"*Frankenstein in Baghdad* – a Contemporary Iraqi Dystopian Writing"

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Abstract

The present essay is personal reading of Ahmed Saadawi's novel Frankenstein in Baghdad, which is viewed in light of the development of the genre of utopian/dystopian writing not only in Western literature but also in the Arab/Islamic literature, highlighting the way the Iraqi writer understood the realities in his own country following the American invasion. The novel is a metaphor of the intertribal violence that is still shaking the illusory peace of the country, affecting the lives and destinies of a people who has not completely recovered from the horrors of the wars of the last decades.

"*Frankenstein in Baghdad*… is something of an exorcism of the evil spirits of an era not quite past. Saadawi's goal isn't to resolve the horror of war, but rather to thrust the reader into its midst so that they may question its senselessness". ~ Zahra Hankir

1. On Utopia and Dystopia

Considered from a purely semantic perspective, utopia and dystopia seem as two easily accountable terms. Thus, the first, originally used by Thomas More in his eponymous work to describe an island that is at the same time a blueprint for an ideal (and subsequently chimerical) project, becomes in its evolution a term to generically designate all such social schemes, as well as the literary genre that includes them.

The second, dystopia, or anti-utopia, denominates a literary (sub)genre, mainly of the twentieth century, comprising such visions that might be regarded as critiques (or opposite models) of the enthusiastic and progressive models proposed by nineteenth-century utopians, models that have degenerated, as the history of the previous century has proven time and again, into brutal totalitarian societies. However, things are much more complicated than that.

Utopia, seen in relation to its malefic doppelganger anti-utopia, is a complex and often intriguing concept, and any serious critical approach on the topic must begin *ab ovo*, right at the origins of this

unique phenomenon in the history of western thought (for utopia remains, in most of its history, inextricably linked to the Western, and foremost Anglo-Saxon literary tradition).

Thus, one must agree that any understanding of the utopian phenomenon should start from an analysis of its diachronic perspective (in its chronological, scientific and ideological evolution) and then attempt to circumscribe it synchronically (utopia, both as *forma mentis* and literary structure is so intricate that in order to have a panoramic view of it, one must apply to its concepts and theories from ields as varied as psychoanalysis, mythology, anthropology or sociology).

Similar to utopia, dystopia is a notion where the disparity between *the thing* and *the word* is discernible. The term was first coined by John Stuart Mill in an article written for a British periodical in 1868, and it designated a place that was bad or evil (formed with the Greek prefix "*dys-*", meaning bad). The actual birth of dystopia is difficult to be established, as there is not one text which could serve as the ultimate model for the anti-utopian discourse. Rather, opinions among literary critics dealing with the subject are split on what could serve as the blueprint for dystopianism. The model for anti-utopia was furnished by Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *The Coming Race* (1871) and H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895), to which we should add Samuel Butler, with his anagram of *nowhere,* that is *Erewhon* (1872). One thing that all critics agree upon is that the emergence of the dystopian discourse is linked to a new vision of man, in the context of the scientific and ideological shifts occurring throughout the first decades of the 19th century.

But the utopian satire, forerunner of the modern dystopian narrative, has existed for as long as utopia did, the most antique examples of it being dystopian myths such as Hades, Hell and the Underworld. Probably the greatest of the older anti-utopias remains, however, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), where we can notice both an attack on Bacon's scientific utopia and a satire on eighteenth-century English society. Here, the anti-utopian temperament is still not definitely dystopian: there are or seem to be, distinct utopian features in Lilliput and Brobdingnag, while the society of the impeccably rational horses, the Houyhnhnms, appears as an almost formal utopia. Swift's man marks, for the first time, the ambivalence affecting all dystopian fiction, the conflict between a streak of utopian humanism and rage at the obduracy of human folly.

The Industrial Revolution becomes a central theme for the ever-growing anti-utopian strain. Mary Shelley's gothic masterpiece, *Frankenstein* (1818), subtitled "or the Modern Prometheus", explores some of the perils encapsulated inside the Enlightenment notion of

progress. Frankenstein, as its subtitle makes clear, harks back to older myths, especially those of Prometheus and Faust. Like them, Victor Frankenstein "risks his soul and eternal punishment by his obsessive pursuit of dangerous or forbidden knowledge" (idem 112).

