

Ahmed Saadawi, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* translated by Jonathan Wright (Penguin, 2018)

Baghdad is rocked by war and Iraqis flee the city under the frenetic rampage of American occupation, sectarian violence, and a wilting economy. Hadi, a junk dealer and storyteller of the Bataween neighborhood, scans the scene of a suicide car bombing. Hadi collects more than rubbish: amongst the smoke, dust, and the bloody debris of human bodies, he stoops to pluck the remnants of a nose from the wreckage, wraps it in a canvas sheet, and leaves the scene. Curating the remains of human bodies blasted asunder by suicide bombs, Hadi sutures bloody remnants to form a complete corpse, stowed away in his crumbling flat. Necromania is far from the reason Hadi pursues his gory task: 'I made it [the corpse] complete so that it wouldn't be treated as trash, so it would be treated like other dead people and given a proper burial' (27). The nose from that day's bombing was the crowning remnant that perfected the corpse.

Hadi is peculiarly obsessed with imposing an order of wholeness on his disparate and dispersed corner of the Islamic world. He's preoccupied with what happens at the periphery of suicide bombings: 'It [a bomb] cut electricity wires and killed birds. Windows were shattered and doors blown in. Cracks appeared in the walls of the nearby houses, and some old ceilings collapsed. There was unseen damage too, all inflicted in a single moment' (21). At the periphery of the rubble are human remains that are carelessly regarded as debris by Baghdad emergency teams. He watches firemen power-hose blood and ashes down city storm drains, never caring to differentiate rubble from flesh. Hadi's gruesome project is, in large part, an act of hushed redemption, mourning, and reconciliation for human vestiges left behind at scenes of horrific violence.

Another suicide bombing changes the course of events for the corpse hidden away in the Bataween neighborhood. Hasib, a security guard, is killed by a dynamite-lined truck at the entrance of a hotel. Following the fatal blast, Hasib's soul wanders Baghdad in search of its incinerated body. His spirit is admonished by another itinerant urban soul, who predicts, 'You have to find [your body], or some other body, or else things will end badly for you' (38). With only the charred remains of his body, Hasib's family was obliged to bury an empty coffin. His gravesite, like countless others, is not a place of eternal rest but an empty topographical marker of vanished life. Vacated from his body, Hasib's soul eventually encounters Hadi's reconstructed 'Frankenstein', and is fluidly absorbed into the corpse: 'Overwhelmed by a heaviness and torpor, he lodged inside the corpse, filling from head to toe, because probably, he realized then, it didn't have a soul, while he was a soul without a body' (40).

Hadi, however, is far from a devious necromancer – he neither mumbles incantations nor conjures a fiery eschatology for occupied Baghdad. He's merely the clumsy earthly conduit through which the corpse is born from a deep reverence for the human body. Hadi, if anything, resembles a strangely forlorn ZAKA worker, exposed to the hazardous aftermath of explosions, surveying rubble for blast-torn limbs and scraps of flesh. Established by a group of ultra-orthodox volunteers (Hebrew acronym for the Israeli society, Identifiers of Victims of Disaster), ZAKA's objective is to collect bodies at scenes of mass violence to ensure that 'regardless of the

Book reviews: *Frankenstein in Baghdad* by Ahmed Saadawi, translated by Jonathan Wright. Sebastian Galbo.

Transnational Literature Vol. 10 no. 2, May 2018.

<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

religion of the deceased, [their bodies are] treated in accordance with Jewish law.’ As Lauren B. Wilcox states, ‘ZAKA effectively undertakes a purification ritual of making clean proper of what was disordered and defiled. ZAKA volunteers are motivated by a desire that the bodies of the victims be treated with respect. [...] They will spend hours ensuring that no blood or bits of flesh are left behind.’ She cites interviews with ZAKA workers expressing concern that ‘dogs, birds, and ants will consume human flesh, or that blood will be washed away by hoses’.¹ Indeed, Hadi, witness to the effacing menace of Baghdad’s hoses, is inspired by a similar kind of mission—that human remains are not “heaps of meat,” but deserving of respectful burial (93).

