief and joins the public in celebrating the event (p. 349). The phrase 'for the voice sounds like Hadi's' and the reference to Al-Misri are critical of the official record as a politically driven construct that falsifies human consciousness with intellectual distortions. The Hadi incident connects with Said's disillusionment with cultural imperialism, in particular the tendency to blur critical awareness of the oppressive and exclusionary practices of centres of power. This is particularly explicit in the last comment made about the public attitudes to the capture of Hadi: 'No one believes that this frightening criminal was living among them, but what the government says is true' (p. 348).

The current paper moves now to inquire into the alternative vision of Iraqi nationhood that Ahmed Sadaawi adduces in lieu of the dominant discourse of modernity in his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. The discussion is followed by a concluding section where I offer a summary of the whole points discussed in the paper, attempting also to stimulate new lines of thinking, as will be shown below.

3. Alternative Iraqi Nationhood

Saadawi's interpretation of recent dismantling of the Western model of modernity and modernisation contains a consideration of both Al-Bataween as a model of life and the inexhaustible potential of the human phenomenon. The novelist's responses emphasise the need to expose the limitations of imposed "solutions" to the Iraqi situation and to raise awareness of the country's dormant resources-material and cultural-as possibilities for resolving the crisis.

Al-Bataween is an area in the centre of Baghdad. It was where most of the bombing was

concentrated during the War on Terror. Al-Bataween has been ethnically diverse, an area where Sunnis, Shi'as, Muslims, and Christians have lived alongside one another and have continued to do so since the bombing. The novel dwells on the area as a site where non-sectarian values have been sustained over time, suggesting a model for a better kind of Iraqi nationhood. As described in the novel, 'The sector is crowded with strangers who had populated the place down the ages so that no one can claim to be an original inhabitant' (p. 31). 'The old lady is blessed, and the Hand of the Most Compassionate is on her shoulder wherever she descends or goes' (p. 15). This is how Salim's Mother (Muslim) describes her neighbour, Elishu (Christian).

Elishu is a Christian lady, who had lost her son in the Iraq-Iran war and yet lives in the hope of his return. For Elishu, 'memory' is life-giving, a cause greater than herself, and a uniting element against the dazzling 'glamour of details' (p. 22). Modern language does not render intelligible what Elishu goes through. The old lady has a different language that keeps her communion with God alive and her conversations with portraits of saints and memoirs possible: 'She expects God to give her a sign about her son' (p. 23), 'She definitely understands His [God's] speech [...] He [God] is so old an acquaintance [of Elishu's] that it is difficult to give up on His friendship' (p. 71). Elishu's faith in the divine accounts for her refusal to move from Baghdad to Australia where her daughters live. 'It seems that her daughters have ultimately understood how to deal with the old lady. They used a logic and a rationality without trying to understand her specific logic' (p. 287).

Saadawi's attack on fixity comes through an affirmation of the inexhaustible potential of human meaning and identity. The novel sketches each character as a composite of innumerable voices, associations, desires, memories, and contradictions; each person is characterised as a site of contesting forces: 'There are no completely pure individuals, nor are there fully criminals ones' (pp. 255-56). The novel's emphasis on the complexity of human nature is subversive of the reductionist approaches to human identity, such as 'the citizen No. 341' (p. 235). For this reduction of human identity to mere figures of identification is typical of the dominant practices of dehumanisation characteristic of the hegemonic discourse of Western modernity. The impoverishment of human potential is in Saadawi's emphasis on the ever-changing dynamic of meaning and identity: 'No one is ever in one state of mind or in one permanent condition' (p. 297).

4. Concluding Observations

The paper has delineated the ways in which Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* undermines Western thinking. The novel calls into question grand narratives, especially cultural imperialism. Of critical note is the delineation of Saadawi's response to powers of hegemony. The novel's portrayal of Al-Bataween as Iraq in a miniature serves to highlight its heterogeneous culture, which is far too complex to be reduced to the essentialist accounts of Eurocentric models.

The paper has made it explicit that Saadawi has offered representations of local experiences on a global scale. The discussion has indicated how the novel has addressed problems, such as nationalist ideology and the War on Terror. The crises in Iraq are a miniature of the human predicament vis-à-vis the hegemonic forces of cultural imperialism. The novel's expressions of the agonies in Iraq are integral to articulations of resistance to the manipulative rhetoric and oppressive apparatuses of dominant powers.

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