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Master's Thesis

Violence and Grief in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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Abstract

This thesis examines the portrayal of violence and grief in Ahmed Sa'adawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) and explores their implications in post-invasion Iraq. Tracing Iraq's history throughout the past four decades shows that one cannot skip the topics of war, death, and loss. Thus, this novel reflects a broader trend among Iraqi authors who use literature to give a voice to the silenced and forgotten victims of war. Sa'adawi's work, blending elements of horror, magical realism, and political satire, stands out as one of the few Iraqi works that successfully reached Western audiences and received international acclaim, partly because of its intriguing title, which evokes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Sa'adawi's Frankensteinian figure is a stitched-up corpse that becomes inhabited by a lost soul. Driven by vengeance on behalf of the previous owners of his body parts, he commits a series of crimes that stir the media. These events take place two years after the American invasion, during the onset of a brutal sectarian war. This research investigates how this figure and other characters, such as Hadi and Elishva, navigate grief and violence and the extent to which the "Whatsitname" or *Shisma* is a manifestation of collective grief, especially within the historical context of Iraq. In addition, it offers a transcultural analysis that makes use of historical, political, literary, and cultural theoretical perspectives to examine the interconnection between grief and violence by drawing on theories by Judith Butler, Giorgio Agamben, and Achille Mbembe, and others. For instance, Butler's concepts of grievability and precariousness will be applied to examine which lives are deemed mournable in the context of war. Agamben's notion of "bare life" will frame the analysis of characters existing in a state of exception, while Mbembe's work on necropolitics will contextualise the pervasive conflict in Iraq. This theoretical background will be enhanced by incorporating secondary literature, which will provide additional depth to the analysis.

This comprehensive study aims to contribute to the understanding of contemporary Iraqi literature and its role in highlighting the aftermath of prolonged conflict, while also engaging with broader theoretical discussions on grief and violence in post-colonial contexts. The research also seeks to shed light on the cyclical nature of violence portrayed in the novel and its influence in shaping the socio-political reality after several years of conflict.

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Introduction

In the context of war, media coverage tends to focus primarily on themes of violence, death, and destruction. Conversely, the profound emotional toll that such conflicts exact upon individuals and communities is frequently overlooked or underrepresented. For this reason, literature is often the outlet through which the complex realities of conflict-ridden societies are processed. The frequent depiction of war, displacement, and the struggle for cultural preservation is an important feature of Iraqi literature. Themes of violence, loss, exile, and identity are central, with many Iraqi authors using their works to reflect upon socio-political issues, document historical events, and tell the stories of the marginalized communities in Iraq.

Iraqi literature is distinct because it is deeply intertwined with the country's tumultuous history, shaped by its prolonged experience with war and political instability. Many authors blend elements of realism and fiction to navigate the turbulent realities of life in Iraq, allowing them to address sensitive topics in less direct ways yet equally powerful and essential. However, there are relatively few translated Iraqi works compared to those from other regions. Interest only grew recently, partly due to the international attention garnered by authors like Ahmed Sa'adawi, whose novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* was widely translated and acclaimed in the West. Like other Iraqi novels, Sa'adawi's work is set against the chaotic backdrop of post-invasion Baghdad, in which it describes a world where the boundaries between life and death blur, and where the characters' lives are haunted by both the physical and psychological remnants of war.

Hence, the decision to select Sa'adawi's work as the primary text of this thesis is influenced by its accessibility to non-Arab readers and its unique title, which alludes to Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Moreover, his novel is a striking example of post-2003 Iraqi literature that deals with the aftermath of the 2003 U.S. invasion. Sa'adawi uses themes of violence and grief to articulate the collective trauma of the Iraqi nation. By tracing the cyclical nature of violence and the pervasive loss it causes, the novel not only functions as a critique of war and corruption but also engages with Western theoretical discussions on the nature of violence, power, and mourning. Drawing on the works of notable figures like Butler, Agamben, and Mbembe, this research situates *Frankenstein in Baghdad* within a transcultural framework that investigates the implications of violence on human lives deemed unworthy of mourning and explores how Sa'adawi's narrative comments on the ongoing struggle for identity and survival in a divided society.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, it is necessary to provide a thorough historical contextualization that elucidates the complex political situation in Iraq. Although there is barely any American presence in the novel, the Iraq War and the ensuing political vacuum profoundly shape the novel's themes. Furthermore, understanding Iraq's multi-ethnic and multi-confessional social landscape is essential for a nuanced analysis of the characters. The novel's diverse "cast" reflects Iraq's diverse ethnic and religious groups, including Arabs, Assyrians, Sunnis, Shi'as, Christians, and -less directly- the exiled Jewish community. The interactions between the characters reflect broader tensions between the different communities in Iraqi society. At the same time, it showcases the effort to promote plurality and construct a more accommodating Iraqi national identity.

