Posthuman Gothic and Monstrosity in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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Abstract

Posthuman Gothic is one of the recent emerging areas of research in the twenty-first century. It explores the different ways in which Posthuman thoughts and ideologies conflate with Gothicism in all its contemporary variations. Primarily, the posthuman gothic concerns itself with the human beings' technological, biomedical, and supernatural experiments with the human body and consciousness that alters the human identity into the posthuman. The possibility and capability of humans to alter the human identity into something other than human or into the 'posthuman other' create anxiety among humans. The humans' fear of becoming the posthuman other or encounters with the posthuman other over the course of evolution is the nucleus or the driving mechanics of the posthuman gothic genre. The Posthuman Gothic fiction deals with the scientific, technological, as well as supernatural developments on cyborgs, android robots, bio-engineered transhumans, vampires, zombies, and Frankenstein monsters in a gothic setting that opens up a dystopian posthuman future or condition. Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* deals with the Frankenstein monster kind of posthuman that kills humans and poses a threat to human lives in a post-modern gothic setting. In this paper, the researchers try to highlight the dovetailing of the posthuman thoughts with the post-modern gothic setting and the posthuman monstrosity of the posthuman other, i.e a Frankenstein monster with multiple consciousness that threatens the human identity, lives, survival, and the very existence in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* through the posthuman gothic lens.

Keywords: posthuman, gothic, frankenstein monster, multiple consciousness, monster theory, posthumanism

1. Introduction

The Posthuman Gothic is a post-millennial, twenty-first-century genre that combines the posthuman notions and theories with Gothicism in its different forms in the present. Therefore, it can be equally considered as a genre that jointly emerges from both Posthuman Studies and Gothicism. Also, it is necessary to trace the origin of gothic in order to fully understand how the contemporary posthuman ideologies, from different theories like posthumanism, transhumanism, metahumanism, new media, interconnect with the gothic in its various forms. So, as of introduction to the gothic, according to Fred Botting, the gothic is believed to have emerged from romance that consists of medieval settings, chivalry, knights, and castles. In the late eighteenth century, romance was criticized for its lack of following the classical tradition, neo-classical ideas of beauty, morality, and reason. Romance is believed to have filled with fanciful imagination that corrupts the mind and morality of the readers. Similarly, Gothic as a genre was criticized with the similar accusations that were previously put forward against romance. The gothic was condemned for not producing moral, reason, and symmetricity in literary works by eighteenth-century critics. Therefore Botting believes it would be more appropriate to call the 'gothic novel' as 'gothic romance'. He writes:

> In discussions of eighteenth-century fiction, the term 'Gothic romance' is more applicable than 'Gothic novel' as it highlights the link between medieval romances, the romantic narratives of love, chivalry and adventure, that were imported from France from the late seventeenth century onwards, and the tales that in the later eighteenth century were classified as 'Gothic'. (Botting, 2005, 16)

Eventually, the gothic romance with all its characteristics of medieval and historical romance blended with the novel of life and manners of the eighteenth-century to form the gothic novel. It is "a hybrid form from its inception, the Gothic blend of medieval and historical romance with the novel of life and manners was framed in supernatural, sentimental or sensational terms" (Botting, 2005, 29). Botting further writes: "The Gothic novel owes much to these developments. The marvelous incidents and chivalric customs of romances, the descriptions of wild and elemental natural settings, the gloom of the graveyard and ruin, the scale and permanence of the architecture, the terror and wonder of the sublime," (Botting, 2005, 16). Since all the characteristics of the romance later became the characteristics of the eighteenth-century gothic novel, Botting considered it would be more appropriate to call the gothic novel as 'gothic romance'.

Subsequently, the gothic underwent several alterations and revisions at the hands of the writers who dealt with the gothic. First, Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* was taken to be the skeleton for gothic writings. Walpole excessively used supernatural and irrational impulses in his work which was tampered with by the subsequent gothic works by the other writers. For instance, Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* reduces the supernatural incidents and creates a balance between supernatural and realistic eighteenth-century life. Similarly, in Sophie Lee's *The Recess,* the gothic is introduced with the use of history and it also highlights the problems of ideals of female virtue and domesticity. Next, William Beckford's Vathek takes the gothic genre back to the supernaturalistic incidents of horror and terror. Furthermore, based on the contrasts and connections found in the writings of Horace Walpole and William Beckford, and Clara Reve and Sophie Lee, the gothic genre can be found divided into two major strands. The first type of gothic narrative is that of the male writers who belong to more of "an aristocratic class position, lean towards representations of irrationality and the supernatural, exercising the privileges and freedoms conferred by gender and class position" (Botting, 2005, 39). The second type of gothic narrative is that of the female writers who "usually more solidly middle-class in origin, remain more concerned with the limits of eighteenth-century virtues, careful to interrogate rather than overstep the boundaries of domestic propriety which, because of their gender, were more critically maintained" (Botting 2005, 39). So, the first type of gothic had the excessive representation of supernatural and irrational incidents while the second type rationalized the imaginative and supernatural excess.

