‘Magical Realism’ Existentialized in Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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Received: December 22, 2024 Accepted: March 10, 2025 Online Published: May 29, 2025

doi:10.5430/wjel.v15n7p236 URL: https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v15n7p236

Abstract

From the very onset of its literary transformation, magical realism has taken on Postcolonial and Postmodern stances toward the appropriation of cultural identity. Normalizing the invasion of cultural history and heritage – having become long-forgotten myths of culture – in a modernized setting, gives cultural identity the presencing urgency its authenticity requires, thus creating a postcolonial text or a postmodern individual reminded of an indigenous identity. However, from the standpoint of a war-torn country, this paper argues that the genre requires immediate presencing of existential nature to that which invokes cultural heritage. In other words, in the context of war, an immediate act of presencing is required as otherwise the subject’s inaction may be the cause of not mere identity but also physical nonexistence. In this sense, immediate urgency affected by direct contact with chaos is understood to require a more immediate approach than those offered by postcolonialism and postmodernism. The study then investigates the possibility of fathoming magical realism from an Existential lens within the context of war as projected in Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, especially when a calling shifts from individual retribution to victimization, thus taking the analysis typically associated with the genre a step further.

Keywords: magical realism, existentialism, immediate urgency, existential presencing, Ahmed Saadawi, Frankenstein in Baghdad

1. Introduction: Postcolonialism and Postmodernity in Magical Realism

With the transformation of magical realism from its German origins as an artistic style in the visual Arts to Latin America as a literary genre in 1927, effected by Jose Ortega y Gasset’s translation of Franz Roh’s article in *Revista de Occidente* (Reeds, 179), Latin America became ‘the locus for the development of the style, with the first wave of magical realist texts written by well-known names such as Jorge Luis Borges, Alejo Carpentier, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez’ (Salhi, 2-3). From then on, critics have treated it generally as a genre in which ‘the fantastic become[s] banal … [and] the banal becomes fantastic’ (McHale, 77), as the realistic setting is invaded by marvelous, magical and unexplainable elements that are naturalized into it, causing no confusion to the characters of the fiction. In other words, ‘the magic element […] is received in a plain, pragmatic manner by the characters […] and not as […] a power, as would be found in fantasy’ (Salhi, 3). This, according to Brian McHale, describes a state of ‘dual ontology’ whereby the realist fiction turns into a world where the ‘normal and the everyday [and] the paranormal or supernatural [intersect at a] contested boundary’ which usually appears disconcerting to the characters although very much present for the reader (McHale, 73). However, the normalization of the marvelous and supernatural by the characters is conditioned by their experiences and perceptions as projections of their surrounding environment (Hegerfelt, 77). In the same vein, the marvelous is mixed with the mundane for the characters, especially when emanating from a combination of socio-cultural and historical beliefs, simultaneously creating a reality whereby the inexpressible is visualized and normalized into the setting.

According to Wendy B. Faris, with whom other critics agree, magical realism is a postmodern genre and a part of the postmodernist movement. She contends that it ‘combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed’, and with the combination of real and fantastic, the genre projects a fragmented world in a postmodern manner (Zamora & Faris, 163). This came in reaction to previous scholarly contestation that projected magical realism as a solely postcolonial reaction and response to former Western colonization, especially with the genre’s fixation on the ‘historical origins’ having been marginalized by Western mainstream writers, thus producing a ‘residuum of resistance toward the imperial center and its totalizing systems of generic classification’ (Slemon, 408). However, with the fact that Western authors such as Angela Carter, Kelly Link, Karen Russell, and Helen Oyeyemi employ mythologies originating in Western cultures in addition to, or in lieu of formerly colonized cultures in their fiction, the genre automatically loses its postcolonial purview and instead embraces a postmodern stance (Hegerfelt, 64); that is to say its international spread placed it as a more global genre, especially with the fragmentation it displays between the real and the magical, further offering multiple interpretations to the reader, thus placing it in a somewhat more contemporary mode than that of the postmodern movement. The postcolonial and postmodern approaches have thus far been employed as the two literary stances implemented in the understanding of magical realistic fiction. However, as this paper argues, neither approach is sufficient in understanding a magical

realistic text specifically focused in a war-torn setting. An existential implementation of magical realism is therefore employed, as it is more understood to address the immediate urgency required to maintain one's presence.

