

A Feminist Reading of Ahmed Saadawi's Novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

قراءة لرواية أحمد سعداوي فرانكشتاين في بغداد من منظور نسوي

د. عفاف فرحان العنزي
أستاذ مساعد – كلية اللغات و الترجمة
جامعة الامام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية
afenezi@imamu.edu.sa

د. محمد أحمد مصطفى الليثي
أستاذ مشارك - كلية الاداب
جامعة العريش
allassignmentshere@gmail.com

Introduction

This paper, as the title promises, aims at providing a feminist reading of Ahmed Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. It proposes to examine the (mis)representations of women in the novel. The reading will evidence how the (Iraqi) patriarchal society of the novel whether consciously or unconsciously has subjugated and abused women. It will also point out how that patriarchal oppressive authority has kept women surrendering in humiliation to the overbearing, male hegemony. It is worth remarking that the novel abounds with examples of women that have been othered, objectified, subjected, scorned, abused and devoiced. Further, women in the novel are anything but normal human beings; they are on extremes: either purely religious, as Elishva, or purely sensual, lustful entities, objects of physical desires, looked at as fallen, female demons (99). Most of the women in the novel, Nawal al-Wazir, Zeina and many others, belong to this second type. In between these two extremes of women are some other women who are represented as nonsignificant gossipers. Representations of women in the novel are, thus, worth investigating. The paper will respond to two questions: how are women represented in Ahmad Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*? How is the novel exposing of the (Iraqi) patriarchal, hegemonic dominance practiced on women?

To start with, the majority of women in Saadawi's *Frankenstein* are morally corrupt. A reader of Saadawi's novel can well figure out that most of the women represented are fallen ones, selling their bodies for money. The fact that the novel is written by a male novelist, Ahmad Saadawi, should not escape the readers' attention as it is, before all else, through a male's eyes that readers, so to speak, see the microcosmic neighbourhood of Iraqi Betaween that teems with fallen women. Simon de Beauvoir comments that "[t]he representation of the world as the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from a point of view that is their own and that they confound with the absolute truth" (162).

In Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, woman is a saint, a whore or a mindless gossiper. The novel is revealing of how woman in Iraq, an Oriental society, as shown in the novel, is looked down on. Woman's suffering in the novel can largely be attributed to society that has already formulated the societal gaze at women. As represented in the

novel, woman is mostly looked at as the “devil” incarnated, sexually seductive, disposable or mindless; a “proper feminine conduct” is not expected (Campos).

This paper is divided into three sections: Section I examines the representation of Elishva as a sole example of a spiritually dedicated and religious woman, Section II deals with the novel’s representation of women, such as Nawal al-Wazir, Zeina, Veronica Munib and many others, as lascivious, lustful, sinful, deviant and immoral women. Section II is further subdivided under the following subtitles: Women: the Fallen Beings, Woman as Devil, Women Objectified and In a Patriarchal Society. Section III investigates the representation of the variety of other women (folks) as non-significant, gossipers.

Section I

1.1 Woman as Saint: Elishva

A religiously devout, reticent old Christian lady, Elishva provides an essential venue to this feminist reading of the novel; she stands on the other extreme of almost all the other women depicted in the novel. Referred to throughout the novel as Elishva, Umm Daniel, Daniel’s mother, the old lady or the old woman, she, as seen by some at least, stands for religious spirituality. Some neighbours, including Umm Salim, see her to be saint-like. After the death of her husband and the migration of her two daughters to Australia, because of the American invasion of Iraq, Elishva chose to live alone in her house with her cat Nabu. She waits for the return of her son Daniel who is believed, by neighbours, to have been killed in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) twenty years before. Umm Salim believes firmly that Elishva is divinely and blessed and, more importantly, that it is her being blessed that protects Bataween, the neighbourhood in which they both live, from the explosions and the bombings that happen all around Iraq. Such events, it is to be noted, started with the American colonisation of the country in 2003.

The deplorable state of colonised Iraq the novel portrays should by no means be considered apart from the American invasion of the country and the catastrophic consequences that ensued. “No day passed without at least one car bomb” (Saadawi 86). Baghdad, as the novel reveals, has turned into a city of ghosts and of reproductive death¹ (Saadawi (Arabic Version) 335). The invasion played so great havoc with Iraq that the whole country started to look like “the Jewish ruin next door” (Saadawi 169). The novel, thus, depicts what Teggart dubs, “the Gothic nature of reality” (Teggart). This simply accounts for Rawad Alhashmi’s description of the novel as a “dystopia” (Alhashmi).

An aura of blessedness has always characterised Umm Salim’s outlook on the old lady, “Elishva’s neighbor Umm Salim believed strongly, unlike many others, that Elishva had special powers and that God’s hand was on her shoulder wherever she was. She could cite numerous incidents as evidence” (Saadawi 9). It is true that, she might criticise or think ill of the old woman but she quickly went back to respecting and honoring her

¹ This is the translation of the authors of this research as they believe Jonathan Wright’s translation to be inaccurate here and, therefore, to have missed the point. Wright’s translation reads: The definitive image of him was whatever lurked in people’s heads, fed by fear and despair (Saadawi 221).