By situating the novel within its historical context and closely analyzing the characters through the frameworks of several important scholars, this thesis aims to shed light on the interconnection between grief and violence. The novel's portrayal of a fragmented society, embodied in the composite figure of *Shisma*, offers a new perspective on the collective trauma experienced by the Iraqi nation during and after the war. The objective of this analysis is to demonstrate how the novel functions as a critique of war and portrays the futility of violence, highlighting its deep physical and psychological consequences for both individuals and society. The following section will briefly introduce Ahmed Sa'dawi and summarise *Frankenstein in Baghdad*.

Biography of Ahmed Sa'adawi

Ahmed Saadawi is an Iraqi author, screenwriter, and illustrator born in 1973 in Baghdad. He made several contributions to contemporary Arabic literature and became renowned for his work *Frankenstein in Baghdad,* which was translated into several languages. From 2005 until 2007, he was a reporter for BBC's Arabic channel. While working as a correspondent, he saw "not just dead people—body parts. Many body parts" (Hankir). In those two years, he witnessed the aftermath of the Iraq war, which led him to start working on *Frankenstein in Baghdad.* While researching for his novel, he spoke with multiple families and visited different locations in Baghdad to highlight the complex issues in Iraqi society, especially regarding diverse identities and backgrounds. He crafted characters from various backgrounds to reflect this multifaceted reality of Iraq (Hankir).

Sa'adawi's novel, published by Al-Kamel in 2013, was the first Iraqi novel to receive the International Prize for Arabic Literature in 2014. Additionally, the English translation by Jonathan Wright was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize in 2018. What's interesting about his work, aside from the title that refers to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is the fact that:

> […] Unlike most mainstream works of fiction that have explored the aftermath of the Iraq war, both literary and cinematic, Saadawi shifts the focus from the "outsider" (the American) to the "insider" (the Iraqi). In fact, Americans hardly appear in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* at all; when they do, they maintain a ghost-like presence in the background. Whatsitsname isn't only avenging the deaths of the men whose body parts he's been built from, he's also disrupting the narrative swirling around the Iraq War (Hankir).

As can be seen, his work represents a local voice, which provides the non-Iraqi reader with a broader perspective on Iraqi society. Sa'adawi believes that the Iraqi perspective is not present in the Western discourse, despite the abundance of literary and cinematic works that revolve around the Iraq War (Mahmood 234).

Overview of Sa'adawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

The novel is set in Baghdad, specifically in the Al-Bataween neighbourhood, during 2005, following the American invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Right from the opening paragraph, the narrative launches with a dramatic explosion scene after an old woman called Elishva rides the bus (Sa'adawi 5). Umm Daniel or Elishva is an elderly Assyrian woman who lives with her old cat Nabu in a big house. She is constantly pestered by Faraj, the realtor, who tries to convince her to sell the house, and her neighbour Hadi the junk dealer, who wants to purchase her antiques. Nevertheless, she vehemently rejects their requests, creating an air of hostility between these three characters (10). While Elishva's actions contribute to some localized tension, she is not solely responsible for the conflicts that arise between her and her neighbours in Al-Bataween. The novel portrays a complex web of social, political, and personal conflicts that collectively cause friction between the characters.

The story then shifts its focus towards Hadi, who is notorious for his alcoholism and his unbelievable stories. He frequents a coffee shop owned by an Egyptian man, Aziz. There he meets

an Iraqi journalist called Mahmoud al-Sawadi, who resides in Abu Anmar's Hotel. In Aziz's coffee shop, Hadi recounts to Mahmoud what he witnessed during the explosion at Tayaran Square, an event from which Elishva narrowly escaped. Hadi describes finding a missing nose amidst the wreckage, which he then takes to sew onto the face of a disfigured, abandoned corpse before reporting it to the forensics (26). One day, while thinking about how to deal with the stitched-up corpse in his shed, a garbage truck explodes near him. Due to the shock of the incident, he returns home and is overcome by sleepiness. The next day, he notices that a storm during the previous evening turned his place into a mess; and while inspecting the chaos, he realizes that the corpse has vanished (33).

