DISTORTED IDENTITY IN AHMED SAADAWI'S FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD

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Abstract

This study examines the issue of distorted identities in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad, set in post-2003 war-torn Iraq. The novel, inspired by Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, depicts a creature "Whatsitsname" created from the body parts of war victims, representing the fragmentation of both individual and national identity at a period of tremendous violence and instability. This study looks at how Saadawi depicts the collapse of personal and moral identities in the characters of Hadi, Mahmoud, and Baghdad residents as they deal with the horrors of war and occupation. Furthermore, the novel criticizes the erosion of Iraqi national identity, highlighting the profound sectarian splits that match the creature's fractured form. By examining the blurring lines between justice and vengeance, victim and offender, the study contends that Frankenstein in Baghdad is a profound meditation on the complicated process of identity building and destruction in combat zones. Additionally, the study adds to the increasing body of scholarship on Middle Eastern postwar fiction by highlighting how literary works can shed light on the sociopolitical reality of oppressed states.

Keywords: Ahmed Saadawi, Distorted Identity, Post-War Trauma, Cultural Disintegration, Postcolonial Studies, Iraqi Literature

INTRODUCTION

In different cultures, women's leadership have been influenced by several factors. It has been a widely discussed debate for years. Social norms and cultural values are shaping the aspects of human life so they cannot be overstated (Agha, 2003). Swat, which is known as the Switzerland of Asia, observes gender roles that are embedded in its cultural norms and values. Moreover, some predefined cultural norms and values assign roles to respective genders, and opportunities and responsibilities are hence given based on the traditional gender roles. Having its rich cultural legacy created by local customs and historical influences, Swat, a scenic province of Pakistan, is well situated. Comprehending the cultural context is essential for interpreting the complex interactions between women's leadership ambitions and cultural norms.

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018) is a stunning discovery of identity in a city ruined by conflict. Set in post-2003 Baghdad, the novel connects horror elements and magical realism to address the insightful effects of war on personal and collective identities (Saadawi, 2018). Saadawi's narrative, inspired by Mary Shelley's Frankenstein (1818), introduces a creature "Whatsitsname" made from different bodies, it powerfully symbolizes the brokenness and division in today's Iraqi society (Shelley, 1818; Saadawi, 2018).

Post-invasion Iraq is marked by sectarian violence, political instability, and the constant threat of terrorism. This makes the search for identity urgent. The characters struggle to understand who they are due to the chaos around them (Suleiman, 2020). The creature, Whatsitsname, represents this fragmentation. It shows how conflict separates both personal and national identities. (Miller, 2019).

Kenneth J. Gergen argues that today's individuals face a more fragmented sense of self, shaped by constant outside influences like the media and social interactions, which often cause confusion and disconnection from a unified identity (Gergen, 1991, p. 47).

Identity is a key theme in literature, often reflecting social, political, and psychological struggles (Bhabha, 1994). In Saadawi's novel, distorted identities are not just the result of personal trauma, but also a reflection of the country's broken state. This paper will explore how Saadawi uses the character Whatsitsname and the experiences of Baghdad's people to examine identity in the midst of violence and displacement (Sánchez, 2021).

The research will focus on three main areas: first, it will explore Whatsitsname as a symbol of broken identity, showing how the personal identity crises of key characters reflect the larger issue of national identity in Iraq (Khoury, 2011; Kermode, 1967). Second, using postcolonial and identity theory, it will

Distorted Identity in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein...

examine how Saadawi's novel addresses the complexities of identity in a time of war (Said, 1993; Fanon, 1963). By exploring these points, the paper aims to contribute to the discussion of Middle Eastern literature, offering insights into how modern works reflect identity and fragmentation in the face of political conflict. (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* has gained a lot of attention from scholars for its unique story and themes. Researchers have looked at different parts of the novel, such as its critique of post-invasion Iraq and its creative use of the Frankenstein idea. Suleiman (2020) discusses how Saadawi's creature represents the broken identities caused by the Iraqi conflict, while Sánchez (2021) looks at how the story shows the distorted identities of both individuals and the nation. Although these studies offer useful insights, they mainly focus on the socio-political aspects rather than exploring identity as the main theme of the novel.

