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## Feline Trauma in Ahmed Saadawi

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### ABSTRACT

Ahmed Saadawi's literary achievements, notably exemplified in the prize-winning novel, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, have earned widespread acclaim for their profound exploration of trauma, violence, and the repercussions of war. Across these narratives, specifically in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and the short story "The Exercise," Saadawi adeptly utilizes cats as essential components to examine closely these thematic depths. This essay meticulously examines the portrayal of cats in Saadawi's works and their emblematic significance in illuminating the human experience amidst chaos and devastation. Viewing the narrative through the lens of feline characters, Saadawi prompts readers to consider shared vulnerability, resilience, and the intricate complexities of trauma. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Saadawi ingeniously adapts Mary Shelley's classic into an Iraqi context, vividly capturing the trauma caused by the American invasion. The monstrous creation, known as the Whatsitsname, serves as a poignant embodiment of war's horrors, effectively mirroring societal decay. In contrast, the character of Nabu, Elishva's cat, oscillates between humanization and monstrosity, reflecting both individual and collective struggles. While the short story "The Exercise" remains distinct from the novel, Saadawi's adept storytelling continues to shine. The male Shirazi cat, Hannoush, within this narrative mirrors the impact of trauma, while the female cat symbolizes resilience. Employing trauma theory and literary analysis, this study unveils how Saadawi's feline personas serve as poignant mirrors of human suffering, underlining the far-reaching consequences of violence. By juxtaposing this analysis with Poe's "The Black Cat," this paper unveils the nuanced portrayal of trauma and violence within the war context, as depicted in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*.

**Keywords:** feline trauma, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, *The Bare Face inside the Dream*, Edgar Allen Poe, post-invasion Iraq.

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### 1. Introduction

The literary works of the Iraqi poet, novelist and screenwriter, Ahmed Saadawi have garnered critical acclaim for their exploration of themes such as trauma, violence, and the impact of war on society. In both his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) and the short story "The Exercise" from the book of short stories, *The Bare Face Inside the Dream* (2018), Ahmed Saadawi showcases a profound fascination with cats, incorporating them as pivotal elements within his themes. These feline beings

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become symbolic conduits through which Saadawi explores the themes of trauma, violence, and the impact of war on both human and animal lives. By delving into the experiences of cats in these two distinct yet interconnected works, this essay seeks to shed light on Saadawi's compelling portrayal of feline figures as mirrors of the human condition in the midst of chaos and destruction. Through the lens of these unconventional and endearing creatures, Saadawi invites readers to contemplate the shared vulnerability, resilience, and complexities of trauma experienced by all living beings in the harrowing landscapes he meticulously crafts.

*Frankenstein in Baghdad* is an Iraqi adaptation of Mary Shelley's gothic novel, *Frankenstein*, which was originally published in 1818. Both Saadawi's novel and his short story vividly depict the deep trauma caused by the 2003 American invasion of Iraq and its extensive consequences on the inhabitants of Baghdad, including their cherished pets.

*Frankenstein in Baghdad* represents the third novel by the Iraqi author, receiving significant critical acclaim, notably the prestigious Arab Booker prize in 2014. Its English translation was also recognized, being shortlisted for the esteemed Man Booker International Prize in 2018. By skilfully interweaving a Gothic atmosphere of war and terror, reminiscent of Shelley's classic, with the haunting realities of the Napoleonic wars (1803–1815), Saadawi's novel serves as a compelling response to the horrors of war. It masterfully portrays the nightmarish setting of occupied Baghdad, offering a visceral and grotesque depiction of the daily violence, sectarian warfare, and vengeful killings that pervade the city.<sup>2</sup> Beyond merely critiquing the occupying forces, the novel also serves as a scathing critique of the society grappling with the burdens of occupation.<sup>3</sup>

In this contemporary Iraqi rendition of *Frankenstein*, there is a departure from the original tale, where the creature is constructed by a chemist in a laboratory. Instead, the novel presents a bleak retelling, where a monster is fashioned by Hadi al-Attag, a junk recycler and dealer. Hadi gathers human body parts left fragmented by the daily explosions in the war-torn streets of Baghdad. He then skilfully stitches these collected parts together to create his monstrous creation. The grim act of recycling culminates with the body being assembled atop a ramshackle house in the impoverished area of Bataween, situated in the heart of central Baghdad.