Nobody believes Hadi and everyone brushes it off as one of his nonsensical stories. However, it turns out that the corpse becomes inhabited by Hasib's soul, the hotel guard who passes away after trying to stop the garbage truck explosion. The living corpse, or the Whatsitsname (*Shisma*) as Hadi calls it, wakes up in Elishva's house. She believes that he is her long-lost son, Daniel, who went missing during the Iraq-Iran war (53). This creature named Daniel at times, while at other times it is referred to as *Shisma*[1], seeks revenge for the previous owners of his body parts. As it roams the city of Baghdad, it notices that their body parts are falling apart. This pushes the creature to kill more people to replace its decaying flesh. As a result, the series of murders grabs the attention of the media and government. The young journalist Mahmoud Al-Sawadi also gets involved, when he receives a tape recorded by *Shisma.* Unlike the rest of the characters, he becomes intrigued by the story and ends up selling the digital record to a mysterious figure called 'the Writer'; this decision is made after Mahmood discovers that his boss Ali Baher Al-Saidi is entangled in a huge corruption scandal. He eventually makes up his mind to return to his hometown Amara after being caught up in Saidi's scandal. Interestingly, Mahmood's tape inspires the Writer to draft a novel, leading to his detention by Iraqi and American authorities and the confiscation of his novel.

After a series of events related to the Tracking and Pursuit Department and Brigadier Majid, who relentlessly try to capture *Shisma,* the government ends up arresting Hadi after failing to find

[1] In Iraqi Arabic and several other Arabic dialects, the term '*Shisma'* (or *Shu-ismo*) is a colloquial expression used to refer to an object or a person, whose name the speaker cannot recall at the moment of conversation. The English version of the novel uses the literal translation 'Whatsitsname', which does not fully capture the colloquial usage and cultural understanding of the term *Shisma* (Mahmood 80). For convenience, this figure will be referred to using the Iraqi term.

the creature's whereabouts. Moreover, the deteriorating state of Iraq forces Elishva to leave Baghdad and sell her house to Faraj, which falls apart shortly after her departure due to an explosion. The story ends with an ominous note, alluding to a mysterious ghostly figure, who observes the neighborhood festivities alongside Elishva's aging cat, Nabu. The reader is then encouraged to link the mysterious figure to *Shisma*, implying that the troubles in Iraq are far from over. The last scene creates a sense of unease, hinting that the current calm is deceptive, with future conflicts threatening to disrupt the momentary peace, following the arrest of Hadi.

What makes Sa'adawi's novel stand out is the narrative style, which blurs the boundary between realistic and fantastical elements. The multitude of voices and perspectives makes it challenging for the reader to believe the chief narrator. Aside from the main narration, which relays the story from a third-person perspective, there are two intradiegetic narrators, namely the Writer and *Shisma.* In the chapters in which these two characters are centralized the narration shifts to the first-person perspective. However, it is important to note that translation and linguistic conventions can alter the reading experience. For example, in the Whatsitsname chapter, the English version uses quotation marks more frequently to differentiate between the contents of the recorded confession and the narrative text. However, the original Arabic text employs very few, if any, quotation marks. Hence, the recorded monologue is integrated more fluidly into the narrative text, making it slightly more challenging for the reader to distinguish between the two. Overall, it can be asserted that the fragmented narrative structure reflects the turbulent situation in Iraq. The non-linear storytelling effectively conveys the pervasive skepticism in war-torn societies, where truth remains elusive and subjected to scrutiny.

Research Questions

The central aim of this thesis is to examine the depiction and consequences of violence and grief in Ahmed Sa'dawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* within the context of post-invasion Iraq. To achieve this goal, several key research questions will guide the analysis of the novel.