(Saadawi 9). Umm Salim, thus, believed that it is Umm Daniel's being a blessed and sacred that shielded Bataween from the evils that have befallen Baghdad, and the country in its entirety. This belief, of Umm Salim's, can be supported by these lines with which the novel opens:

The explosion took place two minutes after Elishva, the old woman known as Umm Daniel, or Daniel's mother, boarded the bus. Everyone on the bus turned around to see what had happened. They watched in shock as a ball of smoke rose, dark and black, beyond the crowds, from the car park near Tayaran Square in the center of Baghdad. (Saadawi 6)

In her old house, the old lady keeps the picture of Saint George the Martyr (Saadawi 193). She addresses the picture daily imploring the saint to bring back her son. She has become emotionally attached to her favorite saint and "treated her patron saint as one of her relatives, a member of a family that had been torn apart and dispersed. He was the only person she had left, apart from Nabu, the cat, and the specter of her son, Daniel, who was bound to return one day" (Saadawi 15). Significantly, from a feminist perspective, Elishva is depicted as subservient to the male dominance of her male saint. Christiana Phillips's remark that Saint George the Martyr "is celebrated as a symbol of fertility and rebirth" is considerable in this context (Phillips). The old woman is not independent of the yoke of patriarchy as she may appear at first. Of significance to this reading of the novel is the servitude insinuated by the old woman's many nights praying to Saint George the Martyr to fulfill the wishes she "had extracted from him after countless nights of pleading, begging, and weeping. She didn't have much time left on this earth, and she wanted a sign from the Lord about Daniel—whether he was alive and would return or where his real grave or his remains were" (Saadawi 16).

The same claim of Umm Daniel's being blessed can, further, be supported by the fact that near the end of the novel, in Chapter Sixteen, when Umm Daniel ultimately, after seeing her grandson who looked quite like her own son Daniel, decided to leave the neighbourhood and travel to live with her daughters in Australia. Umm Salim, foreseeing what would most probably happen, was panicked by the idea that she yelled a banging and deafening cry of woe and fear of a forthcoming bad omen, apocalyptic moment even though many others around her did not really understand these mingled emotions of Umm Salim's. "Umm Salim predicted that disaster would befall the lane because of Elishva's departure" (Saadawi 198). Umm Salim had, indeed, repeatedly warned that were it not for the old woman's "baraka— spiritual power—the neighborhood would be doomed and swallowed up by the earth on God's orders" (Saadawi 9). She proved to be more far-sighted than the others. Astonishingly, her portending, prophetic expectation came true soon enough. Just after Elishva, left the area, an explosion destroyed everything there:

The explosion rocked the whole neighborhood— cracks would later be found in the Liberty Monument—but the most serious impact was on the old houses in Lane 7, some of which had been built in the 1930s.

Elishva's house collapsed. So did Hadi's. Elishva's things and some other wooden furniture caught fire in Hadi's courtyard, and the fire

spread to Hadi's bed...The blast threw Faraj many feet in the air, resulting in a serious injury and some bruising on his face. The facade of Umm Salim's house was destroyed, while the walls inside were cracked. (Saadawi 203)

That Elishva is considered by some to be a divinely-blessed figure and paragon of religious spirituality should not, however, skew our judgment of a proper evaluation of the other sides underlying the character of the old lady. An important contradiction underlying the old woman's personality is that despite the fact that she is a devout Christian, she lives in a house that was built by and belonged to the Jews. Furthermore, her very name, Elishva, is originally a Jewish name that means in Hebrew "devoted to God" or "God is my oath" (thenamesdictionary). Many people in the Bataween neighborhood, on the other hand, think that *نثمسارش* is an old, raving lady, "just a demented old woman with amnesia" (Saadawi 9) who lives alone with her cat Nabu in a seven-room house. Chapter One of the novel, mainly about Elishva herself, is entitled "The Madwoman" (Saadawi 6), probably alluding somehow Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, published in 1979.

Another rarely explored side of the old woman's character is that of looking at her as a witch practicing black art:

Ninous's wife accused Elishva of practicing some kind of black magic on her two little boys and said she had prevented one of them from speaking even at the age of six. She was frightened of the old woman, especially after she found her talking to pictures or to the many cats that roamed the house. Once she told her husband that one of the cats spoke back to the old woman and had a conversation with her. She even said she suspected the cats were in fact humans and that Elishva had transformed them into cats with satanic magic. (Saadawi 52)

That the old woman almost always kept to the company of her Tom cat Nabu and that she noticeably cares about him sound really enigmatic. The narrator's keen eye on Nabu, the old lady's cat, is meant to provoke readers' thought about the cat in a way that tells them the cat should be looked at as one of the characters that can bring about actions in the course of the novel (Saadawi 28). This is supported by the fact that the word "cat", mentioned forty times throughout the novel, In his turn, "Nabu", the cat's name, is mentioned fourteen times. Nabu, thus, acts as one of the novel's dominant motifs. A keen reader of the novel will most probably notice the close relationship between the old lady and her cat Nabu. That the woman sometimes addresses him is also enigmatic. Mysteriously, Nabu was one of three ghosts in the old woman's house. "To others she lived alone, but she believed she lived with three beings, or three ghosts, with so much power and presence that she didn't feel lonely" (Saadawi 15). Readers are somehow prepared to expect more from the cat than they would from as an ordinary pet cat "She was preparing an answer for when she opened the door and Nabu looked up as if to ask, "So? What happened?" (Saadawi 9). Nabu the cat, we are told, can ponder on the events that go on around him, and can have his own interpretation of different events, "the

molting gray cat looked at Daniel with wide, frightened eyes, mewling softly as if talking to itself” (Saadawi 46). More importantly even, at the end of the novel, when Elishva was leaving the neighbourhood forever, the cat made up his mind not to go with his lifelong companion in a way that astonished Elishva herself:

Before closing the front door, Elishva called after Nabu, but the cat escaped up the stairs. She shouted after him again, and the cat looked toward her and gave an undulating meow, as if to say he wasn't a coward like her and wasn't going to leave the house, then he disappeared at the turn on the stairs. (Saadawi 198)

Elemental to this feminist reading of the novel is the fact that Elishva has a house of her own. In a male-centred society this epitomises the independence of a woman, which represents a great threat to the power and dominance of men. Under patriarchal dominion, women can barely have any rights; the very word “have” is doubtfully used with women. As the novel makes clear, throughout centuries of objectification and deliberate marginalisation, women came to accept their lots of societal marginalisation as part of the culture and the social constructs to which they have to succumb. It is the male-dominated society, rather than anything else, that inscribes and circumscribes the roles women have to comply with, conformably with the long-standing societal construct that has become one of the unquestionable givens of the society.

Women in the novel have one of two places, a husband's house or a brothel, but no third choice. In the novel, Elishva is the only woman who owns a house, a big one, with no one else sharing her house. Inherently, this aroused a state of discomfort and discontent of the men in the neighbourhood who firmly believe that possession, especially of houses, is man's but not woman's asset. Out of this societal convention, many men in the neighbourhood tried to get the woman out of the house; she was offered to sell or rent her house many times. She simply rejected all such offers. On their part, Faraj the realtor offered to buy the house, and Hadi tried to get the antiques in the house:

Faraj the realtor tried several times to encourage Elishva's neighbors to win her over to his proposal...Faraj never lost hope. Hadi, on the other hand, constantly pestered Elishva until he eventually lost interest and just threw hostile glances [at]² her way whenever she passed him on the street. (Saadawi 11)

All men's endeavours to take hold of the old woman's house emanate, among other reasons, from the social convention that a woman does not have the right to own a house. She was also offered to sell property. It is unacceptable in a patriarchal community, as the novel depicts, for women to make important decisions or say no to a man. Even though such endeavours are individual ones, they rise from, and are urged by, the belief that a woman is not allowed to own a house: the unwritten laws of patriarchy overpower, supersede and preside over the legal written laws, “Faraj thought it would take only half

² The preposition is added by the authors but it is not in Jonathan Wright's translation of the novel.

an hour to evict a defenseless old Christian woman, but a voice in his head warned him that he risked breaking the law and offending people, so it might be better to first gauge people's feelings about the old woman (Saadawi 13-14). He cares about societal reaction much more than he does about the legality of his actions.

It can be said that women are not considered proper human beings in their own right, but rather they themselves were seen as possessions. Thus, as a male in a patriarchal society, Faraj believes it is his right to own Elishva's house. He came to the conclusion that the "best thing would be to wait till she died, and then no one but he would dare to take over the house, since everyone knew how attached he was to it and acknowledged him as its future owner, however long Elishva lived" (Saadawi 14). Indeed, nothing in the whole novel aroused men's antagonism and anger as the idea of this woman owning a house of her own; an idea they never conceded to. Faraj's misogynic attitude and his scolding of the old woman who entertained the government employees who offered to buy her house is one evidence in this respect:

He turned and saw Elishva looking through the gaping doorway. Her face was pale and tired, more like that of a ghost than of an ordinary woman. Faraj raised his hand and waved it in front of her face. "Won't you drop dead already and give me a break? You're as tough as old boots, for God's sake!" he said. (Saadawi 152)

Elishva's having a house, thus, provoked a state of discontent, which became mutual, between men in Bataween and the old woman. Even her great suffering is not enough to give her the right to own a house. That she is a widow who lost her son twenty years earlier and that her two daughters left her alone and migrated to Australia are not enough reasons for such a sexist society to acknowledge her right to have a house of her own. In male-oriented societies, as the novel shows, men and women are poles apart. It is only through a set of binary oppositions of possessor/possessed, independent/dependent, dominant/submissive that the man/woman relation in such societies can be explained; men are nominators women are denominators.

Faraj and Hadi would annoy the old lady. Faraj the realtor, "had seen her house from the inside only twice but had fallen in love with it immediately" (Saadawi 12). In his turn, Hadi, who once entered the old woman's house and saw it from the inside, never stopped thinking about getting the antiquities in the old lady's house:

Over the past few years Faraj had tried repeatedly to persuade Elishva to sell her old house, but Elishva just flatly refused, without explanation.... As for Hadi, her neighbor, he was a scruffy, unfriendly man in his fifties who always smelled of alcohol. He had asked Elishva to sell him the antiques that filled her house....his eyes popping out of his head at the sight of them all. But the old woman just walked him to the front door and sent him out into the street, closing the door behind him. (Saadwai 10)

Elishva must, at certain times at least, however, have wavered and felt weak before the practices of her patriarchal society. The old woman must have felt at unease with the ongoing harassment of the men who wanted to dispossess her of her property out of nothing but that she is denied the right of possessing a house or properties due to the fact of being a woman in a male-centred society. In addition to the attempts made by Faraj and Hadi, there were some other attempts to deprive the old woman of her house but the old woman would still hold steadily to keeping the house. One such attempt drove Faraj mad and he slapped a young man who was a member of the “Association for the Protection of Historical Houses” (151). He meant to intimidate the woman, and he did.