But Shelley's novel is not just a retelling of the old myths. Her hero is a type of modern scientist, not just the reincarnation of the ancient Faustian alchemist. The links with the old science are maintained: young Frankenstein is fascinated with the medieval occultists and alchemists – Agrippa, Albertus Magnus or Paracelsus; but he learns to join their theories to the methods of modern science. New scientific theories, like those of galvanism and electricity, together with the older concepts and techniques, could produce results far beyond the wildest expectations of the old alchemists. The novel represents a turning point for dystopia, as it securely establishes one of its principal themes (the specter of modern science and technology as a malignant power evading human control and threatening to destroy humanity) and clarifies, for the first time, the trilateral relationship between utopia, dystopia and reality.

2. Early Islamic Utopian Literature

Apart from *The One Thousand and One Nights*, first translated into English in the early 1970s, very little is known in the Western world about earlier Arab/Muslim speculative literature. However, the utopian dimension in the Nights is extremely limited. The sense of the wonderful and the extraordinary, in describing the places alien to the family world of Islamic lands, is absolutely prevalent; the elements of social criticism are minimal and tend to be reduced to moral criticism; there exist, in the 'other' worlds, more just, more devout Muslim societies, but not alternative organizations to be indicated, for example, virtuous communities or charismatic imams. As Irwin notes about the more detailed description of a different society present in the collection, that of the underwater world in the story of "Abdullah Fisherman and Abdullah of Merman", the marvellous appears only as bizarre, and not because it represents the design of a utopian community: "Underwater society offers an inverted reflection of society on land" (Irwin 2010: 211).

One first example of utopian writing is the work of the Persian philosopher and cosmologist Abū Naṣr Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al Fārābī (aka Alfarabius), whose psychology treatise, *Ārā ahl al-Madīnat al-fāḍila* ("*Principles of the Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City*", 915-941), combines the principles of the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle and describes a perfect society, based on the participation of all citizens under the leadership of wise philosophers, ruling according to Islamic principles – a utopian model of good governance for the Islamic state.

Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān ("Alive, Son of Awake", also known by its Latin title, *Philosophus Autodidacticus* – "The Philosopher as Autodidact"), written in the early twelfth century by the Granada-born Arab philosopher Ibn Tufayl, is considered the first Arabic novel. It opens a dialogue both scholarly and lively with all of his predecessors in thought (like Avicenna and Averroes), which summarizes the major issues of Arab knowledge of the period. Ibn Tufayl's masterpiece is structured around the story of Hayy, a boy born on an island where he is the only human being. From the outset, the narrator's approach is that of a seasoned scientist, who comments in detail on the two versions of his birth. The first comes out of the pure tale: the splendid sister of a jealous king who keeps her safe from any pretender secretly marrying a man named Yaqdhān from whom she has a son. So that the secret of this birth is never revealed, she puts the child on a boat that drifts offshore to an island. The other version of Hayy's birth is explained by spontaneous generation and gives Ibn Tufayl the opportunity to develop a theory of the relationship between climate temperance and the possibility of life, then to describe the process of spontaneous generation of life as we see it then. Whatever version the reader chooses, it is his education by a gazelle that collects it, which will concern the reader from now on, then its death by which Hayy becomes aware of the phenomenon of life and goes in search of its meaning.

Another notable example worth mentioning is Ibn al-Nafis with his novel *Risālat Fādil ibn Nātiq* ("The Book of Fādil ibn Nātiq", 1268-1277), or *Theologus Autodidacticus*, written in response to Ibn Tufayl's *Philosophus Autodidacticus*, Society, the Islamic community, offers the only space for the realization of authentic aspirations and human needs. To understand this, a man can come with the tools of reason alone, given some basic knowledge. In the Risālat Kāmiliyya this man, Kāmil, is like Ḥayy, born of spontaneous generation on a desert island but, unlike his predecessor, he leaves the island, and the story gradually evolves into a coming-of-age account of the protagonist, with science fiction elements.

3. Twenty-first-century Response: Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

Halfway between the fantastic and the burlesque, Frankenstein in Baghdad also plays the card of popular political satire. Still living in Baghdad, Ahmed Saadawi obtained the International Prize for the Arab novel in 2014 for this novel. He had previously participated in the IPAF's "Nadwa" program (International Prize for Arabic Fiction), writing workshop for promising young authors. Ahmed Saadawi said that he had the idea for this novel, following two violent events in Iraq, which particularly shocked him. The first is the story of this

young man, kidnapped by Al Qaeda. He was finally killed by the terrorist group. They cut it into pieces and scattered it around the city so that the whole city sees the body at the same time. Another time, when clashes between Shiites and Sunnis in Baghdad raged, a family came to see the body of a loved one in the morgue, after yet another attack. Exhausted hospital staff replied to the victim's brother that all the bodies had been claimed. There, they told him to reconstitute a body with these remains and to leave with.