Firstly**,** the concept of violence will be investigated according to the theories of Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, Achille Mbembe, and Judith Butler. Their understanding of violence and politics will be used to explore how Sa'adawi's novel represents the cyclical nature of violence in post-invasion Iraq. This involves examining how characters become both victims and perpetrators of violence, reflecting the broader socio-political context following the 2003 US

invasion. Agamben's notions of bare life and the state of exception will be used to examine how the characters in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* live in a state of legal and political limbo. The paper will also explore the novel's engagement with Mbembe's theory of necropolitcs, studying how various factions exercise power through control over life and death.

Drawing on Judith Butler's concepts of grievability and non-grievability, this research paper will examine how the Whatsitsname (*Shisma*) in Sa'adawi's work serves as a manifestation of collective grief in Iraqi society. This analysis will highlight how this embodiment of communal grief emerges as a direct consequence of the pervasive and extreme violence portrayed in the narrative. By investigating *Shisma's* composite nature and quest for vengeance, the thesis will uncover how it represents the fragmented identities and unresolved grief of the Iraqi people, indicating broader societal attitudes towards death and suffering in the context of prolonged conflict. Sa'adawi's depiction of grief is not limited to *Shisma* but rather extends to other characters, such as Elishva. Her grief will be examined to see how it epitomizes the unresolved sorrow experienced by countless Iraqis. Moreover, Butler's *Frames of War* will provide a crucial framework for analysing how the way wars are presented in the media shapes our understanding of whose lives matter and whose deaths are worthy of mourning. In Sa'adawi's novel, this concept is illustrated through *Shisma*, who is composed of various victims' body parts.

Additionally, the paper will investigate how *Frankenstein in Baghdad* contributes to the broader landscape of contemporary Iraqi literature by addressing the themes of war and its aftermath. By examining Sa'adawi's approach, his distinctive contributions to the discourse on war, violence, and grief in Iraqi society will be illuminated. Furthermore, his novel challenges and potentially subverts dominant Western narratives about the Iraq War. By shedding light on Iraqi characters and experiences, he offers a counter-narrative to typical Western representations of the conflict. The Iraqi author's perspective challenges the often-one-sided portrayals found in Western media, providing a more nuanced understanding of the war's impact on Iraqi society.

In summary, this paper will highlight how Sa'adawi's narrative reflects the complex interplay between grief and violence in war-torn societies. Through characters like Elishva and Shisma, the author illustrates the enduring impact of violence on individual lives and the broader society. This multidimensional analysis of the novel invites readers to consider the long-term consequences of war and the challenges of reconciliation and healing in a society marked by deep-

seated divisions and unresolved grief. Through this comprehensive analysis, drawing on close readings of the primary text and supported by relevant secondary literature and theoretical frameworks, this thesis seeks to contribute to the scholarly understanding of Iraqi literature and its engagement with the complex realities of post-war Iraq.

Tracing Shelley's Influence in Sa'adawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

Compared to other works in contemporary Iraqi literature, Ahmed Sa'adawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* stands out due to its eye-catching title. At first glimpse, the reader assumes that Mary Shelley's most famous work *Frankenstein* inspires his novel. While the title explicitly evokes Shelley's 19th-century gothic masterpiece, the extent of its influence on Sa'adawi's narrative remains a subject of scholarly debate. This section aims to briefly explore how Sa'adawi's novel draws inspiration and departs from Shelley's original work, reimagining it to reflect the complexities of modern Iraqi society.

It is important to mention that due to the popularization of *Frankenstein*, particularly in film and other media, Victor's creature is frequently referred to as Frankenstein. In Shelley's novel, Victor Frankenstein is the scientist who creates the monster, but in the title of Sa'adawi's work Frankenstein refers to the Whatsitsname; the animated corpse (Alkhayat 53). In an interview with Al-Mustafa Najjar, Sa'adawi explains that he only adopted the motif and gothic atmosphere of Shelley's *Frankenstein*:

> There are only two references to Frankenstein in the novel: one made by a German journalist and another by Bahir Al-Saeedi. Apart from these two references, the people of the Baghdad in the novel call the strange monster the "what's-its-name" or "the one who does not have a name," and perhaps it does not concern them whether it looks like Frankenstein or not.
>
> In any case, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* deals with a different theme from that of Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Frankenstein in this novel is a condensed symbol of Iraq's current problems. The Frankenstein-esque atmosphere of horror was strongly prevalent in Iraq during the period covered by the novel (Najjar).