Within the pages of this novel, an extraordinary phenomenon unfolds - the entry of a displaced soul into a patchwork corpse, granting life to a new being. This enigmatic creation is christened "Al-Shismah," a term in Iraqi Arabic signifying "the One Who Has No Name" (FiB 2017: 161). As fate would have it, Elishva, an elderly Christian woman residing next door, becomes the first to encounter this mysterious the Whatsitsname. To her astonishment, she perceives a reflection of her long-lost son, Daniel, who vanished more than two decades ago during the Iran-Iraq war. The monstrous visage of the Whatsitsname is vividly portrayed through his vengeful acts, carrying out revenge on behalf of those whose organs form his very existence. This contrasts starkly with the serene domestic scenes in Elishva's house, where the creature silently absorbs her poignant narratives about her missing son.

Within this reimagining of Shelley's tale of a reanimated body, another gothic figure emerges onto the stage - Nabu, Elishva's mangy old cat. This feline character, seemingly drawn from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat," curiously rubs against the Whatsitsname's trousers during the monster's visits.

This paper ventures into a profound examination of how animals, much like their human counterparts, endure profound trauma in the ravaged landscapes of war. Although trauma theory seldom extends its scope to non-human creatures, this narrative delves into their suffering and resilience.<sup>4</sup> Elishva's tale reveals a past filled with many feline companions, yet tragedy struck, leaving all but Nabu missing. One poignant day, she stumbled upon the decayed remains of one of her feline

<sup>2</sup> The term "grotesque" serves as an adjective that conveys a sense of being comically or repulsively ugly and distorted. In literary context, the grotesque body is a concept introduced by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin while analyzing the works of François Rabelais. The core tenet of grotesque realism revolves around degradation, wherein all abstract, spiritual, noble, and ideal elements are brought down to the material and physical level.

<sup>3</sup> Americans play a minor role in the narrative, as Saadawi's focus is primarily on the challenges and issues impacting the everyday existence of Iraqis.

<sup>4</sup> The focus of interest lies precisely within the deconstructive school of trauma theory, spearheaded by eminent theorists like Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth. While Freud's approach can be situated within an empirical, humanist tradition that maintains belief in the stable self's capacity to attain absolute "truth," Lacan's perspective aligns with post-structuralism. Consequently, Lacan scrutinizes any simplistic conceptualizations of the "self" or "truth," instead delving into the construction of knowledge through the intricate interplay of linguistic and ideological structures. These structures not only shape our conscious experiences but also wield influence over our unconscious realms.

friends, tragically lost on the roof. This haunting incident serves as a poignant reminder that in the midst of wars, violence spares no lives - neither human beings nor animals.

In “The Exercise,” the narrative revolves around a young man named Marwan who seeks revenge on an old man who was responsible for his father’s death and the loss of their wealth. Encouraged by the lawlessness and security chaos of post-occupation Iraq, Marwan’s pursuit of vengeance leads him down a path of increasing violence and moral ambiguity. Marwan’s friend, Lateef, decides to train him to handle a pistol and be ready for his vengeful mission. During one of the training exercises, Lateef instructs Marwan to shoot cats and dogs. In his pursuit of revenge, Marwan shoots and kills a male Shirazi cat, which belonged to his neighbor’s disabled and introverted daughter, Aliyah. Despite feeling remorse, Marwan proceeds with his training, later buying a female Shirazi cat as a compensation gesture for Aliyah. However, she rejects the offer, further complicating the emotional landscape of the story. As the narrative unfolds, Marwan continues to kill the new cat and grows increasingly violent under Lateef’s influence. The story explores themes of trauma, revenge, and the complex emotional responses to violence and loss in a war-torn society.