One might be surprised to read that this is a fantastic novel. However, for the novelist, the fantasy genre is not foreign to Iraqi culture. He said in an interview for the *Magazine Littéraire*: “Treating what is imaginary as if it were real is common, ghosts, angels, jinn, and wandering spirits of ghosts being part of the current vocabulary of Iraqi life. The fantastic is part of Iraqi reality, and using it in the context of literary writing is not unusual. Revealing the fantastic aspect of Iraqi reality gives us a more accurate idea of what is going on around us” (Saadawi, 2016). He also reveals that he was inspired by real facts when he spoke of Brigadier Sarsour, who works with mages and astrologers to predict the future, try to thwart the attacks, and avoid bombs or explosions. According to him, some Iraqi police really used this type of help during a period when no one really understood who they were fighting against.

Interviewed by Al-Mustapha Najjar, the author explained that the protagonist, Alshesma, “is made up of parts taken from Iraqis of different races, sects and ethnicities, [because the monster] represents the complete Iraqi individual, [and he is] trying to bring together all of the elements of the Iraqi experience” (Najjar 2014: np). The author’s choice is by himself as a personal experience at a Baghdad morgue:

I saw many dead bodies... Not just dead bodies – body parts. Many body parts. A young man walked into the morgue… demanding to see the corpse of his brother, who’d just been killed by a bomb. The man in charge at the morgue led the grieving brother to a room filled with assorted limbs, casually pointing to one body part in the corner. The man wailed, asking where the rest of his sibling’s mutilated body was, to which the desensitized morgue manager said while waving his hand around the rest of the room, ‘take what you want and make yourself a body. (Hankir 2018: np)

The plot takes us to the Baghdad of 2005, a city devastated by the repercussions of the illegal as well as illegitimate Third Gulf War, where locals are trying, literally, to survive. Production and incomes have collapsed, and an already poor population has become poorer. Life is difficult and precarious, in all senses of the word, because beyond the difficulties of everyday life, people must survive everyday attacks and political assassinations or the villainous gangrene the city.

The Iraqi state destroyed by the American conqueror, remains in the city, in addition to occupation troops largely confined to the green zone, armed religious militias, gangs of delinquents, and groups of soldiers of fortune employed by one or the other. To go out in the street – to go to study, to work, to see a friend – is at the risk to meet a violent death. Staying at home is equally dangerous, car bombs being so charged with explosives that they can crush buildings and kill their occupants.

It is in this city in decay that the Alshesma/Whatsitsname is born, the creation of a modern Frankenstein, Arab and Iraqi at the same time. Characteristic of the city of which it is an atrocious reflection, Whatsitsname is a composite monster. First, there is a body, made of pieces of victims of attacks sewn together; the creator of this mongrel body of Whatitsname is Hadī al-Attāk, the junk dealer, who created it patiently "of the body parts of people who had been killed, plus the soul of another victim, and had been given the name of yet another victim. He was a composite of victims seeking to avenge their deaths so they could rest in peace. He was created to obtain revenge on their behalf." (Saadawi 2018: 130) for reasons which belong to him only: "I wanted to hand him over to the forensics department because it was a complete corpse that had been left in the streets like trash. It's a human being, guys, a person" *(idem* 27).

Saadawi chooses "Daniel" as his monster's name anticipating the irreducible elements of magic realism novels. Then there is the wandering soul of a hotel security guard, killed in a car bomb attack, seeking meaning in the afterlife. There is finally a will of iron, that of the "Madwoman", Umm Daniel Daniel's mother), who has been waiting for twenty years, faced with a portrait of St. George to whom she speaks, the return of her son Daniel, who had officially disappeared during the Iran-Iraq war. From the fusion of these three miseries is born the creature who begins to roam the streets of Baghdad at night, seeking revenge against those who had killed the owners of each of the body parts he is made of. And if revenge is "a spontaneous form of aggression; an explosion of destructive impulses that are activated by special circumstances usually perceived as threatening to survival" (Fromm 1973: 272).