1.1 Existential Presencing in Magical Realism: A Novel Approach

The aforementioned projection of magical realism as a postmodernist genre seems warranted, especially given the shared characteristics they both display. Through his study of a number of prominent theorists, Theo L. D'haen further confirms not a mere association linking the genre with the movement, but rather argues in favor of the genre sitting firmly within the boundaries of the postmodern movement by means of comparison. He contends that a postmodern text employs 'self-reflexiveness, metafiction, eclecticism, redundancy, multiplicity, discontinuity, intertextuality, parody, the dissolution of character and narrative, the erasure of boundaries, and the destabilization of the reader' (D'Haen, 192-193). In a similar fashion, magical realistic fiction is said to typically display elements of multiplicity, intertextuality, termination of character and narrative, diversity, and the erasure of boundaries between the real and the unreal. When viewed from a postmodernist perspective, the termination of character may seemingly occur in magical realistic fiction to offer the global reader a diverse society rather than a center-based individual, almost outcasting individuality altogether, so that an amalgam of perspectives is offered to the global reader. As it follows, characters in magical realistic fiction are usually given fantastical traits such as telepathy, levitation, and the state of life in death, traits that serve external purposes rather than the characters themselves. However, as the paper will thoroughly illustrate, subjectivity may be the fixation of magical realistic narratives when a cosmopolitan society and the individual are treated interchangeably as one, projections of one another, and alternating in representation.

As a way of life, the philosophy of Existentialism is fixated on two objectives: the first involves the subjectivity of one's representation in an absurd world that makes no sense to the individual, and the only way for one to make sense of his existence is through action he chooses away from his societally predetermined definitions. The second objective, in turn, is the ripple effect his actions leave on others observing him. In other words, according to Jean-Paul Sartre, 'existence comes before essence – or, if you will, that we must begin from the subjective' (2007, 2). In this sense, and beside the rest of the characteristics displayed in magical realism, when approached from an existential perspective, a new characteristic is added, that of individuality and self-affirmation, otherwise called existential presencing. Although existentialists may differ in their approach to the philosophy, they unite in their understanding of being thrown into an absurd nonsensical world, whereby the only sense that the existential individual may make is his own. It is, as Sartre puts it;

> Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist [… finds himself undefinable], it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself [….] Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. (2007, 2)

Soren Kierkegaard was the first to acknowledge man's subjectivity, which 'becomes one's truth and reality of being, and holding responsibility for one's actions leads to his very existence; the task that is usually assumed by religious, and political authorities, monarchs and science' (1996, 3). This is to say, with the existential individual's belief in his ultimate freedom of choice, he is grounded in his sense of responsibility toward each affected action, which in turn keeps him in a state of *angst*, out of fear of otherwise losing his presencing in the world, 'because he is in synthesis, he can be in anxiety; and the more profoundly he is in anxiety, the greater is the man' (Kierkegaard 1980, 154).

In addition to the existential individual's fear of losing his existence, he is conscious of the effect his action leaves on others around him, therefore, each chosen action should be selected carefully. Otherwise, he runs the risk of losing his subjectivity as he reduces himself and ultimately others around him to nonexistence. An existential individual does not outcast himself from the rest of society but rather gives priority to associating meaning to his own existence, after which his self-chosen essence is shown to the world, thus influencing it. Ultimately then;

> when we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men. The word "subjectivism" is to be understood in two senses, and our adversaries play upon only one of them. Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is the latter which is the deeper meaning of existentialism. When we say that man chooses himself, we do mean that every one of us must choose himself; but by that we also mean that in choosing for himself he chooses for all men. For in effect, of all the actions a man may take in order to create himself as he wills to be, there is not one which is not creative, at the same time, of an image of man such as he believes he ought to be [….] What we choose is always the better; and nothing can be better for us unless it is better for all. If, moreover, existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole. (Sartre, 2007: 6)

In this sense, although the philosophy gives priority to the subjectivity of the individual, by doing so nonetheless, priority is by default given to all individuals with the realization that a subjective individual only chooses the best action possible, thus deeming it the best action for all, even if it requires the use of violence, a stance that Albert Camus greatly opposed and argued against in *The Rebel* (1951). Sartre's perception of the individual's utter freedom to choose for himself was also greatly disputed by Simone de Beauvoir for what she

believed projected a lack of morality. However, whether Sartre's opinions may be generally applicable to all societal contexts or not, amidst the chaos of war they are valid.

Simultaneously, in fiction, when fantastical and extraordinary elements serve the specific purpose of the protagonist's existential presencing, especially in the context of a war-torn country, whereby the remains of victims of different sects, religious affiliations and areas within the country are stitched together to create one extraordinary man that unifies all, projecting an interplay between the individual and the entire society centered in one character, magical realism may be approached from an existential lens, and more so, individuality may be considered a constituting characteristic that envelops the literary genre. Ultimately then, the study will employ the existentialization of magical realism in its close reading and analysis of the protagonist in Ahmed Saadawi's novel, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2018), by projecting the absurdity that war creates, and how society led by chaos produces an urgency in its citizens to act upon personal conviction to maintain survival presence. In this sense, the existential concepts of absurdity, ultimate freedom, immediate urgency and presencing will be applied to the magical context of the novel under study. To unravel the atmosphere surrounding the plot, and to better address the shift that takes place in the novel from communal representation to individualistic existential urgency within a magical realistic setting, a short synopsis surrounding the setting's history, Iraq in 2005, is deemed pertinent.