According to Friedman and Kavey, Shelley's creature has turned into a symbol that transcends its original context (9). The creature's struggle with identity, rejection, and the consequences of

human progress became a metaphor that represents various social, political, and ethical issues. Sa'adawi's work diverges significantly in its thematic focus. While Shelley delved into the ethics of scientific advancement and the deep sense of alienation experienced by the creature, Sa'adawi crafts a narrative that resonates immensely with the contemporary Iraqi experience. The *Shisma* becomes a metaphor for the fractured state of the nation, embodying the diverse and often conflicting elements of the society.

Christina Phillips highlights the complex dynamics of translation and audience regarding Sa'adawi's novel. She observes that non-Arab readers tend to approach the work through an intertextual lens, interpreting it mainly in relation to English literature. This perspective differs from that of Iraqi and Arab readership, who may engage with the text more directly within the original historical and cultural context (382). Based on Webster's biomedical reading of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Phillips draws an interesting analogy between Hadi, the junk dealer who unintentionally creates *Shisma*, and the coalition forces:

> In this context, the coalition army is a force for good and the rejuvenation of wounded soldiers' bodies through regenerative medicine and bionic prosthetics testifies to the medical advancement of the US and its allies in the Iraq War. *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in translation brings a different story to the English-speaking international audience. Hadi the junk-dealer rejuvenates a body but he works in a filthy shed as opposed to a pristine laboratory, which speaks to the unequal distribution of health care between the coalition power and Iraq, and the corpse he creates becomes a critical driver in an unending cycle of violence in Baghdad (381).

This insightful observation shows how Western readers often interpret Sa'adawi's work through the lens of Shelley's *Frankenstein*, particularly regarding themes of scientific progress and ethics. The contrast between Victor's well-equipped laboratory and Hadi's makeshift workshop in war-torn Baghdad underscores the uneven distribution of scientific resources and capabilities across different regions. While Shelley's work primarily explores the moral consequences of excessive scientific ambition, Sa'adawi's novel contextualizes these themes within the complex realities of conflict-ridden Iraq.

Despite the differences in context and thematic subjects, it is worth noting that both works feature a creature assembled from human remains. They grapple with issues of identity and

belonging, where both of them are incapable of fitting into society and are constantly faced with rejection. Hadi and Victor share a parallel in their unearthing of concealed truths, yet Bushra Juhi Jani contends that the essence of their findings diverges drastically. Victor's breakthrough lies in a novel human discovery, whereas Hadi's revelation delves into the darker realm of violence, rooted in a discarded human corpse ("Violence as the Abject in Iraqi Literature" 325). Nevertheless, just like Karzan Mahmood explains in his dissertation A *Study of Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein in Baghdad in Light of Appropriation of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein Through Translation and Adaptation Studies,* it may be more appropriate to consider *Frankenstein in Baghdad* as a novel that employs Frankensteinian motifs rather than a direct adaptation of Shelley's work. Sa'adawi explains in an interview with Mahmood that Shelley's *Frankenstein* has evolved beyond a single literary narrative to become a broader 'cultural horizon'. Therefore, it can be said that his novel is a relatively new interaction with this expanded cultural landscape, rather than a direct remake of Shelley's original work (Mahmood 229). While parallels can be drawn between the two narratives, Sa'adawi's work repurposes the themes and imagery of Shelley's *Frankenstein* to give a voice to the marginalized Iraqis and raise awareness about the repercussions of war.

Historical Background

Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is deeply rooted in the socio-political context of Iraq, specifically reflecting the turbulent period following the 2003 U.S. invasion. This chapter aims to explain the historical events that influenced the emergence of this novel and give an overview of the contemporary history of Iraq, in order to gain a better understanding of the causes of violence and how it is reflected in the Iraqi novel. The fall of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent years of violent chaos caused severe structural and psychological damage to Iraqi society and has been heavily tackled in Iraqi fiction. Hence, the focus will be mainly centered on Saddam Hussein's regime and the US military intervention in Iraq.

Frankenstein in Baghdad captures many aspects of this period, such as daily explosions, suicide bombings, sectarian conflicts, and murders that plague the capital city of Baghdad. The presence of foreign troops and the rise of militias are mirrored in the novel's atmosphere of fear and unpredictability, which reflects the struggles of ordinary Iraqis trying to survive in a time of moral ambiguity and political tension. Through the characters, the novel highlights the social fragmentation and lawlessness Iraqis face daily. For this reason, it is crucial to comprehend the historical events that form the basis of this story.