This short story examines the significance of Shirazi cats as symbolic representations of trauma and its impact on individuals in war-torn Iraq. The male Shirazi cat, Hannoush, owned by the introverted and gloomy girl Aliyah, serves as a stark contrast to the female cat later introduced in the narrative. Hannoush is described as gloomy and bearing bad omens, reflecting the prevailing atmosphere of trauma and despair in the characters’ lives and the wider context of the American invasion’s aftermath.

*Frankenstein in Baghdad* inspects the themes of absurdity and psychological monstrosity stemming from unchecked violence. The novel establishes an intertextual connection with Shelley’s earlier English work, *Frankenstein*, wherein horror is evoked through depictions of infernal violence, irrationality, and the grotesque transformation of the human body. In both narratives, the concepts of the grotesque and the abject emerge as significant elements, centering around the creation of monstrous beings.<sup>5</sup> Through the portrayal of the grotesque and the menacing abject, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* serves as a reflection of the author’s motivation, driven by the experience of living in a violent society and an increasingly violent world, where the very fabric of the universe appears inhumane. Saadawi’s intent is to present a world fraught with monstrosity, horror, and atrocity, where the agency of humankind over its own destiny is rendered impotent.

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the contrast between the fragmentation of the individual self and the fragmentation of society emerges as a prominent thematic concern.<sup>6</sup> Ahmed Saadawi’s choice to present a monstrous science fiction scenario can be understood as a response to the pervasive violence that permeates post-invasion Iraq, leaving little room for humanity. This choice appears to be deeply influenced by the grim reality of Iraq, wherein a shocking incident during the height of the civil war, marked by a staggering daily average of 317 civilian deaths, left an indelible impact on the author.<sup>7</sup> The overwhelming influx of bodies into hospitals and morgues after bombings and mass killings further underscored the dehumanizing effects of war. Saadawi’s interview with Jean-Marc Mojon from *France Press Agency* elucidated how the relentless exposure to such atrocities had seemingly caused the forensic workers to lose touch with their humanity. This harrowing reality served as a poignant source of inspiration for Saadawi’s novel, compelling him to depict a world characterized by monstrosity, horror, and a loss of human agency in the face of unrelenting violence:

“One day someone came asking about his brother... they told him that all the bodies had already been collected by their families, except for these pieces,” he said. “There were mismatched, unclaimed [...] body parts and they told him to assemble a man from them and take it away” (Mojon, 2016: n.p.).

<sup>5</sup> The psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva introduced the term “abject” in her seminal work, *Powers of Horror* (1982).

<sup>6</sup> For further exploration of the theme of self-fragmentation, readers may refer to Bushra Juhani’s article titled “The Search for Identity in Doris Lessing’s *The Good Terrorist* and Abdallah Thabit’s *The Twentieth Terrorist*,” published in *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Volume 12, Issue 5, 2020, pages 1-11. The article can be accessed at <https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupekatha.v12n5.rioc1s6n1>.

<sup>7</sup> See Body Count website, 2012: n.p. In the context of the current discussion, Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “bare life” as presented in his work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen and published by Stanford University Press in 1998, holds relevance. Additionally, Ikram Masmoudi’s scholarly contribution in *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*, published by Edinburgh University Press in 2015, can provide valuable insights. To gain a deeper understanding of Agamben’s notion and its application, one may refer to these seminal works.

In his novel, Saadawi appears to have incorporated elements of the aforementioned incident in the narrative involving Nahim, Hadi's companion. In this account, Nahim meets a tragic end when an explosion shatters his carriage, leaving both him and the horse dismembered to the point where it becomes difficult to distinguish between Nahim's flesh and that of the horse (FiB 2017: 25). Following the detonation, Hadi proceeded to the mortuary with the intention of retrieving the remains. This course of action was necessitated by the absence of any familial connections for Nahim. Hadi was confronted with a profound sense of astonishment upon observing the indiscriminate commingling of the victims' cadavers resulting from the explosion. Moreover, he was taken aback upon hearing the mortuary attendant instructing him to reconstruct a coherent body from the fragments and carry it off: "take this leg and this arm and so on" (FiB 2017: 170).