The theme of identity is a recurrent motif in postcolonial literature, often reflecting the complexities and conflicts of societies affected by colonialism and its aftermath. Bhabha's (1994) concept of hybridity and the fragmented self is particularly relevant for understanding the identities portrayed in Saadawi's novel. His idea that postcolonial identities are constructed through a process of negotiation and conflict helps illuminate the fragmented identities of characters like Hadi and Mahmoud in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Said's (1993) discussions on cultural fragmentation in *Culture and Imperialism* further contextualize the ways in which Saadawi's novel reflects broader themes of national and personal identity in postcolonial contexts.

Saadawi's novel is deeply affected by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, which gives a critical framework for understanding the creature Whatsitsname. Shelley's monster, often understood as a symbol of marginalization and moral ambiguity, parallels Saadawi's portrayal of the creature as a representation of fragmented and distorted identities. The creature's assembly from disparate parts in both novels underscores themes of creation and destruction, reflecting societal and personal disorders (Shelley, 1818; Saadawi, 2018). This intertextual connection is crucial for understanding how Saadawi adapts the Frankenstein motif to discover contemporary issues in Iraq.

While this research has provided valuable insights into Saadawi's novel and its socio-political commentary, there is also a visible gap in comprehensive analyses focusing specifically on the theme of distorted identity. Most studies focus on the novel's critique of Iraq's political situation or its narrative structure. They

Distorted Identity in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein…

pay less attention to how Saadawi explores identity. This aspect connects to broader literary and theoretical ideas.

This paper aims to fill that gap by closely examining how Saadawi uses the creature and the setting of Baghdad to explore deep themes of identity, both personal and national.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a **qualitative approach** to examine the theme of fragmented identities in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. The analysis combines literary criticism with theoretical frameworks from **postcolonial studies** and **identity theory** to explore how Saadawi portrays the disintegration of personal and national identities in post-war Iraq.

The research is based on two primary theoretical frameworks: postcolonial theory and identity theory. P**ostcolonial theory**, particularly the works of **Edward Said** (*Culture and Imperialism*, 1993) and **Homi K. Bhabha** (*The Location of Culture*, 1994), examines Iraq's socio-political context after colonial influence. The focus is on the fragmentation of both individual and collective identities. There are two reasons for using the tools as mentioned earlier. First, they help explore the impact of colonial legacies on Iraq's national identity. Second, the ongoing sectarian violence and political instability make the identity crises worse in the novel.

Identity theory by Frantz Fanon and Erik Erikson provides a sense of self-understanding from a psychological corner. It also encompasses trauma and dislocation when by affecting identity formation. Fanon's vision of the psychological scars of colonization and violence assists us in finding the distorted self-images of the characters. Erikson's idea about how people figure out their identities can be used to unfold characters in the novel who are struggling with their sense of self, especially when the society around them is falling apart.

The main research method embraces a close textual reading of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. A focus on key sections that reveal the collapse of identity. The character of Whatsitsname and the lives of other central figures like Hadi and Mahmoud can be examined to achieve the goals. Through a comparative analysis with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the study explores intertextual connections and their relevance to the contemporary setting of Saadawi's novel. This method helps illustrate how Saadawi uses the **Frankenstein motif** to critique the fragmentation of both personal and national identity in Iraq.

Additionally, the research incorporates **contextual analysis**, situating Saadawi's work within the broader socio-political realities of post-war Iraq and

Middle Eastern literature. **Secondary sources** such as critical essays, articles, and books related to postcolonial studies, trauma theory, and identity formation are reviewed to further contextualize the text and support the analysis.

The study also acknowledges certain **limitations**: it primarily focuses on Saadawi's novel, which may overlook other literary representations of identity in Middle Eastern literature. it only looks at one novel and uses a narrow set of theories. It might miss other important ideas or different ways to think about identity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the character Whatsitsname symbolizes broken identity. He is created from the body parts of victims. Metaphorically, Whatsitsname does not only represent the fragmentation of personal identity but rather serves as the fragmentation of national identity in post-war Iraq. The assembly of Saadawi's creature in chaos reflects how violence can disrupt individual and collective identities. This idea resonates with Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, where individuals can experience identity confusion when external forces, such as war, disrupt their sense of self (Erikson, 1968). The fragmented form of Whatsitsname mirrors the disintegration of Iraq's political and social order. It also refers to the lack of coherence and shows the broader struggles of a nation torn apart by conflict.