Next, the gothic further developed and altered during the romantic in the hands of Ann Radcliffe, S.T. Coleridge, Lord Byron, and Mary Shelly. Gothic during the romantic age in the history of English literature is called as 'Dark Romanticism'. It often includes the terror and horror narratives with a supernatural element in a setting that usually shows or projects nature as a dark or gothic entity. Also, it is to be noted that Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* is considered as the pioneering work in the posthuman gothic genre. Although it was written in 1818, it is classified as the pioneering work of posthuman gothic only after the emergence of the genre in the twenty-first century. The posthuman gothic texts contain the posthuman monstrous others or the gothic posthumans like evil cyborgs, android robots, artificial intelligence, Frankensteinian creatures, vampires, and zombies that are a threat to the life of human beings. And unlike the evil A. I Winston, the posthuman monstrous-other discussed found in Dan Brown's *Origin,* it is the Frankenstein creature that is found in Mary Shelly's Frankenstein as the posthuman monstrous other. And it is the Frankenstein monster of Mary Shelly's novel that sets the skeleton or frame for Frankenstein monsters that are found in other literary texts. Next, the gothic of the Victorian age is more of an industrial gothic and domestic gothic found in the works of Charles Dickens and Emily Bronte. It is in Sir Arthur Conon Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes*, the gothic took a detective turn.

The beginning of the twentieth century brought with it the emergence of modern gothic in gothic fiction. Fred Botting writes that the gothic at the beginning of the twentieth century continued the style it had in the late nineteenth century. He writes: "Objects of anxiety take their familiar forms from earlier manifestations: cities, houses, archaic and occult pasts, primitive energies, deranged individuals and scientific experimentation are the places from which awesome and inhuman terrors and horrors are loosed on an unsuspecting world" (Botting, 2005, 103) Modern gothic fiction dealt with the urban present setting in its narratives unlike the traditional gothic which usually has a pseudo-medieval setting or desolate, rural gothic setting. In traditional gothic, the narrative is set in remote past with abandoned castles, deserted towns, and wild settings. So, when the readers read traditional gothic they have to travel back to the historical gothic past in which the narrative is set to get into its plot. But, on the other hand, modern gothic creates gothic terror and gothic horror in the present urban setting and dealt with contemporary issues through the lens of gothic horror and terror. Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca, Diane Setterfield's Once Upon a River, Elly Griffith's The Stranger Diaries, and Kate Morton's The Distant Hours are some of the examples of modern gothic fiction.

Next, the late twentieth century gave rise to a strand of gothic fiction that can be considered Postmodern gothic. It contains postmodern ideologies in gothic writings. It dealt with the gothic in the contemporary setting and also

imagines the futuristic gothic possibilities. Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic novels that revolve around the contemporary and futuristic dystopian tensions are a few examples of the postmodern gothic. According to Fred Botting, postmodern gothic deals with postmodernism's worries on the "loss of human identity and the alienation of self from both itself and the social bearings in which a sense of reality is secured are presented in the threatening shapes of increasingly dehumanised environments, machinic doubles and violent, psychotic fragmentation" (Botting, 2005, 102). But as Michael Sean Bolton points out in his research article "Monstrous Machinery: Defining Posthuman Gothic" the difference between the postmodern gothic and posthuman gothic is in the external terror in the loss of human identity in postmodern gothic and the internal horror in the alteration of human identity in the posthuman gothic. Bolton writes postmodern gothic is concerned with "the fate of human subject," and for him the postmodern gothic deals with the "fears of external threats from the alien other, faceless terrorism, and technological annihilation" (Bolton, 2014, 02). Furthermore, the conflation of this postmodern gothic, sometimes along with the characteristics of different variants of the gothic discussed above, with the contemporary diverse posthuman ideologies gives rise to the posthuman gothic. Therefore, it is to be understood that the posthuman gothic can be considered as the next step of the postmodern gothic, i.e. the posthuman gothic is one of the next stages of the gothic that evolved out of postmodern gothic.