Until the 1950s, Iraqis attested to having lived through a time without sectarian conflict, when Sunnis, Shi'is, Kurds, Christians, Mandean, Yazidis and Jews lived together without political conflict or a noticeable differential, apart from the occasional and individual incidents of prejudice and discrimination; the general socio-political atmosphere in the country projected 'relatively multicultural and to some extent cosmopolitan environments that encouraged education, travel abroad and cultural appreciation' (Al-Ali, 66). However, the 1960s and 70s witnessed the second wave of exiled Iraqi immigrants mainly to the United States, especially the elite associated with the monarchy and communists escaping the persecution of the Ba'th regime, and the growing sectarian and political conflict associated with it. The Ba'th regime remained in power between 1963 and 2003, whereby many disappearances, mysterious deaths and many atrocities were committed and reported, ultimately leading to public anger amassing to a substantial support of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, as getting rid of the sectarian conflict and the struggle for power that had controlled the country for over thirty years was the priority of the civilians. Surprisingly however, the outcome of the war was more devastating for the residents, as many were internally dispersed; there was 'worsening violence and lack of security, including continued armed conflict and increasing ethnic and religious tensions, new patterns of persecution, and the acute lack of services and infrastructure [having] led to new displacements of Iraqis both inside and outside Iraq' (ibid, 55). Amidst the state of disarray that Iraqis lived following the American invasion, the question of survival-prompted action became of utmost significance for all citizens, as it blurred the fine line separating the victim from the victimizer, hence, the setting of the novel under study.

2. Existential Shift within the Magical

From his observation of the Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus (1999) develops his understanding of the absurd, deeming the individual of worth denied by mainstream society. The absurd is then a byproduct of the confrontation that ensues between one's individual rationality and the lack of order discovered in the world. The state of absurdity in which man finds himself becomes an inevitable reality that cannot be altered, and the only way for the individual to feel his worth is by placing his energy in a struggle of life instead of choosing to give in (Camus, 15). However, this perception of the absurd is problematic for Sartre, as man's agency and freedom of choice are negated, giving precedence to the orderlessness of the world as an inevitable reality that cannot be altered. Sartre's understanding of absurdity, on the other hand, challenges the traditional notion of meaning and purpose by projecting the nonsensical as an incentive for human agency and freedom, away from an inherent or predetermined purpose (Nath, 116). In this sense, absurdity becomes the basis upon which the existential individual's freedom of choice, sense of responsibility, and action are based, as he argues in his play *No Exit* (1944). Because the state of absurdity connotes the quality of ridiculousness and irrationality, it harbors a perfect atmosphere for the extraordinary, fantastical, marvelous and magical to manifest in any form, and still be normalized in any given context. In this sense, Saadawi's fiction projects an interplay between the absurdity that Iraqis live and the normalization of the creature's magical manifestation.

Similar to the opening style of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* opens with an epigraph of three quotations laying out the existential process that the protagonist undergoes throughout the novel. The first quote is taken directly from Shelley's novel and reads; 'Yet I ask you not to spare me: listen to me; and then, if you can, and if you will, destroy the work of your hands'. Addressing his creator from an inferior and weak standpoint, the creature beseeches to be heard in an attempt to form some sort of acceptance, subjecthood, and identity. The second quote however is a biblical reference to the story of St. George, the Great Martyr, illustrating the condemnation of good-will amidst his attempt to defend humanity, and in turn his gaining the reward of resurrection and stronger return; 'The king ordered that the saint be placed in the olive press until his flesh was torn to pieces and he died. They then threw him out of the city, but the Lord Jesus gathered the pieces together and brought him back to life, and he went back into the city'. The process of resurrecting the saint is similar to that of the creature, with the clear intent of having him complete his mission of avenging the victimized. The intent behind the second quote is also a clear illustration of strength and power resulting from his destruction at the hands of authorities, ideally leading to the third quotation, the understanding of which completes the existential cycle that the creature, who symbolizes Iraq, undergoes amidst his state of complete deformation and confusion. Taken directly from Saadawi's novel, the creature – otherwise referred to as The Whatitsname – contends; 'You who are listening to these recordings now, if you don't have the courage to help me with my noble mission, then at least try not to stand in my way'. Almost voicing a warning threat against whoever may stand in the way of his existential presencing, which he will claim at any price, and the purpose of which he chooses to be 'noble' (Saadawi,

2018).