Furthermore, the profound impact of Nahim's demise brought about a transformative shift within Hadi (FiB 2017: 25). This pivotal occurrence subsequently serves as the impetus behind Hadi's conception of a creature akin to the one found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. It is noteworthy that this aspect diverges from Shelley's narrative, wherein Victor's motivations for creating the entity are considerably distinct. Victor's motivations encompass ambitions of attaining mastery over the natural world and assuming god-like authority, as he articulates, "I trod heaven in my thought [...] From my infancy I was imbued with high hopes and a lofty ambition" (Shelley 2012: 152).

The conclusion of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* culminates in a celebratory event, albeit not in the manner of Bakhtinian carnivalesque revelry which symbolizes a definitive victory where life prevails over death (Bakhtin 1984: 408). In the concluding sequence, the entity known as the Whatsitsname makes its appearance alongside Nabu within an abandoned edifice. Engaged in the act of smoking a cigarette, the Whatsitsname assumes a contemplative stance by the window, observing the jubilation of individuals who are rejoicing over the dissemination of erroneous information by the authorities regarding the apprehension of the Whatsitsname, who is designated as Criminal X (FiB 2017: 161, 213). His gaze is directed towards the heavens, where a congregation of somber clouds has amassed. Amidst the streets, individuals partake in exuberant dances, accompanied by ensembles performing popular musical compositions; however, a sudden downpour prompts a collective retreat to their residences (FiB 2017: 215). The prevailing rainfall is not one that fosters growth; instead, it carries an ominous essence due to the presence of the Whatsitsname. This entity exhibits an unsettling proclivity for embracing life through its unsettling practice of extracting lives to replace deteriorating tissue (FiB 2017: 154). This perspective interweaves vitality with mortality, although not in a manner that neatly fits into either a grotesque or unequivocally positive category, as it grapples with discerning between the realms of life and death (Bakhtin 1984: 318, 404). The traditional cycle of "the passing of the old and the emergence of the new," as expounded within the Bakhtinian framework where the "constantly rejuvenated body of the populace" perseveres finds no resonance in this scenario (Bakhtin 1984: 149, 226). The Whatsitsname takes on a super-bject stance more than a strictly grotesque one, acting as a harbinger of death and encapsulating the abject within itself through its corporeal existence and deeds, which it subsequently projects onto others.

Within this literary work, the character of Nabu, a feline displaying signs of balding, assumes a dual role of profound humanization and monstrosity. Nabu's portrayal encapsulates a remarkable anthropomorphism, imbuing the cat with human-like traits and emotions. However, this humanization is accompanied by a distressing psychological impact stemming from exposure to violence. Furthermore, Nabu's affiliation with the overarching monster figure within the narrative contributes to his own transformation into a manifestation of monstrosity. This complex portrayal sets the stage for a deeper examination of the cats' symbolic resonance in relation to the themes of trauma and recovery.

As the narrative progresses, the short story "The Exercise" emerges in tandem, illustrating the symbolic significance of the Shirazi male and female cats. This parallel exploration of feline symbolism intertwines the two facets, enriching the understanding of the narrative's thematic depth. Through the symbolic representation of male and female cats, the text unravels a poignant exploration of the lasting emotional scars and the potential for healing and renewal. These feline figures navigate the complexities of human suffering, shedding light on the multifaceted nature of trauma recovery and its inherent challenges.

The methodology employed in this study involves a close reading and analysis of Ahmed Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and the short story "The Exercise." The primary focus will be

on the portrayal of cats and their experiences in the narratives. The analysis will encompass identifying key passages and instances where cats are featured, examining their interactions with human characters, and exploring the emotions and responses attributed to them by the author. Additionally, this study will draw on trauma theory and literary criticism to provide a comprehensive understanding of the feline trauma depicted in Saadawi's works. It will incorporate relevant scholarly articles and critical analyses to support the interpretations and findings.

Through the analysis of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and "The Exercise," this study reveals that Ahmed Saadawi's portrayal of cats serves as a powerful vehicle for exploring the themes of trauma and violence in the context of war-torn environments. The cats in both narratives are depicted as sentient beings, capable of experiencing complex emotions such as fear, grief, and resilience. Their interactions with human characters highlight the shared vulnerability and the far-reaching impact of violence on both human and animal lives. The cats' responses to the chaotic and destructive landscapes of Baghdad add depth to the narratives, offering readers a poignant perspective on the consequences of conflict on all living beings.