If in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) the monster's purpose was not very clearly stated, Saadawi's man wants to avenge his constituents by killing their killers. He will gradually come to understand that each new death makes new victims to avenge, that the cycle of revenge is endless, and that no one is perfectly innocent, all depending on the level at which one decides to stop the search for the root causes. Are the sins of the sons imputable to the fathers, and to the fathers of their fathers? Yes, at least to the

extent that their mere existence in a bygone past is the first condition without which, one morning in 2005, there would not have been a specific individual driving a truck full of explosives, in a suicidal act, kills a young guard and thus sets in motion the chain of events described in the novel. In Saadawi's hand, the violence in Baghdad in 2005 acquires supernatural dimensions that make it as uncontrollable as a storm. His Frankenstein is a metaphor, of Iraq and of the human being. Saadawi looked back and turned to the monster imagined by the British writer Mary Shelley in the early nineteenth century to tell the trauma of a country devastated by the war.

Like the *Frankenstein* created by Mary Shelley, the Iraqi Frankenstein escapes its creator, Hadi, to avenge the multiple souls of Iraq victims of injustice. Built around enchained narratives mixing the real and the imaginary, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* recovers the chaos that never leaves the news of Iraq and its capital, Baghdad.

4. Baghdad, the dystopian capital of violence

The year 2005, when the story takes place, remains marked by the exacerbation of community tensions and fighting between the US occupier and the armed resistance that is spreading on Iraqi soil. Iraqis then helplessly attend a paroxysm of phenomenal violence that leads to an eschatological atmosphere. As they punctuated the daily life of the Baghdadians, the explosions will punctuate the novel. Al-Rashid Street, like Al-Kindi Hospital, all these places that refer to glorious names inherited from the rich history of the city, are no more than landmarks to know where this car bomb explosions happened.

The evolution of Batawin, the old and multi-denominational neighborhood, where the novel unfolds, symbolizes the decline of social life. Considered as one of the most popular places of the capital in the early twentieth century, the neighborhood has deteriorated to become, from the 1990s, the place where prostitutes are found, sellers of alcohol made a house, gangs of kidnappers and traffickers of all kinds.

Some modest families still live in the neighborhood, like Umm Daniel, Elisheva of her first name, who is harassed by estate agents who wish to retrieve her beautiful old house. Umm Daniel, like Umm Salim and other Iraqi mothers of all faiths, continues to live with mourning and the name of the lost son. Ahmed Saadawi intends to witness these painful memories of modern Iraq. The reader is invited to remember all the Daniels and Salim's, the young generation of Iraqis whom the power sacrificed on the Iran-Iraqi death front. Moreover, a few steps away, is Abu Zaydoun, the barber, the one who tracked, a few decades ago, the young people to send them to die in the carnage of a million deaths.

Each one tries to serve “the new Iraq” in its own way, that Iraq which was supposedly tasting the unlimited and enjoyable pleasures of the holy Democracy and its sister Liberty. Mahmoud al-Sawadi, a young journalist, is obsessed by the lavish life that leads his boss juggling between travels, lovers and connivance with the higher spheres of power.

Cloistered in his office of the Tracking and Pursuit Department, Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid tries somehow to anticipate the chaos thanks to recruited astrologers. Astrologers have always been well established in Iraq. There was a time when the Iraqi state made them enjoy the comfort of Iraqi jails. Still, the whole Iraqi society clings to the powers of astrologers while the capital continues to blaze. The failure of politics disrupts the whole of society, and the situation of each character becomes a reflection of it. Those who were powerful yesterday became weak today and vice versa.

The value of the human being in Iraq has become insignificant. Some scenes show how commonplace injustice has become. Citizens are at the mercy of the first mobster or any militia. The policeman who tortures the ragman does not even know why he is doing it. Dignity is clearly abolished and subversion is at its height. The terror is diluted in the streets of Baghdad and the whole city lives with the fear of dying. The Iraqis seem to have renounced all certainty except to believe that death can swallow them at any moment. According to Sam Metz,

Daniel (to use one of the monster’s names) defines his actions and sees himself as the solution to all the difficulties the Iraqi people are experiencing, their savior, and as the harbinger of justice. He is “the answer to the call of the poor” (*idem* 142); “the answer to their call for an end to injustice and revenge on the guilty” *(idem* 143); and the one who “will take revenge on all the criminals. I will finally bring about justice on earth” (*idem* 142). Moreover, he sees himself as “the wrath of God” (*idem* 152), whose mission is “noble” (*idem* 132), and whose purpose is to bring justice to the Iraqi people.