Her increasing fears of authoritative men around her is probably one of the reasons why Elishva unwaveringly welcomed the appearance of the Whatisitsname in her house and did not hesitate to confer on the new being the name of her own son; she must have sought a male’s protection from males’ menaces and aggression. Indeed, it is true that in a patriarchal society a woman is too weak to stand her ground before authoritative and oppressive men, especially when she possesses a house, a thing that threatens men’s strongest sense of control over women.

Elishva can be looked at as exemplary in the way she was ready to defend her house and her right of owning a house. She got determined never to leave her house, even though the reason was to join her own daughters in Australia. “I won’t leave my house,” stated the old woman firmly (169). Even if this will cost her her own life, she by no means thought of giving up, “Fear not those who kill the body but are not able to kill the soul,” said she defiantly (169). Most probably, it was her religiosity and devotion that guided her to realise that the body can be sacrificed but not one’s right of defending a place that is one’s own, which is itself one of the reasons why many men would easily deny women’s identification with spirituality and religiosity.

Elishva can be looked at case even worse is that the woman is financially independent. She gets money from her daughters and from the church. Women’s financial dependence, more than all else, is the trap men use to keep in control of women. Women in patriarchal societies are but tiny shadows that must be permanently orbiting the paramount figures of men. Every woman should have a patriarchal pole around whose figure her life and very being should revolve; otherwise she is such an aberrant, pervert, abnormal woman, just as Elishva is, as observed by many males in her society.

What is probably more striking here is that it seems that even women themselves did not believe a woman had the right to own a house. Women got accustomed to the idea that it is not a woman’s right to possess a house. In this respect, they can be compared to the bird, in Maya Angelou’s eponymous poem “Caged Bird” that forgot flying due to having the feathers of its wings clipped and to having been caged long enough. The bird falters, fumbles and finds it hard even to move. When it sings, its song is no more than a “fearful trill”:

But a bird that stalks
down his narrow cage

can seldom see through
 his bars of rage
 his wings are clipped and
 his feet are tied
 so he opens his throat to sing.

The caged bird sings
 with a fearful trill
 of things unknown
 but longed for still
 and his tune is heard
 on the distant hill
 for the caged bird
 sings of freedom. (web.mit.edu)

Like the caged bird in the poem, women in the authoritative, phallogocentric society of the novel see the world through, so to speak, patriarchal the “bars” (restrictions) imposed on them. This accounts for the fact that even women tried to get the old lady out of her own house so that Faraj will get it. Some women, who feared the heavy hand of domineering Faraj, tried to persuade Elishva to sell her house, “Umm Salim...said that Faraj was evil and might do anything. He might...throw her into the street” (Saadawi 160). Further, she was advised by Veronika Munib, who was accused of having taken a bribe from Faraj, “to persuade Elishva to move in with Umm Salim and her husband” (11), to sell her house to Faraj. Giving women bribes is another way of patriarchal abusing of women.

Section II

2.1 Women: The Fallen Beings

Representative of the macrocosm of the Iraqi world, microcosmic Bataween neighbourhood of Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* draws an awful picture of women as morally corrupt. Seduction of the female characters is, so to speak, a re-presentation of the stereotypical image of woman as tempting and luring. Examples of this proliferate in the novel. Throughout the novel countless accusations are directed to women by men. These are revealing of how disparagingly men look at women and how humiliatingly men speak of and to them. Women are seen, and spoken of, as devils or, at best, objects of physical pleasure, but not anyhow human beings in their own right. The generic words “woman” and “women” are mentioned one hundred and twenty one times in the novel. They are used derogatorily many times. “[D]evil woman” (Saadawi 95), a “loose woman” (Saadawi 189), “what else but sex could have brought this woman...?” (36), “He pictured every woman in some lewd position” (39) and “damned woman” (Saadawi 77) are some examples in this respect.

The words “prostitute”, “whore” and “fuck buddy” are mentioned many times throughout the novel. In addition to its insistence on objectifying and othering women, the novel, stigmatises women and cements the archetypal images of them as “deviant”

creatures (Bressler 144-5), and devils. Further, in a male-centred society, a “proper feminine conduct” is not expected (Campos). The novel is, thus, revealing of the injustice and prejudices practiced against women in the patriarchal society of the novel. Thus, in the male-hegemonic society of Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, women are generally represented as fallen beings. The archaic term “fallen woman” is used to describe a woman who has lost her innocence and chastity. The term, thus, refers to “female sexual promiscuity and moral incontinence” ([discovery.ucl](https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/)). It is worth noting that the very word “fallen” is used to refer to women but not to men; i. e. there are fallen women but there are not fallen men; under patriarchy, women are easily cursed, condemned and accused of being immoral while men are almost infallible. Thus, even though Mahmoud al-Sawadi sleeps with women every night (Saadawi 181, 188), he is not fallen, but the women that go to his room are, and even though Ali Baher Saidi easily exchanges one woman for another (Saadawi 83), he is not fallen, but the women in his company are. Indeed, it is Nawal al-Wazir’s proximity to Saidi, more than anything else, that gave her the bad reputation of being a “whore” (Saadawi 189) while Saidi himself is simply “a man of pleasure” (Saadawi 95). Even Hadi, the junk dealer, another typical product of that patriarchal society, is not a fallen man even though collected money to sleep with women, “he was interested in having cash in his pocket, nothing more, enough to sleep with women whenever he wanted and to buy a drink” (Saadawi 71). Like Saidi in this respect, Hadi is a man of pleasure, but he is not fallen. “Aziz might find Hadi with one or two of the prostitutes from Lane 5. It was always fun with Hadi because he didn’t deny himself when it came to pleasure” (Saadawi 19).