The creature, being an accumulation of Iraqi victims, is projected in the novel as 'the true Iraqi', representing unity. At the beginning of his mission, he is not aware of his existence as an entity, sacrificing himself to give the victims their lost presencing identity. However, when he is misconstrued by authorities as a terrorist himself, and when the parts abandon him once they get their required revenge, his mission shifts and becomes one of individual presencing at any price, even if it means victimizing the innocent. The shift that the extraordinary protagonist undergoes is prepared for and projected in a fantastical atmosphere that alters the understanding of faith, life and death, in addition to the world of the spirit. The three characters, Hadi, Elishva, and Brigadier Majid, each allows for his existence to be possible, gives him purpose, and condemns him, thus preparing him for his existential shift. Therefore, they are discussed as part of the magical circumstances surrounding the setting of the novel.

2.1 Absurdity of a War-Torn World: An Interplay with the Fantastical

In Shelley's *Frankenstein*, the creator of the creature is the young genius, Victor Frankenstein, whose vast medical knowledge of anatomy drives him to experiment with human body parts that would eventually be brought to life. However, with the absurdity and despair that any war allows, the creator in Saadawi's novel is Hadi, a simple drunken junk-dealer living next to Elishva. He is described as always 'drinking during the day and always had quarters of arak or whisky in his pocket and the smell of alcohol on his breath. He grew dirtier, let his beard grow longer, and rarely washed his clothes' (ibid, 25). He is known for his talent for story-telling in the local coffee shop, claiming it to be true, yet by the token of always being drunk, he is almost never taken seriously. His constant intoxication allows for the fantastical to spill into his reality as he brings his own creature to life, ironically with no intent to do so.

In projection of the absurdity of the world, Hadi the junk-dealer reports terrorist attacks that he witnesses in the form of a story to entertain his audience. His manner of narrating incidents, however, is found to be too nonsensical for its complete lack of emotion. One of the terrorist attacks is described as follows:

> A gray four-wheel drive stopped, and most of the workers sitting on the curb stood up. When some of them approached, the vehicle exploded in a ball of fire […] The people who weren't injured – because they were too far away, or screened by other people's bodies, or behind parked cars, or because they were coming down the side lanes and hadn't reached the main street when the explosion went off – all these people and others – like those in the offices next to the Armenian church and some long-distance taxi drivers – witnessed the explosion as it engulfed the vehicles and the bodies of the people around them. It 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. (ibid, 20-21)

For someone to witness such a horrific terror would normally send chills down one's spine, to say the least. Yet, it does not seem to shake Hadi out of his idleness, as he attests to standing 'at the corner by the hardware stores and calmly watch[ing]' when he reaches the scene (ibid, 21). As he narrates the incident, his emotional detachment is not merely apparent, but rather bordering toward amusement as 'he liked the idea of appearing on the scene as a kind of disinterested villain, and he waited to see from the faces of those who were listening whether they were similarly impressed' (ibid, 21). Hadi's fixation on reporting terrorist attacks that he witnesses is not coincidental. In fact, he exerts great effort in witnessing as many crime scenes as possible to accomplish a mission; that of collecting certain body parts. He is found watching 'with eagle eyes, looking for something amid this binge of death and devastation. Once he was sure he had seen it, he threw his cigarette to the ground and rushed to grab it before a powerful jet of water could blast it down the storm drain' (ibid, 22). Hadi does not fall short of reporting the details of his actions, as he informs Mahmoud, a local journalist;

> "Where did we leave off?" asked Hadi after relieving himself in the toilets next to the coffee shop.
>
> "At the part about the big nose in the canvas sack," Mahmoud al-Sawadi replied wearily.
>
> "Oh yes, the nose." (ibid, 25)

As part of the absurdity that Hadi experiences, assembling the body seems nonsensical to him, but this does not stop him from completing what he feels is a task that lacks purpose. He also does not know what he should now do with the corpse; to dispose of it or to 'hand him over to the forensics department' (ibid, 26, 27). With a similar quandary to that which occupies most Iraqis around him pertaining to their fates, Hadi resolves to take the corpse apart; to 'restore it to what it had been – just disconnected body parts. Then he should scatter the parts throughout the streets, where he had found them' (ibid, 31). The act of dissembling the body he spends months creating, with its randomness, does not merely capture the absurdity that Hadi projects in the novel, but more so becomes part of the turning point that ironically brings life to the creature, the Whatitsname.