Hadi’s status as the neighborhood junk dealer extends to his devoted stewardship of human remains. Despite his drunkenness and garrulity, Hadi works devotedly to reclaim the wholeness of a human body. ‘The practice of collecting all body fragments and fluids is an example of power regulating the body, turning objects only identifiable from a medical or anatomical viewpoint into remnants of a human subject’ (94). Composed of the many parts of bomb victims – the limbs of those with different religious, political, socioeconomic, and sectarian allegiances – Hadi’s creation becomes a walking necrology of Baghdad’s divided community.

A string of perverse murders dominates the city’s headlines. Rumours circulate that the mysterious corpse – or the ‘Whatsitsname’ or ‘Criminal X’, as it is dubbed by the Iraqi Tracking and Pursuit Department – is a ruthless superhuman, unable to be killed. Animated by Hasib’s soul, Hadi’s Frankenstein stalks the streets of Baghdad to slaughter the murderer responsible for each limb comprising its body, justifying the killing spree as a ‘noble mission’. It realises that, before it can finish off the last victims, the organs and limbs of its putrid body begin to rot. Needing new hands and eyeballs, the Baghdad Frankenstein must obliterate more people for fresh parts. The Whatsitsname realises the corporeal conditions of his bloody mission: ‘My list of people to seek revenge grew longer as my body parts fell off and my assistants added parts from my new victims, until one night I realized that under these circumstances I would face an open-ended list of targets that would never end’ (153). To survive and complete his objective, the corpse becomes entangled in an ever-widening web of killings that span sectarian and political factions.

Implicated in the mystery of the Baghdad Frankenstein are other complex characters whose lives are seamlessly intertwined amidst the everyday violence: Mahmoud al-Sawadi, a diffident journalist; the wizened Elishva, who believes the Baghdad Frankenstein is her son incarnate after years as a missing person of war; Ali Baher al-Saidi, a prominent but shadowy editor of an influential magazine; and Faraj, an unctuous real estate agent bent on seizing historic properties of the Bataween neighborhood. In Saadawi’s novel, these characters move throughout one another’s lives, all directly and indirectly shaped by the corpse’s bloody machinations.

Sadaawi’s posthuman figure has vast hermeneutic potential – an outraged spectre; a disgruntled jinn (الجن); a lost soul of war. Particularly troublesome, however, is the limited efficacy of Sadaawi’s allegory, one unfortunately vitiated by the physical composition of

¹ Lauren B. Wilcox, *Bodies of Violence: Theorizing Embodied Subjects in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014) (93).

Criminal X who is almost exclusively the amalgamation of mature, able, male bodies. Curiously excluded from the makeup of the Baghdad Frankenstein are the blood, fluids, and limbs of Baghdad's women, children, and elderly – why are these victims' lives, equally precious and precarious, omitted from Saadawi's narrative, from the corporeality of the living dead? In whatever way readers choose to 'read' the Whatsitsname, the figure is an allegory – a dark hyperbole – of cyclical sectarian violence carried out to the point of absurdity, though readers may puzzle over the advantages of creating a specifically male organism to reflect on human life at the centre of war.

Sadaawi's novel concentrates also on the fragility and fluidity of borders, on the chaotic swirling of admixtures and contaminations, and on the (im)possibilities of amalgamation. There's a preoccupation with exteriors and interiors, explosions and implosions, and 'boundedness' and 'unboundedness' that exposes the vulnerability of religious, political, and social boundaries. Yet the novel's innermost tragedy is that the Baghdad Frankenstein is not – despite its initial intentions to exact justice – a wartime messiah, but becomes, with its helpless victims, locked within the endless rotation of Hammurabian retaliation. As conditions in Baghdad deteriorate, Saadawi's novel casts a doubtful light on the challenges of overcoming sectarian divisions in the Islamic world.

Sebastian Galbo