Saadawi provides three keys to a proper understanding of the novel and the personality of the protagonist: (1) “the what’s-its-name represents the complete Iraqi individual”, an example of the “melting pot of identities”; “the monster represents the savior”, as he wants to take revenge on behalf of all the victimized people of Iraq (3); the monster may be viewed as “the epitome of mass destruction” that “has been growing with a sort of a snowball effect” (*idem*).

In a comparative study of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Bushra Juhi Jani reaches the conclusion that, considering Whatsitsname’s Christian identity, he “symbolizes Western military and cultural invasion..., the demonic

nihilism of Western culture projected onto Iraq. He is the tumor and cancer caused by the invasion of aliens" (Jani 2015: 330-31). Whatever the Indian scholar's position, the Christian community in Iraq is part of the Iraqi society, and even the monster says, "I know I have many ancestors, who appeared here on this land in past epochs and times" (*idem* 171). The evil may also come from within, as it was correctly understood by Dwight Garner who, in his review in *The New York Times*, wrote:

Saadawi's tone can be sly, but his intentions are deadly serious. He's written a complex allegory for the tribal cruelties in Iraq in the wake of the American invasion. His book is especially moving about women who have lost their sons and husbands, and who wonder if they are alive and will ever return. In Iraq, the dead sometimes really do return, from dungeons among other places. (Garner 2018: np)

Twelve hundred years ago, the Abbasid Caliph Al-Mansour called his capital city Al-Madinat al-Salaam, "the City of Peace" – a peace seriously challenged by the unexpected post-invasion developments which cannot be solved by the more or less imaginary monsters of a dystopian novel.

5. Conclusions: From the banality of injustice to a mosaic of a broken culture

Ahmed Saadawi rightly redraws the impressions that the country has left on its inhabitants in recent years. Some Iraqi readers were unable to finish the novel. Many have recognized the talent of the novelist. But their daily life has been steeped in such violence that even fiction is unable to overcome.

The injustice ended up sowing a country which was only waiting to bring about the revenge of the innocent. This is how Hadī al-Attāk, the neighborhood rag-maker, like Doctor Victor Frankenstein, created "The one who has no name". The Alshesma/Whatsitsname comes to life thanks to the shreds of corpses picked up by Hadi after this or that explosion. These are all victims of attacks who are gathered in one body and who cry out for revenge.

The fact that Whatsitsname comes to life during this period allows us to understand why the political situation in Iraq, contrary to what the current media coverage suggests, had already reached an exceptional level of violence! These facts almost sound like a prelude to Daesh. In Iraq, and for a long time, the death drive has been fueled on all sides. The spiral of fear multiplies endlessly, it is a fear generated by death, and which itself generates death.

Like Baghdad, and Iraq in general, the Batawin district is losing more and more, and we notice this over the course of the novel, its multi-faith character. The Iraqi Jews had already left Iraq for more than half a century, the two monotheistic religions remained.

However, the lack of security eventually pushed the few remaining Christian families to leave. Besides, the exile of Iraqi Christians does not seem to cause conscience problems for politicians and militias in Iraq. The reader could conclude that there is only one monotheistic religion left. But it can easily be said, as the novel attests, that even Islam has been taken hostage by religious self-righteousness. The land of Abraham is no more.

Umm Daniel, like Wardiya, the main character of Inaam Kachachi in *Tashari*, refuses to leave her native land even though she is separated from her family. This elderly lady, like her co-religionists, represented part of Iraq. Their exile marks the irreplaceable loss of a wealthy part of Iraqi identity. The Christians of Iraq had also marked, on October 31, 2016, the 6th anniversary of the terrorist attack on the Syrian Catholic cathedral in Baghdad, Sayidat al Najat, which had killed fifty people, causing a shock within the population. The disintegration continues under the watchful eye of What's its name, whom the authorities do not seem to be able to apprehend. There remain the memory and the indelible trace of the memories that each and every one will have shared. In Batawin, a rich diversity of cultures and ethnicities has existed. This trace of life cannot be erased by a bomb.

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