As feminist critics assert, the archetypical image of woman as a fallen creature is supported biblically. Women are “told often enough that they are the source of sin, women may well begin feeling guilty as they accept the necessity for penance. Taught effectively enough that they are irrelevant to the important process of society, women begin to feel they are living invisibly” (Gilbert 426).

In the novel, Saidi’s driver, spoke of Nawal al-Wazir as a “fallen woman”³ (Saadawi (the Arabic Version) 277) The word “fallen” is readily applicable only to women; it is gender-bound. The fact that countless words in English are used to offensively refer to women’s immorality has turned into what can be dubbed a linguistic phenomenon. Words, such as “tramp”, “tart”, “slag”, “slut”, “whore”, “swinger”, “sexpot”, “goer”, “scrubber”, “troll”, “scarlet woman”, “nymphomaniac”, “vamp”, in addition to many others, are all gender-bound ones, used offensively to refer only to women ([macmillandictionary](https://www.macmillandictionary.com/)). It is noteworthy that the words used refer to men who have sensual relationships with many women are not only few ones in comparison with the countless words used with women but many of these words that refer to immoral men are less offensive. Many of them are allusions to certain fictional characters such as “Romeo”, “Don Juan”, “Casanova” and “Lothario” ([macmillanthesaurus](https://www.macmillanthesaurus.com/)). Only quite few words, such as libertine and womaniser, can be described as blunt enough.

2.2 Woman as Devil

³ Jonathan Wright translated the word as “loose woman” (189), but the authors of the research find that “fallen woman” is the proper translation.

The image of woman as devil is one of the images propagated and instilled throughout the course of the novel. To begin with, Saidi saved Nawal's number on his office mobile phone as "666". When alone in the office, Mahmoud al-Sawadi saw the number 666 calling and he quickly identified the caller with the "demon, "the caller's name, as appearing on the screen, was (666) and he knew, as he once watched in an American movie that the number represents the Antichrist or the Devil in Daniel's Vision in the Holy Book"⁴ (Saadawi (the Arabic version) 111). This was enough to inculcate the image of Nawal in Mahmoud's mind as an incarnation of the Devil. Diabolising a woman means, before all else, to see her as fallen. Al-Saidi quickly associates the "666" lady with voluptuousness and immorality. His mind conjures up immoral images of her, ones that he could never rid his mind of thenceforth (Saadawi 82). He always looked at her sensually. Indeed, he could never think of Nawal but as a woman devil, the image of the diabolic figure implanted into his mind by the number 666. Importantly enough, he "imagined her face and her figure in his elaborate sexual fantasies" (Saadawi 185) even though he acknowledged to himself that she "didn't seem to be a beggar or a prostitute; she was a respectable woman" (Saadawi 185).

Mahmoud al-Sawadi kept thinking about Saidi's "female devil Nawal" (Saadawi 99), and would never give the idea or the image of the female devil up. Nawal realised the way Mahmoud thought of her and tried to correct this image more than one time (Saadawi 184, 188). She told him to think of her in a better way and to respect her, "Try to respect me" (Saadawi 188) said she to Mahmoud, but Mahmoud was not ready to change her image in his mind, or, rather, the long-standing (archetypal) image of woman in the mind of a patriarchal society; this is the way he, a product of the patriarchal Iraqi society, wanted to see her. She tried many times to defend herself against the thoughts she knew preoccupied Mahmoud's mind, "don't get carried away. He was just helping me on a film" (184). Her endeavours, however, proved useless. In his dreams he saw he coming to satisfy him (Saadawi 82). Once in the lift with Nawal, Mahmoud embraced and kissed her, "When the elevator had reached the ground floor, Nawal pushed Mahmoud away with her hands and exited as soon as the door opened" (Saadawi 188). She realised she was just mistaken when she thought he and Saidi were "like chalk and cheese" and that only Saidi is "a real bullshitter" (Saadawi 184). Indeed, she would think highly of Mahmoud and expect him to have a prosperous future. She simply forgot that both of Mahmoud al-Sawadi and Saidi are outcomes of a patriarchal society that molds men's minds to objectify and look down on women; that is why Mahmoud always "wanted more from Nawal" (Saadawi 184).