Next, some of the contemporary critical theories that contemplate and work on the notion of the posthuman are Posthumanism, Transhumanism, Metahumanism, and New Media. Therefore, it is to be understood that the notion of posthuman not only derives from Posthumanism alone but also from the other critical theories mentioned above. And these theories have further subdivisions that concentrate on the different possibilities or variants of the posthuman in their own ways. And all these variations of the notions of the posthuman are included within the posthuman gothic genre. The posthuman gothic points out the dystopian possibilities of human beings evolving or turning into posthumans as well as the gothic encounters the humans would have with the posthuman monstrous others in the modern, postmodern, and futuristic setting.

2. Theoretical Framework

This research paper uses the posthuman gothic lens to read and interpret Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad. It is a pioneering study of the novel through this lens. It highlights the possibilities of the posthuman monster, i.e the Frankenstein monster, the posthuman consciousness in the Frankenstein monster, and the human posthuman encounters between the Frankenstein monster and the humans in the novel.

3. Discussion

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a strange, horrific, gripping, detective novel with a criticizing take on war, terrorism, and America's big brother attitude on a war-torn society afflicted by fear. It projects the harsh reality of the destruction of war and its effects on the lives of people who had lost at least one of their loved ones to war. Most of its characters brood over the abyss or absence left over by their loved ones. With his brilliant, heart-gripping plot Saadawi has pictured the other side of war and its cruelties. For instance, one such excellent portrayal of the cruelty of war is when he writes about car bombings that vaporized the flesh of the people: "Nahem had already been dead for several months – from a car bomb that had exploded in front of the office of a religious party in Karrada, also killing some other passersby and Nahem's horse. It had been hard to separate Nahem's flesh from that of the horse" (Saadawi, 2018, 23). The novel can be seen as an attack on those governments and organizations that support war and believes that weapons are the final solution to unsolvable problems. He questions the death of innocent young men in the name of war and how their absence emotionally breaks families into pieces. The story is not only about those who voluntarily or involuntarily participate in war, it is also about bombing and killing of innocent people on a day-to-day basis. The very idea of living has turned out to be a question of survival to the people of war-torn Baghdad. They constantly live in fear of death, fear of losing someone special, fear of the future, and fear of living. These fears make the spirit of the people to come out of their bodies and hover around places as ghosts. These ghosts are called "tawabie al-khouf" or "familiar of fears" in the novel. All these descriptions about the war-torn Baghdad open up a necessary space for the posthuman gothic to develop and evolve in the novel when the Frankenstein monster is introduced in its plot.

Furthermore, the novel opens up the possibility for the posthuman gothic reading through the introduction of Frankenstein or the posthuman monstrous other in its plot. It presents a posthuman gothic Frankenstein monster that is stitched together as a physical effigy from different body parts of dead victims of terrorist attacks, suicide bombings, and war in the novel. But, contrary to the Frankenstein monster of Shelly which was the product of scientific experiments, the Frankenstein monster of Saadawi is a product of supernaturalism. It is a result of the resurrection of a dead soul into the body made of the parts collected from various dead victims' bodies of Baghdad.

The roaming spirit of the dead Hasib enters into the body made of different body parts creating the posthuman monstrous other or the Frankenstein monster. Therefore, it is through the Frankenstein monster the posthuman gothic is created in the novel.

The novel opens up with a final report from the Iraqi intelligence bureau on the activities of the Tracking and Pursuit Department. The duty of the Tracking and Pursuit Department was to archive information and preserve documents regarding bureaucratic matters. But, the department had employed fortune-tellers and astrologers to predict future terrorist bombings and attacks under the direct order of Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid. The report stated that the Tracking and pursuit department has been suspended from its activities after one of its members had been caught leaking secret, important documents to outsiders. The very activities of the department itself make this novel more supernatural and gothic. Trying to solve chain-murder mysteries and bombings through astrology and future-predictions sets up the readers' minds to expect supernatural beings like spirits, ghosts, creatures, and supernatural happenings. It is here, Saadawi mixes up gothic supernaturalism in the plot of the novel. Furthermore, the novel is set in America-occupied Baghdad in the neighborhood of Bataween. All the main characters of the novel live in and around Bataween. Elishva, the old woman, a widow, lost her son, Daniel, in the Iran-Iraq war hopes that her son is still alive and will return home one day. Her neighbors started to think that she has become mad and started to imagine things. Hadi is a junk dealer and an amusing storyteller who lives next to Elishva's house in the rubbles of the fallen house. Hadi can be compared or equated to Victor Frankenstein who created the Frankenstein monster in Mary Shelly's Frankenstein. In the novel, Hadi collects the body parts of people who are killed in bombings and stitches them together to create a corpse effigy. And despite Victor Frankenstein's conscious effort to create a posthuman being or creature, Hadi creates a corpse without knowing what he himself is doing. He did the horrible job of collecting the body parts from the dead bodies after each explosion in Bataween and stitching them together so that they would be complete and won't be treated like a pile of rubbish so that it would be respected like the dead people and given a proper burial. He wanted the dead to be respected even though they don't have a body.