Formation of Iraq

After the decline of the Ottoman Empire during World War 1, the British Empire decided to occupy three major provinces: Basra, Baghdad and Mosul. Before 1920, the land now known as Iraq was not considered a single national state but rather a group of provinces under the control of the Ottoman Empire. The British Mandate, established in 1920, marked the beginning of modern Iraq as we know it. Eric Davis, a Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University, and Bushra Juhi Jani, a doctor at Al-Nahrain University in Baghdad, assert that the British Mandate set the stage for the internal conflicts in Iraq, due to the diverse ethnic and religious groups in these areas, who had different reactions toward the British occupation (Jani 31-32).

The implementation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement in 1916, which divided the Ottoman Arab provinces into areas of British and French control, resulted in assigning Britain the mandate over modern-day Iraq. [2] The foreign interference sharpened anti-British sentiments and created a nationalist revolt, which failed to achieve Iraqi independence. Nevertheless, it proved to be "costly" for the British government and highlighted the failure of the Indian colonial policy, which Britain followed as a model to rule Iraq. Moreover, it enhanced Iraqi involvement in self-governance and facilitated the establishment of Iraqi state institutions. Thus, the British Mandate, which was established in 1920 by the League of Nations, allowed Britain to indirectly control Iraq while permitting it a degree of self-determination (Marr 17-23).

In 1921, Faisal was appointed as the first king of Iraq, marking the beginning of the Hashemite dynasty in Iraq. The British mandate was then formalized through a treaty and a constitution, which placed Iraq under indirect British rule and economic reliance that hindered its development. The Constitution was, therefore, seen as a tool of foreign control, and efforts were directed towards removing British presence from Iraq. After a series of revolts, the Anglo-Iraqi treaty was ratified in 1930, paving the way for Iraq's admission to the League of Nations in 1932, which subsequently brought the British Mandate to a close. This, however, did not indicate the end of British control because Britain still kept its rights to every military facility in Iraq. Therefore, opposition to British influence continued and played a major role in shaping anti-imperialist sentiments, which would later fuel the 1958 revolution and the overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq. In 1932, Iraq was finally admitted to the League of Nations as the first mandated state to achieve independence. This officially ended the British Mandate, although British influence continued through advisors and military agreements (Marr 24-28).

Saddam Hussein's Reign

Iraq transitioned from a monarchy to a republic in 1958, when a military coup led by General Abdul-Karim Qassim toppled the Hashemite dynasty. This event represents the end of the kingdom established under British influence and marks the start of republican governance in Iraq (Jani 33). After a Ba'ath-led coup in 1968, the Ba'athist party gained massive power and brought significant changes to Iraq. According to Phebe Marr:

[2] The Sykes-Picot Agreement can be read here: https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/sykes.asp

> The party not only established a command economy, under the rubric of socialism, but also undertook an industrial program—including extensive weapons development—and provided widespread health, education, and social benefits that went well beyond those of any previous regime. These measures enabled the regime to allay discontent and establish greater control over society. By the late 1970s, Iraq had begun to emerge from its earlier regional and international isolation, and began to exercise a major influence on the Middle East and even in the nonaligned movement (109-110).

Despite the major developments in Iraqi society, the Ba'athist rule was not devoid of strife. There was much opposition from the Kurds and Shi'ites, especially due to the Ba'athist Arabization campaigns in northern Iraq. When Saddam Hussein became president in 1979, he started by eliminating his rivals in the Ba'athist party and began restructuring the political system to assert his power. Meanwhile, due to the Islamic Revolution in 1979 in Iran, Saddam's Sunni regime became wary of the spreading of revolution to its borders, largely because of the Shi'a majority in Iraq. As Iran was undergoing a total shift from a secular monarchy to an Islamic republic, Iraq was promoting a contrasting ideology of secular Arab nationalism. This ideological divide between these two neighbouring countries prepared the ground for escalating tensions and ultimately contributed to the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq war in 1980 (Marr 139, 142).