This paper makes a significant contribution to the literature by offering a comprehensive analysis of feline trauma in Ahmed Saadawi's works. By focusing on cats as central characters, the study expands the scope of trauma research to include non-human experiences, challenging traditional notions that limit trauma exploration to human subjects. It highlights the importance of considering animals' emotional responses to violence and their place within the broader narratives of war and trauma.

Additionally, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship that examines the representation of animals in literature. By delving into Saadawi's humanized depiction of cats, it enriches discussions on the portrayal of animals as active agents with their own emotional landscapes.

Furthermore, this study offers fresh insights into the themes of resilience and interconnectedness within traumatic contexts. Through the lens of cats, Saadawi showcases the shared experiences of vulnerability and the potential for strength in the face of adversity. This examination of cats' emotional experiences and their role within human narratives deepens our comprehension of the extensive consequences of trauma and nurtures empathy for all entities affected by violence.

Following this introduction, the paper proceeds with an in-depth analysis of cats in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and "The Exercise," exploring their interactions with human characters and the portrayal of their emotional responses to trauma. Additionally, a comparison will be conducted between the depiction of cats in these two literary works and Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Black Cat," as a means of enriching the understanding of feline symbolism and its significance in narratives of revenge and violence. The subsequent section investigates the portrayal of cats in all three works, focusing on their roles as symbolic conduits and their connections to the themes of trauma and violence. The analysis is informed by trauma theory and literary criticism, drawing on relevant scholarly sources to support the interpretations. The paper concludes with a synthesis of the main findings from the comparative analysis and their broader implications for trauma literature and the nuanced representation of animals in literary works.

## 2. Critical analysis

The portrayal of cats in both *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and "The Exercise" draws attention to their shared inclination for repose, yet it is in the texture of their fur that the divergence lies. While Nabu's fur demonstrates a recurring tendency to shed, loosening effortlessly when Elishva's touch is applied, leading to a state of languid relaxation as he reclines on the couch and indulges in extended periods of slumber, the Shirazi cats' luxurious fur suggests a more composed and opulent disposition, hinting at their proclivity for leisure and relaxation.

In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, a pivotal juncture arises when Elishva, spurred by her daughters, decides to undertake a journey to Australia. Curiously, Nabu elects to disassociate himself from this venture, forgoing the prospect of accompanying her. As she calls upon him, he promptly scampers towards the staircase, emitting meows that resonate with a sentiment signifying his refusal to be perceived as a timid entity, juxtaposed against her own perceived timidity, thereby reaffirming his intent to remain steadfast within the confines of their domicile (FiB 2017: 186). In contrast to the

prevalent Romantic literary tradition wherein animals often bear limited agency to influence their destinies, Nabu, in this instance, emerges as an autonomous entity, endowed with a measure of autonomy to exercise personal choices. This assertion of autonomy lends him certain heroic attributes, rendering him a figure that transcends a monolithic monstrous depiction. An alternative interpretation to consider is that Nabu functions as an extension of Elishva's internal conflict, reflecting the intricate psychological turmoil she grapples with. Beneath her exterior, an inherent reluctance to relinquish her residence and homeland resides, yet the coercive influence exerted by her daughters compels her to consider departing.

Upon Elishva's departure, Hadi acquires her furniture, yet upon his return to retrieve it, he encounters the presence of the cat, which fixates upon him in an eerily silent and motionless manner, akin to an inanimate statue (FiB 2017: 186). Perturbed by Nabu's prolonged and unyielding gaze, Hadi resorts to launching a small fragment of brick at the feline, albeit failing to disrupt its stance, as the cat remains unflinching (FiB 2017: 186). Subsequently, during the night, the Whatsitsname enters the residence through the roof, overcome by a profound melancholy stemming from Elishva's departure. Nabu, in an act of camaraderie, approaches him, brushing against his boots and depositing some of his shedding hairs. The cat then proceeds to curl up in a compact form by the Whatsitsname's feet, seemingly drawn by the comforting warmth exuded by his presence. Together, they linger in this manner until the break of dawn (FiB 2013: 244). The ensuing day ushers forth a tragic event, as a booby-trapped car detonates within the old neighborhood, resulting in the complete obliteration of the vacant dwelling. Nonetheless, Nabu defies this destruction, reappearing in the concluding scene alongside the creature, within a dilapidated structure, where he engages in playful interaction and physical contact. At this juncture, Nabu's physical condition is notably altered, having "lost most of his hair" (FiB 2013: 350).