Hadi thought making an effigy from different body parts of terror attack victims would be a powerful declaration and warning to the government about the deteriorating state of affairs in the nation. He wanted to ring the wake-up call for proper funeral rites for the deceased victims even though only the parts of their bodies remain. This was the idea behind his experiment of collecting and stitching together body parts to make a full body. Later, this body was occupied by the spirit of Hasib Mohamed Jaafar. Hasib was working as a watchman at the Sadeer Novotel hotel and was killed in a bomb explosion caused by a suicide bomber. After the explosion, Hasib's spirit finally understands that it has left its body and hovers around the city. It becomes confused and worried. It is not sure whether Hasib is actually dead or dreaming. After the cautions of the other spirits to find its body and to be near it, Hasib's spirit went back and searches for its body at Sadeer Novotel hotel, the scene of his death. But, it couldn't find its body there. It looked for its body up and down all the neighboring streets and instead found another body. It was the body that Hadi stitched together. Hasib's spirit touches the naked body and automatically sank into it. This is where the readers can find the 'Posthuman Gothic Supernaturalism' in the novel.

Gothic fiction often uses supernatural elements and events in its plot. For instance, the readers could find isolated, haunting castles and horrifying mystic surrounding in the traditional gothic settings. Gothicism or Gothic Fiction is a kind of backward-looking genre that usually has a pseudo-medieval kind of setting. Post-Modern gothic fiction is different from the Gothicism of the seventeenth century. Post-Modern gothic fiction is set in the present-day setting and opens up the visions of futuristic dystopian possibilities. It deals with the gothic present and future. For instance, Dan Brown's Origins can be seen as a modern gothic fiction with a terrorizing, mysterious plot about what is going to happen in near future. Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* has a present-day post-modern setting. Thus, Posthuman Gothic Supernaturalism, in the novel, is a mixture of supernatural involvement of Posthuman identities or creatures and a post-modern gothic setting. In the novel, the spirit of Hasib getting into the body stitched of different people's body parts and coming back to life as a Posthuman creature or 'posthuman monstrous other' can be seen as 'Posthuman gothic supernaturalism' in the plot. It is named 'Whatsitsname' by Hadi.

'Whatsitsname' is the Frankensteinian Posthuman or the posthuman monstrous other in the novel. It should be understood that Posthuman is not just a by-product of "Posthumanism" critical theory alone. The notion of posthuman can also be seen in Transhumanist critical theory. Based on the reading and understanding of several books and articles on posthumanism and Transhumanism like Donna Harraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, Katherine Hayle's *How We Became Posthuman,* Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman,* Robert Pepperell's *The Posthuman Condition,* Pramod K Nayar's *Posthumanism,* Cary Wolfe's *What is Posthumanism,* Stefan Herbrechter's *Posthumanism* and Robert Ranisch & Stefan Lorenz Sorgner's *Post- and Transhumanism: An Introduction,* the researchers have tried to classify the posthuman into three types: Posthuman, Transhumanist-Posthuman, and Post-human. The first type of

Posthuman the researchers classify is evolutionary Posthuman which Rosi Braidotti talks about in her book *The Posthuman*. This posthuman can be a human evolving into a posthuman, a machine becoming posthuman, an animal becoming posthuman and even earth becoming posthuman. The posthuman here may replace 'the human' rather than one for a radically, biologically, physically enhanced human. The second type of posthuman is the transhumanist-posthuman. Transhumanism is one of the emerging critical theories which propounds that technology can help human beings to transcend their biological, physical, and intellectual limitations. It affirms the radical transformation of human beings' biological, intellectual capabilities and their social conditions with the help of technologies. It aims to enhance human characteristics, identity, and life from a very basic level that it brings about a life form with completely different characteristics to be called the 'Posthuman Other'. This Posthuman can be called as Transhumanist-posthuman. The third type of posthuman is medical, scientific experiments, and supernatural creations like zombies, vampires, Frankenstein monsters. Whatitsname can be classified under the third type of Posthuman that the researchers discussed above.