As Hadi, the character who assembles Whatsitsname, looks at his reflection, he experiences a profound disconnection from his own identity: "*In shock, he wiped his hand along the surface of the mirror to make sure it was really a mirror and then he leaned in to examine his disfigurement*" (Saadawi, 2018: 726). This moment, in which Hadi sees his face disfigured into something unrecognizable, summarizes his loss of self and highlights Erikson's idea of identity confusion under extreme external pressure. The act of putting together the creature from different parts symbolizes Hadi's effort to build his identity in a society that is falling apart.

Zygmunt Bauman created a concept in (2000) named liquid modernity. Liquid modernity can be utilized to decode Hadi's identity crisis. Bauman interprets the notion of modern life and its structure as unstable with constant change. Our life is no more solid or stable but it is fluid. The concept emphasizes that social norms, relations, and institutions are uncertain, have no stability, and also it lacks long-term security.

According to Bauman, modern life is characterized by endless changes. He refers to the idea that the personal identity is not fixed but continues to be reshaped by external forces. Saadawi's character "Hadi" in the novel and especially in the act of seeing his fragmented self in the mirror demonstrates the burden of

Distorted Identity in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein…

traumatic and chaotic milieu leads to the disintegration of personal coherence. It forces people to face changes and restless sense of self in post-war Baghdad. In some other words, Bauman wants to reveal that the personal identity is not fixed but reshaped by external forces. This mirrors Hadi's experience, where the act of assembling and seeing his fragmented self in the mirror exemplifies how the traumatic and chaotic environment in post-war Baghdad leads to a disintegration of personal coherence, forcing individuals to confront a shifting and unsettled sense of self.

Saadawi also critiques the broader Iraqi national identity via Whatsitsname. He shaped his character to be constructed from fragments in one hand. On the other hand, Iraqi identity is shattered by the force of extreme violence and the unstable condition of Baghdad. Saadawi constructs the idea that people and nations are relatedly forced to weave together their new identities after each destruction. Supporting the discussion, Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is not a static essence, but rather, it is constantly in flux and shaped by historical and socio-political alters. He closely shows that identity is always constructed within a context of power dynamics and cultural exchanges. The same case can be seen in Saadawi's portrayal of post-war Iraq. The nation's collective identity is similarly reconstructed in response to external and internal pressures (Hall, 1996).

From a different perspective, Rawad Alhashmi, in his 2020 article (p. 94), claims that the grotesque portrayal of Whatsitsname and the fragmented identities of Saadawi's characters effectively depicts how war and displacement lead to the breakdown of personal and national identities. These shattered identities reflect not only the trauma experienced by individuals but also the disintegration of Iraq's collective sense of self, where the line between the human and the monstrous becomes increasingly indistinct amidst the chaos.

Personal Identity Crises in the Novel

Saadawi's depiction of Hadi's identity crisis mirrors the internal struggles of other characters, notably Mahmoud, who faces his own disconnection from the person he once was. Mahmoud's struggle to find meaning in the rubble of post-war Baghdad emphasizes the psychological impact of war on identity. In a city marked by instability, Mahmoud feels increasingly alienated:

"*In the chaos of the streets, Mahmoud felt like a ghost, wandering through a city that no longer felt like home. Each explosion echoed the fragments of his former self*" (Saadawi, 2018). This passage illustrates how Mahmoud, like Whatsitsname, experiences fragmentation—his identity shattered by trauma and loss.

Mahmoud's alienation, as described here, aligns with Erikson's theory of identity confusion, where war and violence cause individuals to lose their sense of self (Erikson, 1968). His inability to recognize his previous self reflects the larger

Distorted Identity in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein…

national struggle to maintain unity and coherence amidst constant upheaval. According to Bhabha's concept of hybridity, Mahmoud's fractured identity can also be seen as a product of cultural dislocation and the inability to reconcile diverse aspects of self in the face of violence and displacement (Bhabha, 1994). Mahmoud's transformation from a man with dreams to a ghost-like figure speaks to the fragmentation of both personal and collective identities in post-colonial contexts, as described by Said in Orientalism and Culture and Imperialism (Said, 1978, 1993).