It should be noted that throughout events of the novel, Nawal is looked at as a fallen women. This is, above all else, how men want to see her rather than how she sees herself or how she wants her (patriarchal) society to see her. She is not allowed to say who she is. This can be described as a male gaze, man's entrapping and enticing look that is sure to overwhelm woman and make her helplessly vulnerable to man's penetrating looks. "The male gaze", coined by film scholar Laura Mulvey in 1975, refers to stereotyping

⁴ This translation is the authors' as they believe that Wright's translation here is not accurate enough. Wright's translation reads, "On the screen it showed up as 666, and he knew from an American film that this was the number of the "beast from the sea" in the book of Revelation" (81).

women and associating them with sexual objectification. Nawal repeatedly tried to convince Mahmoud's patriarchal mindset that she is not a fallen woman, but it was all in vain, as he wanted, and insisted on seeing her as one, "Nawal said that Saidi had tried to be intimate with her several times but she refused. The term "The male gaze" also refers to a male's gazing at parts of the body that are usually exposed or uncovered. The first time Nawal appears in the novel at al-Saidi's office, she is subjected to Mahmoud al-Sawadi's gaze. To him, Nawal represents the stereotype of the seductive Arab woman. Noticeably, little is provided, even by the author of the novel himself about her intellectual ability compared with her physical appearance:

Nawal al-Wazir was a film director, or so she claimed. She was about forty, light-skinned with jet-black hair, plump with a double chin that gave a touch of oriental beauty to her face, which was always covered with a thin layer of slightly tacky makeup. She liked dark red lipstick, a thick line of kohl around her eyes, and black eyebrow pencil to accentuate the arch, and wore a loose scarf on her head, matching tops and skirts, and an ever-changing array of colorful plastic accessories. (Saadawi 43-44)

2.3 Women Objectified

Men in the novel easily objectify women. Like other men in his society, Mahmoud al-Sawadi knew well, that women are, before all else, objects of pleasure affordable anytime if he can pay them. When he visited the office of Brigadier Majid, Mahmoud al-Sawadi noticed that "everything he needed was there—except for a woman's body" (Saadawi 91). He speaks of a "woman's body" as if it were any piece of furniture that the Brigadier's office lacked. In his turn, Hadi, the junk dealer, looks at woman as an affordable article or commodity (Saadawi 87). Under Patriarchy, money is the sure bait that hides the hook of enticing and getting women; women are, consequently, kept financially dependent on men who keep abusing them. Article-like, a woman can be exchanged for another, "So now Nawal al-Wazir was the devil incarnate. Saidi must have exchanged her for some other woman. Someone like Saidi couldn't not [but]⁵ have a woman" (Saadawi 83). In his turn, Mahmoud al-Sawadi abused many women. Whenever he needed a woman, he just "called Raghayib, the woman who arranged women for him, and waited in his room", and she sent him the one he wanted (Saadawi 179). Objects of males' pleasure, and easily accessible as they are, women are no more than entities of physical pleasure. It was through promises of financing Nawal's proposed movie that Saidi planned to entrap Nawal:

She had met him through friends and had read a book of his that was published in London called *The Conditions for Democracy in Rentier States*. He had convinced her that he could finance her first full-length film by introducing her to organizations with links to the American

⁵ The word has been added by authors of the research since it is missing from Wright's translation. A more accurate translation of the last sentence, as suggested by the authors of the research, is probably, "It is not possible for someone like him to be without women" (Saadawi (the Arabic version 114).

Embassy in Baghdad that were willing to subsidize films from the Islamic world produced by women. (Saadawi 186)

Saidi wanted from Nawal “what most men want. When she came to a dead end with him, she suspended the project and kept out of sight until today, when she came to retrieve her things from Saidi’s desk before he came back” (Saadawi 184). An essential part of the continual struggle a woman has to undertake under patriarchal dominance is to prove that she is not a fallen woman since she is not given a chance to say who she is. Through the countless humiliating gazes and accusations, a woman finds herself amid a vortex of misconceptions and she has, therefore, to keep defending her image by saying who she is not rather than saying who she is. The novel, thus, speaks volumes of the ways women are abused.

The Arminian Veronica Munib is another object-like woman. She works as a maid at Abu Anmar’s Orouba Hotel. A stark example in this respect, the woman accepts being abused by Abu Anmar because of her lack of money. He is said to be the father of her adult son Andrew. Veronica is portrayed as passive and obedient. Her need of money keeps her under the enslaving dominance and manipulation of Abu Anmar. It is money, rather than anything else, that enables men to oppress women. It is this very thing that empowered Abu Anmar and enabled him to practice his patriarchal authority over, Veronica, the keeper of his hotel, and keep her under his male dominion.

2.4 In a Patriarchal Society

Saadawi’s novel is exposing of the inhuman, male practices against women. Zeina, who often visits Mahmoud in his room in Abu Anmar’s hotel, is called Nawal by Mahmoud al-Sadawi just because he wants her to be Nawal. He wants her not to be herself, but to be another woman (Nawal) that he desires to encounter. Zeina corrects him that she is not Nawal and reminds him that she is Zeina but he insists on naming her Nawal. He is a man and he pays her. He, therefore, has the right to (de-identify and) reidentify the woman under his dominance. In Virginia Woolf’s critique *A Room of One’s Own*, the fictionalised speaker, who is at times identifiable with the author herself, says, “call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton. Mary Carmichael or any other name you please-it is not a matter of importance” (Woolf). Zeina accepts to be Nawal when she is in Mahmoud Al-Sawad’s room and under his influence:

he still saw her as one particular woman, Nawal al-Wazir, the woman he loved. There she was in his arms, even if she said her name was Zeina... A minute later he shouted at her, and she replied angrily, “Who’s this Nawal you’re going on about? I tell you my name’s Zeina, god damn it, and then you call me Nawal?” (Saadawi 181)