The novel moves from a posthuman perspective into a Posthuman Gothic plot when Whatitsname comes alive as a Frankensteinian monster. It takes shelter at Elishva's house as the old woman mistake it for her son, Daniel. And, from here all through the novel "Whatsitsname" is also identified as "Daniel". Also, the next Posthuman Gothic supernatural element that takes place in the novel is the 'Whatitsname' regaining consciousness of the multiple body parts of which it is made. That is, it is not a single consciousness rather it is multiple consciousnesses from different parts of which the body is made. This can be called a kind of 'Posthuman Multiple Consciousness'. As 'Whatsitsname' develops the posthuman consciousness, memory, and identity from the multiple parts of different bodies it turns into a 'gothic Posthuman' or the 'posthuman monstrous other.' He was "made up of body parts who had been killed, plus another 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, 125). Furthermore, gaining the memories from all the parts of its body urged it to avenge the death of the persons to whom the parts of the body belong. Therefore, 'Whatsitsname' wants to avenge the death of Daniel and the other owners of its body parts. At this point, the novel turns into a posthuman gothic novel as 'Whatsitsname' threatens the life, survival, and existence of humans in the novel. Anya Heise-von der Lippe in her book *Posthuman Gothic* writes the Posthuman gothic texts often threaten the readers with critically framed encounters between the human and the 'Posthuman monstrous other,' and the consequences of these encounters beyond the imaginable boundaries. Saadawi's novel reflects the same as the readers witness the threatening encounters between the Frankensteinian monster or 'Whatsitsname' and the humans, and the negative consequences of it that result in the killing of people in the novel.

The first posthuman gothic incident, recorded in the novel, is the killing of four beggers by the 'Whatsitsname'. Next, another instance of posthuman gothic is when Whatsitsname grotesquely killed Abu Zaidoun, the old barber, who actually enlisted Daniel to the Iraqi Army. "He was responsible for sending so many young men off to war" (Saadawi 2018, 78). Elishva cursed Abu Zaidoun and blamed him for the death of her son, Daniel. So, Whatsitsname avenged the death of Daniel by killing Abu Zaidoun. The description of Abu Zaidoun killing is grotesque: "He looked to be asleep, at least to anyone seeing him from afar, but the handle of a pair of stainless steel scissors protruded from the top of his breastbone, at the base of his neck" (Saadawi 2018, 78). And, after that, the Whatitsname started to commit numerous crimes and kill people in the city. Although at first, it started as a noble mission to avenge the death of the victims of his body parts, he later started killing innocent people too. The line between good and bad was so blurry that he couldn't differentiate the good from the bad people. One of the terrorising posthuman gothic incidents in the novel is when the Whatsitsname killed an innocent man. Whatsitsname himself says that the man he killed was innocent: "I raised my revolver and aimed at the innocent old man. He was definitely innocent, not one of those people that the three madmen had brought to replace my body parts and keep me going" (Saadawi 2018, 154). But, even after knowing that he was innocent, he killed him: "I fired one from my revolver, just as I began to lose all sensation in my eye . . . Now blind, I took some cautious steps forward until my shoe hit something. Bending down, I felt around for the warm body of the frightened old man . . . I took out a little knife and did my work quickly" (Saadawi 2018, 154). He killed the innocent, frightened old man for his eyes. He starts to ensure his own survival first and at any cost even if it means killing someone innocent. And later, it can be seen that he has further become completely evil and monstrous when he says: "I am now taking revenge on people who insult me, not just on those who did violence to those whose body parts I am made of" (Saadawi 2018, 178). Also, he plans to kill anyone who deserves death whether or not they have connections to the killings of the victims of his body parts. "He would salvage the spare parts he needed from the bodies of those who deserved to be killed. It wasn't the ideal option but it was the best one possible for now" (Saadawi 2018, 194). At last, the posthuman monstrous nature of Whatsitsname is

openly expressed by himself when he says: "My face changes all the time… Nothing in me lasts long, other than my desire to keep going. I kill in order to keep going" (Saadwi 2018, 259). This creates more posthuman gothic as the readers fear the length to which Whatsitsname would go to survive and be alive. Saadawi explains that to keep going was "his only justification. He didn't want to perish without understanding why he was dying and where he would go after death, so he clung to life, maybe even more than others, more than those who gave him their lives and parts of their bodies – just like that, out of fear" (Saadawi 2018, 259). Lastly, with all the above-mentioned instances of posthuman gothic, Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* can be read as a posthuman gothic novel that contains a Frankensteinian posthuman monstrous other.

4. Conclusion

The researchers were able to identify the Posthuman Gothic elements in Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad. Also, the researcher could find the interconnections of post-modern gothic and Posthuman ideologies and the supernatural possibility of Frankensteininan Posthuman monster with Posthuman multiple consciousness to be a threat for the human identity, survival, and existence in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad.*

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