Faith, as we know it, is also made to look absurd as it is given a fantastical stance. History is replete with stories of people losing faith in God because of repeated loss amidst war. Elishva, an elderly woman and mother of three loses her only son, Daniel, who was forced to enlist twenty years back in the Iraq/Iran War. As her two daughters move to Australia, she is left alone in Baghdad to the promise that she believes the picture of St. George makes her of one day returning her long-lost son. She is routinely found standing in front of the Saint's image 'preparing to scold [him]' because, in the world that she creates in her loneliness, 'the previous night he had promised that she would either receive some good news or her mind would be set at rest and her ordeal would come to an end' (Saadawi, 9). With all the losses she is exposed to over the years, her faith in God does not falter, but is rather conditioned with the return of her son. She does not feel the need to follow the teachings of the local priest, Father Josiah, as he explains to her; 'We don't set conditions for the Lord […] but

she saw no harm in setting conditions for God […] The Lord wasn't "in the highest"; she didn't see him as domineering or tyrannical. He was just an old friend, and it would be hard to abandon that friendship' (ibid, 61). In other words, her given circumstances allow her to de-sanctify the image she is taught of God, and by removing all formalities she believes she does not reduce his worth to a human state but rather brings him closer to her life. Her neighbors, however, do not affiliate her hope with faith, but rather with mere lunacy and magical powers they believe she possesses; 'Elishva's neighbors in Lane 7 said later that she had left the Bataween district to pray in the Church of Saint Odisho […] as she did every Sunday, and that's why the explosion happened – some of the locals believed that, with her spiritual powers, Elishva prevented bad things from happening when she was among them' (ibid, 5). Terrorist attacks almost always surround her yet ironically remain unnoticed by her. A bomb may explode just as she mounts the bus on the way to Church. It would kill many civilians and destroy buildings and cars, and cause crates in the street, yet, as she returns from mass, all havoc would have ended by then, almost assuring her return to the peaceful neighborhood in which she lives;

> If she had gone straight back to Tayaran Square, she would have found that everything was calm, just as she had left it in the morning. The sidewalks would be clean and the cars that had caught fire would have been towed away. The dead would have been taken to the forensics department and the injured to the Kindi Hospital. There would be some shattered glass here and there, a pole blackened with smoke, and a hole in the asphalt, though she wouldn't have been able to make out how big it was because of her blurred vision. (ibid, 7)

Her neighbor, Umm Salim, believes Elishva has 'special powers and that God's hand was on her shoulder wherever she was [… without which] the neighborhood would be doomed and swallowed up by the earth' (ibid, 9). However, others believe Elishva to merely be 'a demented old woman with amnesia' or simply 'a crazy old woman' (ibid, 9, 10). Regardless of how she is viewed by others around her, the way she sees and treats the saint is of great significance, especially for her surrounding context of war;

> Almost every evening she sat there to resume her sterile conversation with the saint with an angelic face. The saint wasn't in ecclesiastical dress: he was wearing thick, shiny plates of armor that covered his body and a plumed helmet, with his wavy blond hair peeking out from under the helmet. He was holding a long-pointed lance and sitting on a muscular white horse that had reared up to avoid the jaws of a hideous dragon encroaching from the corner of the picture, intent on swallowing the horse, the saint, and all his military accoutrements. (ibid, 15)

Instead of the typical angelic image that encapsulates the majority of saints, this particular one is a soldier with a clear mission, that of saving humanity from evil. Within the realistic setting, the fluid interplay between reality and the fantastical is clearly projected at night when 'a portal opened between her world and the other world, and the Lord came down, embodied in the image of the saint, to talk through him to Elishva, the poor sheep who had been abandoned by the rest of the flock and had almost fallen into the abyss of faithless perdition' (ibid. 16). Her communication with the saint also allows the blurring of fine lines separating reality from imagination, despair, madness, to hallucination and a dream-like state, thus illustrating a flexible exchange that translates into reality for her, or else allows the spilling of the much needed fantastical/magical into her resented reality. In this sense, faith is given a fantastical stance in the process of being visualized and normalized for the character. As she gazes at the image of the saint, his

> eyes were on Elishva. "You're too impatient, Elishva," he said. "I told you the Lord will bring you peace of mind or put an end to your torment, or you will hear news that will bring you joy. But no one can make the Lord act at a certain time." Elishva argued with the saint for half an hour until his beautiful face reverted to its normal state, his dreamy gaze stiff and immobile, a sign that he had grown tired of this sterile discussion. (ibid, 16)

However it may be interpreted, be it conditioned faith, imagination or senility, Elishva gets her wish granted the very next morning, or so she thinks as she sees the Whatitsname in her house, gazing at the picture of the saint, she believes it is her long-lost Daniel. With this act, she does not merely become his mother, but more so gives him the mission he carries out, that of avenging Daniel's loss, now that he has his name, and the loss of the rest of the victim parts that make him whole.