He encountered Nawal through her. He could not do this without de-identifying Zeina, first and due to lack of money, Zeina agreed to give up her identity and be Nawal. It can be said that Mahmoud enjoyed Nawal through being with Zeina many times until one time he tried to strangle Nawal! Zeina decided not to visit him again, “When bidding him

farewell, Zeina told him she forgave his trying to strangle her last night”⁶ (Saadawi (Arabic Version) 278). The incident must have taught Zeina that she should stick to her own identity and not to accept to be any one other than herself. It should be remembered that one of the reasons this novel was awarded the IPAF (International Prize for Arabic Fiction) for 2014 is that it exposes violence that Iraq suffers from. Part of such violence has to do with what women in the Iraqi patriarchal society of the novel undergo (Zaqqut).

It is worth noting that this is how the males in the novel, Mahmoud al-Sawadiy, Ali Baher Saidi, Sultan (Saidi’s driver), Farid Shawwaf the journalist, Hazem Abboud the news photographer, Abu Anmar, Hadi the junk dealer, and Faraj the realtor want to see women rather than what women are really like. It is this image-imposing (stereotyping) battle that almost all women lose in the novel’s patriarchal world and are, as a result, victimised by males. A challenging question for women in a male-centred society is, thus, not who a woman really is but who I, the subject patriarchal self, want her, the oppressed female other, to be; it is not what she is really like, but rather, it is what I want her to be like. It is the male who determines not only the societal construct of the female but the very the whatness ([collinsdictionary](http://collinsdictionary.com)), the whoness⁷ and the howness (wordsense.eu) of a woman as well. The male draws the image of woman and the latter has to accept it, put on and yield to that framing image even though it may not fit. It is almost impossible for women to reconfigure or reconstruct such received societal givens as such an image has been culturally inculcated. Stereotyping is like the rails along which a female’s life should track forth from birth to death. Any attempts of rerouting can well lead to catastrophic consequences on the woman’s part. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir comments, “without a doubt it is more comfortable to endure blind bondage than to work for one’s liberation; the dead, too, are better suited to the earth than the living” (Saadawi 274). Women should accept their status of being perceived of much lower position than men in society. The novel makes it clear that women have no task other than to please men sensually. Farid Shawwaf, Mahmoud’s friend sums up the whole issue by employing a bluntly explicit and offensive synecdoche, a figure of speech that “name[s] only some part of” a whole (Baldick), that any woman will find quite humiliating (Saadawi 96).

Section III

3.1 Women: Gossiping, trivial Beings

Woman as a nonsignificant gossip is the third of the representations of women in this study. In this three-dimensional representation of women in A. Saadawi’s novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, the paper will come to grips with the depiction of women as trivial gossipers whose words are comparable only to the smoke Umm Salim, who entertained such women gatherings, blew from her shisha pipe; their talks are “like the smoke she blew from her shisha pipe during those afternoon chats: it came out in billows, then coiled into sinuous white clouds that vanished into the air, never to travel outside the

⁶ This is the translation of the authors of the research as this part is missing in J. Wright’s translation of the novel (231).

⁷ The term is coined by Mohammad A. Al-Leithy, one of the two authors of this research.

courtyard.” (Saadawi 9). Central to this consideration is Umm Salim’s gathering which takes place in the limited spot of the courtyard of Umm Salim’s house. Despite the ostensible triviality of the of the gatherings and their exposing of the societal marginalising of women, it is important as it is the means by which women express themselves. They speak and they are listened to. Unlike Zeina and Elishva, who have been silenced by male practices, women in this, so to speak, feminine league can speak freely.

Significantly, women in these gatherings are different from other women in the novel in more than one respect. Unlike other women in the novel, these women chatted freely. Other women in the novel went to, and sought (financial) help from, men. Even Elishva herself is no exception in this respect. She “would come to the church to make free calls” (Saadawi 7) and received her daughters’ phone calls from Australia. Such calls, and Elishva’s very answer time, were strictly controlled by, Father Josiah, Elishva’s parish priest, “Sometimes Elishva and one of her daughters would start arguing halfway into the call, and the minute would run out just as the argument was getting heated, forcing Father Josiah to pull the phone out of Elishva’s hand” (Saadawi 53). Umm Salim’s gatherings are women ones outright. It is in the small spot where such women congregated that such women could “float in another world” (Saadawi 77) beyond the confining male-dominated Bataween and “its daily routines” (Saadawi 77), and, it is there that they, to employ Ann Dobie’s words, “expose patriarchy, and save women from being the other” (Dobie 108). There, in that small spot, almost invisible to society, women listen to and side with one another and even launch attacks on male superseding despotism:

This ... woman with a grudge against Faraj was doing her duty as well as she could, and they were grateful to her. “God curse you this evening, Faraj. God take you,” cried Umm Salim. The other women repeated the curse and brought down on his head various other curses and insults. The woman with a grudge felt a great sense of relief because of their reaction, and suddenly she didn’t hate Faramj so much. (Saadawi 77)

The way such women respond to the woman’s telling of the story is comparable, even though at a minor scale, to what feminists dub gynocriticism. Peter Barry comments on the “broad and varied” employing of the term (Barry 123).