While Saadawi asserts the absence of indebtedness to Poe's gothic narrative "The Black Cat" in crafting Nabu's character, the resonances between the two are indeed conspicuous.<sup>8</sup> The significance of the fur in both felines lies in its role in cultivating an atmosphere steeped in fear and horror. Furthermore, both cats bear associations with the grotesque and monstrosity, enduring episodes of violence and upheaval. In Poe's tale, the narrator derogatorily refers to the black cat as "a brute beast" (Poe 2021: 10). The designation "Whatsitsname" serves to signify an enigmatic source of dread, emblematic of the cycle of sectarian violence and indiscriminate bloodshed that engulfs post-occupation Baghdad. This entity's physical composition emerges as a hybrid amalgamation, blending the remains of unidentified criminals, suicide bombers, and innocent victims alike. While the Whatsitsname embarks upon his killing spree as an act of vengeance, his actions ultimately evolve into the systematic slaying of innocent individuals, executed to procure replacement body parts for his deteriorating form. He materializes as a corporeal embodiment of horror and violence, his very existence borne from the harrowing circumstances that fueled his creation. Saadawi masterfully conjures an image of distortion and disfigurement through the Whatsitsname, harnessing this representation not solely for the purposes of caricature and irony, but also to invoke a sense of cynicism. This grotesque entity, whose sustenance hinges upon the demise of others, emerges as an extraordinary, fantastical exaggeration, serving as a satirical embodiment of the dehumanized reality of warfare that both dehumanizes and is borne from it. Within this Bakhtinian carnivalesque framework, the Whatsitsname metamorphoses into a reflection of the Iraqi populace and their collective involvement in the sectarian strife, embodying the very notion of Bakhtin's "mass body" (1984: 255).<sup>9</sup> As various characters lay blame on the Americans for the genesis of this monstrous entity, others, such as Nawal al-Wazir, a female filmmaker, diverge in opinion. Her cinematic project mirrors themes explored in the novel, delving into "the evil we all have inside us, how it resides deep within us, even when we want to put an end to it in the outside world" (FiB 2017: 174).<sup>10</sup> The narrative's canvas unveils

<sup>8</sup> During a Facebook conversation on June 7, 2016, Saadawi mentioned that he had not read Poe's "The Black Cat."

<sup>9</sup> Carnavalesque constitutes a literary approach and mannerism characterized by the subversion and emancipation of prevalent assumptions within the dominant style or ambiance through the infusion of humor and tumult. This concept finds its origins under the term "carnival," as expounded by Mikhail Bakhtin in his work *Rabelais and His World*.

<sup>10</sup> Concerning the malevolent aspects that dwell within every individual, this narrative explores how these elements persist in the depths of our being, even as we strive to eradicate them from the external realm. It underscores the notion that each of us harbors a measure of culpability, as shades of criminality are inherent to human nature. Furthermore, the inner darkness that resides within us emerges as the most profound and intense manifestation of its kind (FiB 2017: 174).

the comprehensive moral decay and corruption gripping both society and its occupiers, a sentiment illuminated by Ikram Masmoudi in *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction* (2015: 16). Saadawi's remarks underscore a collective responsibility for the current state of devastation, encompassing the civil war and sectarian strife. A character within the novel asserts that all but God are embroiled in sectarianism, underscoring the pervasive divisiveness (FiB 2013: 318). This phenomenon, as per Bakhtin's articulation, assumes a tangible, fleshy form (1984: 83). The body of the *Whatsitsname* metaphorically embodies the very "sects" that divide society, inciting him to inflict retribution on transgressors from both factions. The narrative unveils sectarianism as the cardinal transgression that jeopardizes the peace, security, and prosperity of the entire nation.