In addition to humanizing God and conversing with saints, the perceptions of death, the spirit world and resurrection are given a fantastical understanding that is normalized for the characters with the absurdity and chaos that war allows, as unfathomable and unrealistic it may seem in the physical world. The world of the spirit is allowed access to the world of the living through the coincidental creation of the creature. Hasib, a twenty-one-year-old guard at the Sadeer Novotel hotel, is 'killed in an explosion caused by a […] suicide bomber driving a dynamite-laden garbage truck stolen from the Baghdad municipality' (ibid, 35). As a result, his remains are nearly nonexistent and almost unworthy of mentioning, while an entire chapter is dedicated to the journey that his soul undergoes. As his soul is in the process of allocating its body, it finds itself hovering over the heads of his family members who are fast asleep and dreaming of him – each member in possession of and displaying a part of the same dream they all share of his return – Hasib's soul then finds itself in the presence of other souls drifting about. One particular soul is that of 'a teenager […] sitting cross-legged on a grave in a cemetery (ibid, 38). The young boy warns Hasib's soul against roaming away from its body, as it marks the differing fates that may befall him; if close to his body by dawn, he may be resurrected, but if he remains apart from his body, dawn will mark his eternal state of limbo. Amidst the anxiety that Hasib's soul feels, the young boy's soul attempts to console him further by pushing him toward affecting action that will bring him some form of physical presence. The boy explains; 'Maybe you haven't really died and you're dreaming. Or your soul has left your body to go for a stroll and will come back later' (ibid, 38). In the emotional rush to affect action that existential anxiety usually inspires, Hasib's soul finds the corpse that Hadi had stitched together, and indeed he is resurrected, body and soul, 'filling it from head to

toe, because probably, he realized then, it didn't have a soul, while he was a soul without a body' (ibid, 40).

On the other hand, Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid, the director general of the Tracking and Pursuit Department is responsible for reporting any suspicious activities that may threaten the country to the American military, or in other words, he serves 'the new Iraq' according to his old friend Saidi; 'He was responsible for a special information unit set up by the Americans and so far kept largely under their supervision' (ibid, 75). The department, however, serves a fantastical purpose,

> Its mission was to monitor unusual crimes, urban legends, and superstitious rumors that arose around specific incidents, and then to find out what really happened and, more important, to make predictions about crimes that would take place in the future: car bombings and assassinations of officials and other important people. (ibid, 75)

To add further obscurity to the nonsensical mission of the department, its general status is nonexistent to the public, as it operates discreetly and undercover, almost concealing the unrealistic purpose it serves. To assist Brigadier Majid in his mission, astrologers and fortune tellers are recruited; 'people who specialize in communication with spirits and with the djinn, and soothsayers' (ibid, 76). Yet, once more, the fine line separating the fantastical from reality is blurred amidst the absurdity of a war-torn world and is further normalized for the characters. In a conversation between Brigadier Majid and his old friend Saidi, the Editor-in-Chief of a magazine, in the presence of Mahmoud, a reporter, the Brigadier explains 'We're now in the middle of an information war. An information civil war. And some of my soothsayers are talking about a real war within the next six or seven months' (ibid, 77), to which the reporter is concerned about the possibility of being caught in a civil war, instead of skepticizing the source of information the Brigadier depends on. In addition, some reports show the presence of dead people roaming the streets alive; 'criminals who don't die when they're shot [….] Several reports from various parts of Baghdad. The bullet goes into the criminal's head or body, but he just keeps walking and doesn't bleed' (ibid, 77-78). Soon enough, with the help of the astrologers, brigadier Majid discovers the identity of the criminal and is able to track the activities and whereabouts of the whatitsname, making it his mission to catch him in the hope of getting a promotion.

2.2 A Magical Frame with an Existential Purpose: from Essence to Existence

All fantastical elements projected in the novel – from the characters' emotional detachment toward constant looming death, to the blurring of lines between the spirit world and that of the living, to the possibility of being resurrected – seem to unite under one single purpose, that of survival and presencing, serving an existential purpose. These fantastical circumstances seem to ideally occupy a great portion of the novel in preparation for the introduction of the product of war, death and devastation that would serve the purpose of giving Iraqis the justice they are in desperate need of. The Whatitsname is an accumulation of different body parts that belong to different Iraqi victims from all social, political and sectarian affiliations, stitched together to form one body, that of the true Iraqi citizen. From an existential perspective, the creature becomes the means by which Iraqi victims affect action to avenge the loss of their presencing. Each body part belongs to a different victim, which after being stitched together unite in their cause, that of avenging the killing of each part's owner. In other words, the Whatitsname is initially unaware of himself as an entity separate from the parts that make him; he sees himself as the embodiment of all Iraqi victims, and with his mere existence, in addition to avenging them, he gives those victims their existential presencing, thus projecting himself as an essence, a mere representation of a whole, whose purpose is predetermined by the victims themselves.