Furthermore, Mahmoud's sense of alienation, feeling like a ghost in a city that no longer feels like home, aligns with Bauman's notion of 'liquid modernity,' where individuals experience a lack of stable grounding in a world defined by constant change. In a post-war Iraq, Mahmoud's struggle to reclaim his past identity in a world of destruction echoes Bauman's argument that modern individuals are often left in a state of instability, unable to anchor themselves in fixed identities or social roles.

Thematic Reflections on National Identity

Saadawi's exploration of fragmented identities extends beyond individual characters to reflect the broader national identity of Iraq. The novel presents a nation torn apart by violence, unable to unify due to deep political, social, and cultural fragmentation. This crisis of national identity parallels Erikson's description of collective identity confusion, where groups experience disintegration and dislocation under the pressures of war (Erikson, 1968).

The symbolic use of Whatsitsname highlights this fragmentation. Just as the creature is constructed from parts of different bodies and lacks a coherent sense of self, Iraq, as depicted in the novel, is a fragmented society grappling with an unclear national identity. This allegory suggests that in times of profound crisis, both personal and national identities are irreparably affected, and healing requires not just reconstruction of physical structures but reconciliation of fractured identities (Bhabha, 1994; Said, 1993).

Intertextual Connections and Theoretical Implications

The connection between Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* provides a lens through which we can explore the universal themes of creation, destruction, and identity. Saadawi's adaptation introduces a contemporary context of war and conflict, reflecting the destruction of identity through the horrors of violence and societal collapse. This exploration of fragmented identity speaks not only to individual experiences but also to the collective trauma of post-war Iraq.

The theoretical contributions of Bhabha and Said provide a framework for understanding the ways in which Saadawi's characters navigate their identities

Distorted Identity in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein…

amidst cultural dislocation. Bhabha's theory of hybridity sheds light on how individuals and communities, like Whatsitsname, struggle to integrate disparate parts of themselves in the face of colonial and post-colonial trauma (Bhabha, 1994). Similarly, Said's work on cultural fragmentation and the impact of imperialism emphasizes how historical and political forces contribute to the alienation and identity crises faced by characters like Mahmoud (Said, 1993).

These theories collectively enrich the discussion of Saadawi's depiction of fragmented identities in a post-conflict society. They suggest that the experience of war not only destabilizes personal identities but also erodes collective memory and social structures, making it impossible for individuals to fully reconcile their past and present selves. In this context, the novel serves as a poignant reflection on the impact of violence on both the individual psyche and the collective consciousness of a nation.

CONCLUSION

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* presents an accurate exploration of fragmented identities in the context of post-war Iraq. By weaving the character of Whatsitsname into a narrative shaped by violence and instability, Saadawi encapsulates the disintegration of both personal and national identities. Whatsitsname, as a fragmented creature, symbolizes the fractured reality of Iraq, where the scars of conflict manifest in the psyches of individuals and the fabric of society.

The study has demonstrated that Saadawi employs the Frankenstein motif to address the psychological, social, and political consequences of war. Sadaawi uses the struggles of characters such as Hadi and Mahmoud as vehicles to transport the messages. The novel highlight's identity crises that reflect broader national and cultural dislocations. Theoretical frameworks, including Bhabha's hybridity, Said's cultural fragmentation, and Erikson's psychosocial stages, enrich our understanding of how Saadawi portrays the interplay between personal trauma and collective identity.

This analysis contributes to the discourse on Middle Eastern literature by illustrating how Saadawi's work resonates with global themes of identity and fragmentation while remaining deeply rooted in the socio-political realities of Iraq. It underscores the relevance of literature as a source to examine the human condition in times of profound crisis. Furthermore, Saadawi's adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* situates his narrative within a broader literary tradition, emphasizing the universal challenges of creation, destruction, and selfhood amidst chaos.

Distorted Identity in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein...

In conclusion, Frankenstein in Baghdad serves as an extraordinary source of ideas and reflections. It clearly shows how war tears apart who we are as individuals and as nations. The novel reveals the hardships people face in holding onto their sense of self and identity after every act of violence. This research also uncovers how the characters demonstrate remarkable strength to keep moving forward and refuse to give up on life. We understand that war directly affects culture as well as the mindset of people. literature proves to be a powerful medium to address and shed light on complicated issues.

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Distorted Identity in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein…

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