If Poe's narrative delves into the realm of the "mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime—of Agony and of Death!," Saadawi's literary work navigates the terrain of wartime experiences, underscoring how "we are all criminals to some extent, and the darkness inside us is the blackest variety known to man," encapsulating the essence of al-Wazir's cinematic undertaking (Poe 2021: 1845; FiB 2013: 227; FiB 2017: 174). The blurb contends that "everybody discovers that they relatively form this Frankenstein-esque creature, or they provide it with sustenance and growth" (FiB 2013). In Poe's composition, the ebony feline emerges as a projection of a criminal psyche, aptly named Pluto, an allusion to the god of the underworld within classical mythology, epitomizing malevolence, obscurity, and the shadowy aspects of existence. In the short story "The Exercise," the name Hannoush, derived from the Arabic name Hani, encapsulates the notion of contentment. In stark contrast, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* incorporates the name Nabu, a direct reference to a deity prominent in Assyrian and Babylonian mythology, thereby mirroring Elishva's ancestral heritage. Functioning as a god, Nabu is associated with wisdom and serves as the guardian of the Tablets of Destiny, in which the destiny of humanity was etched. The transgressions committed by Poe's narrator align with the gothic tradition's inclination towards "privileged irrationality and passion over rationality and reason," a thematic emphasis underscored by Saadawi's juxtaposition of the grotesque and the comedic through the symbiotic relationship between a feline and a monstrosity (Milne 2009: 281). This cat, bearing a name synonymous with sagacity, emerges as a conduit for the manifestation of humanity's abandonment of reason amidst the tumult of war, voluntarily relinquishing control of their fate to criminal forces. As Hadi endeavors to conceal the existence of the monster, Elishva extends her protective refuge, culminating in a gathering of numerous assistants and advocates over time. This narrative thread unveils a societal portrait where, as articulated by al-Wazir, collective complicity has unwittingly facilitated the creation of "the evil creature that is now killing us off" (FiB 2017: 174).

In "The Exercise," the male cat's affiliation with darkness and pessimism alludes to the enduring scars of trauma and emotional turmoil within a society ravaged by war. As the cherished companion of a disabled and socially isolated young girl, Hannoush may symbolize the collective vulnerability and distress prevalent among the populace of Baghdad, effectively highlighting the war's impact on the innocent and defenseless segment of the population. In contrast, the female Shirazi cat, tendered as a consolation to Aliyah following the loss of her beloved feline companion, embodies themes of optimism, resilience, and the potential for recuperation. Despite Marwan's misguided endeavors to mend the hurt he caused, the female cat emerges as a representation of redemption and renewal amid adversity. Nonetheless, Aliyah's rejection of the new cat underscores the intricate dynamics of trauma recovery, wherein the wounds may run deep and prove resistant to facile replacement or erasure.

The juxtaposition between the two Shirazi cats furnishes a poignant lens through which to explore feline trauma within Ahmed Saadawi's literary realm. The contrasting experiences of these cats parallel the tribulations undergone by the human characters, echoing the broader motif of collective suffering in the wake of conflict. These feline personae serve as conduits for comprehending the psychological and emotional toll exacted by war on both individuals and society at large, unearthing the intricate facets of trauma and the diverse modes in which it manifests.

By establishing connections between the emotional ordeals of humans and animals, Saadawi engages in a profound exploration of the entwined nature of trauma in his narrative. This approach illuminates the pervasive influence of war on all living entities, whether feline or otherwise, underscoring the author's commitment to excavating the multi-layered dimensions of trauma and its pervasive reverberations within a society in the process of healing and reconstruction.