Conclusion

In a patriarchal society, a woman is denied the right of owning a place of her own since this marks her independence of man’s hegemony. Indeed, women are looked at as possessions. Under patriarchy, as A. Saadawi’s novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* makes clear, women are easily abused and victimised by men; women in the novel are not, it should be mentioned, faultless but it is important to note that hegemonic patriarchy can well contribute to creating an immoral society, one in which women, objectified as they are, can sell their bodies for money. In such a society, women should, submissively, accept and play the role of victims. Elementally conclusive to this feminist reading of

Ahmad Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is the fact that under patriarchal dominion, women are denied most of their basic rights since they are objectified and looked at as nonsignificant shadows that should only be orbiting males' dominance. In the patriarchal society of the novel's Betaween, women are humiliated and exploited by men who abuse them by exploiting them financially; a patriarchal mind understands well that it is through financial dependence that women can be manipulated and, henceforth, abused.

In a male-centred society, women, dumbled and silenced as they are, cannot but surrender and be obedient to males' hegemonic patriarchy; they should, and are expected to, humiliatingly undertake the role(s) fashioned for them by the male supremacy that stands for the upper, heavy hand. It is not a woman's right to introduce herself since the patriarchal society has already prescribed her identification; she has, consequently, just to uphold and undertake the ready-made yoke of patriarchy, regardless of how unfitting it may be. As the novel reveals, men have credited themselves with saying what, rather than who, woman is and what woman is like. Indeed, in a male-oriented society, even though a woman strives to say who she really is and what she is really like, this sounds like a Sisyphus task; a ceaseless, life-consuming endeavor that leads to nothing. It is next to impossible for women in male-dominated society to enhance their images as men themselves insist on seeing women in the desirous ways they have long ago drawn. Likewise, it is next to impossible to effect a change to the long-standing outlook on women in such societies since the males' mindset (singular) is configured to think of women only in this very specific way. Excruciating as the experience is, succumbing to the yoke of patriarchy sounds like an inevitable must and a societal given that women unthinkingly yield to.

Works Cited

- Alhashmi, Rawad. "The Grotesque in Frankenstein in Baghdad: Between Humanity and Monstrosity". *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 2020. <https://ijlls.org/index.php/ijlls/article/view/120>. Accessed 13 March 2020.
- Baldick, Chris. "synecdoche." *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York: Manchester University Press, 2002.
- Campos, Noelia Sanchez. *Subtle Subversion: An Analysis of Female Desire in the Works of Frances Sheridan, Frances Brooke, Elizabeth Griffith and Sophia Lee*. <https://www.tdx.cat/bitstream/handle/10803/405313/nsc1de1.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>. Accessed 26 October 2021.
- <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/whatness>. Accessed 22 November 2021.
- Cuddon, J.A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Penguin Books, 1999.
- De Beauvoir, Simon. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, New York, 2011.
- Dobie, Ann B. *Theory into Practice: An Introduction to literary Criticism*. Australia: Wadsworth, 2009.
- Gilbert, Sandra. Gubar, Susan. *The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press, 2000.
- Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill. Cornell University Press Ithaca, 1974.
- <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/thesaurus-category/british/words-for-women-who-have-a-lot-of-sexual-partners>. Accessed 2 October 2021.
- <https://www.macmillanthesaurus.com/topics/words-for-men-who-have-a-lot-of-sexual-partners>. Accessed 2 November 2021.
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. University of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, Oxford UP, 1999, 833-844.
- Phillips, Christiana. "Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* as a Case Study of Consecration, Annexation, and Decontextualization in Arabic English Literary Translation". *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2020. Accessed 4 June 2020.
- Saadawi, Ahmed. *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Beirut: Elgamal Publishing Company, 2013.
- , Ahmed. *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Translated by Jonathan Wright, Penguin Books, 2018.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak". *Postcolonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. Columbia University Press, 1994.

- Startup, Radjoka. Damaging Females: Representations of Women as Victims and Perpetrators of Crime in the Mid Nineteenth Century. University College London, Department of History, PhD Dissertation, 2000. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/1348856/1/326168.pdf>. Accessed 18 August 2021.
- Teggart, Hope. “*Frankenstein in Baghdad: A Novel of Understanding the Iraq War and Its Aftermath*”. International ResearchScape Journal, 2019. <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1109&context=irj>. Accessed 15 December 2020.
- Thenamedictionary. ““Elishva””. Online. <https://thenamesdictionary.com/name-meanings/9255/name-meaning-of-elisheva>. Accessed 18 November 2021.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. Grafton, London, 1977. Ebook. http://web.mit.edu/~yandros/poetry/i_know_why_the_caged_bird_sings#:~:text=But%20a%20bird%20that%20stalks,caged%20bird%20sings%20of%20freedom. Accessed 14 October 2021.
- <https://www.wordsense.eu/howness/>. Accessed 5 October 2021.
- Zaqqut, Nahid. “A Reading of Ahmed Saadawi’s *Frankenstein in Baghdad*”. <https://fatehmedia.eu/?p=175649>. Accessed 24 November 2021.