In a chapter dedicated to voicing the creature by means of recording his journey, he announces himself as the savior and the answer to all the victims' prayers. He is initially not as yet aware of his own existence but rather offers himself as a much-needed sacrifice to avenge the victims' parts. His mission, he believes is to affect the action that officials fail to accomplish and to avenge the victims against the terrorists who had inflicted pain upon them and their loved ones. He explains;

> They're all poor, and I'm the answer to the call of the poor. I'm a savior, the one they were waiting for and hoped for in some sense. These unseen sinews, rusty from rare use, have finally stirred. The sinews of a law that isn't always on the alert. The prayers of the victims and their families came together for once and gave those sinews a powerful impetus. The innards of the darkness moved and gave birth to me. I am the answer to their call for an end to injustice and for revenge on the guilty. (ibid, 142-143)

From the moment he comes to life, he does not show the need to affiliate with the human experience or come one with it, but rather almost sanctifies his existence by playing God's role in a more effective way. He sees no power exceeding his and feels the need to answer to no one but the calling of the victims. He claims; 'I will take revenge on all the criminals. I will finally bring about justice on earth, and there will no longer be a need to wait in agony for justice to come, in heaven or after death' (ibid, 143). When alone, he does not show interest in interacting with humans. He nevertheless does not want to be misconstrued for a terrorist himself. He explains;

> I am not here to be famous or to meet others. But in order to make sure that my mission isn't misrepresented and doesn't become more difficult, I find myself compelled to make this statement. They have turned me into a criminal and a monster, and in this way they have equated me with those I seek to exact revenge on. This is a grave injustice. (ibid, 143)

Being a manifestation of all Iraqis, the Whatitsname is clearly thrown into an absurd nonsensical world, whereby authorities are either corrupt or too inefficient to play their assigned role of justice. He understands his purpose and the actions required to bring his stitched parts the existence they are otherwise not given, by killing whoever is responsible for the existential death of each part he carries. Once a specific part in his body is avenged, however, it would have no more need to remain attached to him, and so falls off or dissolves. After an

attack he plans on Al-Qaeda and killing his targets, he notices;

> a piece of flesh on my shoulder wouldn't stay in place—it was all runny, like flesh from a several-days-old corpse. When I got up the next day, I found that many parts of my body were on the ground, and there was a strong smell of rot […] Over the next three hours, I lost my right thumb and three fingers from my left hand. My nose was disintegrating, and large holes appeared on my body – my flesh was melting. (ibid, 148-149, 150)

Upon seeing him, one of his assistants explains;

> Whenever you kill someone, that account is closed […] the person who was seeking revenge has had his wish fulfilled, and the body part that came from him starts to melt. It looks like there's a time factor. If you exact revenge for all the victims ahead of the deadline, then your body will hold together for a while and start to dissolve only later, but if you take too long, when you come to your last assignment you'll have only the body part of the last person to be avenged. (ibid, 149)

At this point, the Whatitsname finds himself facing a dilemma, that of the loss of his essence and societal calling. He is determined to avenge all the victims that make him whole, yet he realizes the impossibility of this mission now that each time he exacts revenge, a part in his body falls off, thus deterring him from completing his mission. He contends; 'I needed a complete overhaul. In fact – and this was a conclusion that took me by surprise – I needed new spare parts' (ibid, 150). This epiphanic moment however drives him toward the only solution possible to keep himself intact, at least until his mission is complete, by finding new victim parts to replace the released ones. It is not nevertheless an easy task, as the victim parts that he finds are of two militia members executed by another gang. This pauses an ethical question for the Whatitsname, as he fears that adding militant parts may negatively affect his purpose in life, or worse, turn him into a victimizer himself. It is a task that must be done nonetheless, and according to one of his assistants the executed gangster 'was a victim whose soul would seek revenge, so there was no harm in using his body for spare parts' (ibid, 152).