### 3. Conclusion

In Ahmed Saadawi's literary works, such as *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and the short story "The Exercise," the recurring theme of feline trauma establishes poignant connections between human suffering and the experiences of cats. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the traumatised cat, Nabu, forms an unexpected bond with the monster crafted from the remains of suicide bomb victims. Similarly, "The Exercise" features Hannoush, the male Shirazi cat owned by Aliyah, exuding an aura of gloom and ill omens that mirrors the pervasive trauma of war in the characters' lives. These feline figures symbolize the collective anguish and vulnerability of both humans and animals within the context of war-ravaged Iraq. Saadawi's portrayal of feline trauma underlines his profound exploration of the interconnectedness between the suffering experienced by diverse beings, whether human or animal. Their experiences echo the traumas endured by the characters, thereby reinforcing the broader theme of the profound consequences of conflict and violence on all living creatures. Through these potent parallels, Saadawi prompts readers to contemplate the shared resilience and vulnerability of both humans and animals when confronted with adversity, turning his literary works into a compelling exploration of the universal repercussions of trauma on various lives.

Turning to the culmination of the analysis, a distinctive portrayal of trauma emerges within *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, primarily embodied through the character of Nabu, the cat. Nabu's response to the horrors of Baghdad life is exemplified by the phenomenon of "blowing coat," a scientific term denoting extensive fur shedding. The image of Nabu's abject hair assumes a potent symbolism, reflecting the cat's anxiety and dread amidst the backdrop of carnage, explosions, and death that engulf the city. Furthermore, it conveys Nabu's vulnerability and detachment from the world, highlighting the prevailing sense of powerlessness amidst unending violence (Berry 2009: 40).

Curiously, the novel bestows greater focus on the unconventional figures of the cat and the monster, rather than placing the spotlight on human individuals as might be anticipated. Nevertheless, this discussion posits that *Frankenstein in Baghdad* transcends superficial characterizations, delving deeper into the depiction of individuals inhabiting war-torn regions and their eventual acceptance of monstrosity and criminality. Nabu's choice to align with the dominant figure resonates as a broader societal phenomenon, encapsulating how individuals in conflict-ridden environments gradually embrace and participate in reprehensible acts.

Saadawi's narrative paints a somber tableau that not only births a self-sustaining, self-destructive monstrosity, but also hints at the emergence of an alternate archetype from the shadows. This alternative persona is manifested through the humanized, hairless Nabu, bearing the name of the ancient deity of wisdom and writing. The nomenclature suggests the potential for rebirth or the resurgence of a long-forgotten facet of humanity. Despite the calamitous contemporary crises portrayed by these authors, a glimmer of hope endures. The novel intimates that amidst adversity, the potency of the written word, embodied by the pen, may ultimately transcend the ruinous influence of the sword.

Through its exploration of trauma, violence, and the prospect of redemption, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* offers a profound commentary on the human experience. It challenges conventional expectations by centering on the perspectives of unconventional figures and their responses to the surrounding atrocities. Nabu's fur-shedding encapsulates the essence of fear and vulnerability, emblematic of the detachment and impotence endured by individuals residing in war-torn landscapes.

In essence, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* presents a thought-provoking narrative that compels readers to confront the stark realities of war, violence, and trauma. It underscores the significance of resilience and the potential for transformation, ultimately suggesting that even amidst desolation, the power of language and the human spirit can triumph. Through an examination of the atypical personas of Nabu and the monster, the novel challenges preconceived assumptions and embarks on a profound exploration of the human condition amidst tumult and destruction.

In Ahmed Saadawi's body of work, a thread of profound exploration runs, delving into the complex connections between human suffering, the traumas of conflict, and the experiences of animals. Whether through the haunting connection between Nabu, the traumatised cat, and the monstrous construct in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, or the somber aura of Hannoush, the male Shirazi cat, reflecting the pervasive wartime trauma in "The Exercise," Saadawi intricately weaves these feline figures to symbolize the shared vulnerability and anguish of beings within war-ravaged landscapes.



Saadawi's narratives extend beyond the boundaries of species, prompting readers to contemplate the universal impact of trauma and conflict, and to recognise the resilience that all life forms, human and animal, exhibit in the face of adversity. His literary explorations serve as a poignant reminder of the interconnectedness of experiences and emotions in a world scarred by violence and turmoil.

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