Frustration with his situation overpowers him as he finds himself stuck in the vicious and endless circle of his mission. He reflects on his state of being as he says;

> My list of people to seek revenge on grew longer as my old 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. Time was my enemy, because there was never enough of it to accomplish my mission, and I started hoping that the killing in the streets would stop, cutting off my supply of victims and allowing me to melt away. But the killing had only begun […] as dead bodies littered the streets like rubbish. (ibid, 153)

In addition to remaining misconstrued by authorities and civilians for a terrorist that needs to be obliterated, he needs to remain intact without having his body parts constantly fall off whenever a mission of revenge is accomplished. It is this very absurd situation he finds himself amidst that awakens the question of his existence, directing him toward his shift from the savior onto a victimizer, given that it is the one act that will give his existence the presencing it requires. He stops giving significance to the victims' cause and starts prioritizing his own existence. The shift in his attitude is projected in the form of blurred vision that he first has, escalating into complete loss of eyesight. His survival urgency, marked by the rapid deterioration in his physical state prompts him to affect the required action to sustain his presencing. He believes he is left no other choice but to kill an innocent man to replace his eyes or run the risk of getting captured and killed with no means to fend for himself without his eyesight. His existential urgency then drives him to prioritize himself over the old man, the presence of whom he believes serves the purpose of supplying the Whatitsname the parts he needs, and so the old man is deemed worth sacrificing. The Whatitsname shoots the man from behind as he admits that he 'was definitely innocent' (ibid, 161). In his complete blindness, he 'felt around for the warm body of the frightened old man. The bullet had hit him right in the skull [….] I took out a little knife and did my work quickly' (ibid, 162). The Whatitsname further justifies his action by blaming the man for being in the wrong place and time, claiming the inevitability of his death otherwise by militants if not himself, as 'it looked like the truth [he] had been seeking. The old man was a sacrificial lamb that the Lord had placed in [his] path […] so all [he] had done was hasten his death' (ibid, 162).

From the moment of the creature's existential shift onward, witnesses claim to have seen him behind interchanging faces and body parts;

> He is everywhere and has an amazing speed, […] No one knew who his next victim would be, and despite all the assurances from the government, people grew more convinced with every passing day that he would never die. They were well aware of the stories of bullets passing through him. They knew he didn't bleed and didn't let anyone catch a glimpse of his face. The definitive image of him was whatever lurked in people's heads, fed by fear and despair. It was an image that had as many forms as there were people to conjure it. (ibid, 268)

He is no longer in pursuit of a mission that serves external purposes to his own existence. In a sense, the only action that gives him the presence that he needs projects him as evil in the eyes of organized society, as otherwise, inaction marks his existential and physical death. According to T. S. Eliot (1951), the individual that is incapable of affecting action that sets him apart from mainstream society remains in a state of inaction and therefore death. He argues: 'So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good: so far as we do evil or good, we are human: and it is better, in a paradoxical way, to do evil than to do nothing: at least we exist' (429). Sartre, too, is found to promote violent revolt if required to break free from oppressive regimes. In this sense, the projection of a certain action as either evil or necessary for one's survival becomes relative. From the moment that the creature sets foot in society, his intent is entirely external. In other words, although he does affect action through the killing of terrorists, his mission does not serve a personal purpose, but that of

society, and so he signs his own death. But as he realizes his positioning amidst the absurdity of society and the parts that make him and then abandon him, his interpretation of 'evil' shifts as well from that of the understanding that society confers to it, to that which his value of individual presencing allows. In this sense, the action that he starts conducting is selected according to his personal truth and individual morality as a consequence to his personal experience, as action is chosen for a specific goal; that is, for the confirmation of one's subjective presence, and one's Self-affirmation.

3. Conclusion

Contrary to its past use in fiction, Magical Realism may be construed as a tool that projects individual, in addition to communal agency. It is more effective when existential urgency becomes the driving force that allows for its manifestation. Thus, creating space for the style to go beyond its postmodern and postcolonial stances, onto one fixated on existentialism. When an interplay between the absurdity of the world and the fantastical is allowed in fiction, magical realism becomes the means by which a subject reaches his existential awakening, away from societal irrationality and existential death. In Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the absurdity of the world is perfectly justified by portraying a war-torn country, whereby people live in chaos, and authorities are nonsensical. Amidst such absurdity, the introduction of the fantastical is facilitated, be it through people's attitudes, mentality or action, thus allowing the magical to take physical shape, with the existential purpose of presencing, be it bringing presence to the victims' parts, or the self-affirmation and individuality of the Whatitsname.

Acknowledgements

Not applicable.

Authors Contributions

The corresponding author, Dr. Deema Ammari, contributed to the conception, study design, execution, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation, writing, revision and critical review of the paper. The co-author, Dr. Dina Salman, has contributed to the acquisition of a number of sources employed in the study. She has also contributed to the analysis and interpretation of the body of the study and revised and critically reviewed the paper. Both authors agree on the journal chosen for publication. They both reviewed and agreed on all versions of the article before submission, during revision, the final version accepted for publication, and any significant changes introduced at the proofing stage. They both agree to take responsibility and be accountable for the contents of the article. They both share responsibility to resolve any questions raised about the accuracy or integrity of the published work.

Funding

This research did not get any external funding. It is fully funded by the corresponding author.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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