Although Iraq emerged victorious from the eight-year-long war, the damage it left was severe. The efforts to continuously repress the Shi'ite population in Iraq and the carrying out of the Anfal campaign in 1988 to curb Kurdish insurgency, exacerbated the sectarian tensions in Iraq. This had a significant economic impact and left the country heavily indebted to Western and Arab Gulf states, especially due to the decrease in oil prices and the disruption of oil exports. Furthermore, the number of casualties was high and many were forced to join the military to support the war effort. Hence, the massive drain on human and economic resources paved the way for future conflicts, mainly the invasion of Kuwait, as Iraq struggled with economic pressures (Marr 154-168).

The financial difficulties Iraq faced after the Iran-Iraq War —such as the rising debt owed to Kuwait, other Arab countries, and the West, combined with reduced oil revenues and border disputes, particularly over access to the Persian Gulf and disagreements regarding oil production —were among the key factors that led to the 1990 Gulf War. The decision to invade Kuwait made

the economic situation more dire, as it led to the imposition of comprehensive international sanctions. Saddam's interest in developing weapons of mass destruction led to further escalations, particularly when he threatened to "burn half of Israel". This disclosure worsened Iraq's ties with Israel and Western countries, however, it was met with immediate support from neighbouring Arab countries, where he was hailed as a true Arab leader for going against Israel (Marr 169-172).

The First Gulf War in 1991 happened as a response to the occupation after Saddam refused to withdraw from Kuwait. Based on Arkin et al.[3], Jani explains in her thesis *Violence in Margaret Drabble and Selected Iraqi Novels: A Comparative Study* that "the Gulf war, which was 'short and decisive' because of the use of modern weapons and electronics, was the 'most destructive war in modern history' as described by the Director of Military Research at Greenpeace" (35). After the ceasefire agreement and the liberation of Kuwait, Iraq had to face the consequences of the war and acknowledge Kuwait as a sovereign state. Due to the constant economic decline and power vacuum, sectarian tensions grew further, when rebellion spread in northern and southern Iraqi cities. The rebellion grew into a large uprising that was faced with brutal repression by the Saddam regime. This included violent crackdowns on rebellious forces and battles that lasted for days in some cities. The lack of international and Iranian support for the Shi'ite revolt in southern Iraq led to the recapturing of the South by the government. On the other hand, the situation in the North was more complicated. The displacement of around two million Kurds caused a refugee problem mainly in Turkey and Iran. Due to the humanitarian aid and protection the US and its coalition partners provided, a safe haven was maintained under UN control, allowing refugees to remain free from attacks. After a ceasefire with the Kurds, the Kurdish population was able to establish a self-governing enclave despite the tensions with the central government in Baghdad, which isolated the North through road and economic blockades (Marr 181-185).

Iraq's struggle with ceasefire terms, such as sanctions, weapon inspections, and no-fly zones, which cut off oil trade with Iraq and isolated it from the global economy for several years, had long-term consequences for the Iraqi population:

[3] See: Arkin, William, Damian Durrant & Marianne Cherni, *On Impact: Modern Warfare and the Environment: A Case Study of the Gulf War* (Washington DC., Greenpeace, 1991)

During almost 13 years of sanctions, Iraq was transformed from 'an affluent society, equipped with a modern infrastructure, as well as educational and health systems among the most developed in the Middle East', into a country of poverty and destitution, where the educational outcomes had collapsed and the health care system was non-functioning. […] Those who 'bore the heaviest burden' were children, youngsters, women and the elderly" (Amorim xiii, qtd. in Jani 35).

The deteriorating state during the 1990s damaged the infrastructure and initiated a brain drain problem, where many qualified workers sought safety in other countries. The emigration of many educated individuals negatively impacted social class and gender relations, because it gave more room for traditional values and ideals to take hold. Before the Iran-Iraq War, women from the middle and upper classes (mainly from secular-apolitical families) enjoyed more rights. For example, they were encouraged to pursue higher education and participate in the workforce. Nevertheless, the precarious political situation after a decade of wars led to increased unemployment, forcing women to stay home. Also, the rising living costs led to the spread of poverty, setting the ground for an altered social climate and a heightened sense of fear and doubt among the people. Moreover, the lack of safety and the shifting laws after the Gulf War pushed Iraq towards conservatism, which resulted in stricter adherence to religious dress codes, such as the hijab, and decreased the freedom of mobility, leading to more segregation between the genders (Al-Ali 413-415).

In 1993, the Ba'athist Faith Campaign (*al-hamla al Imaniyya)* launched in 1993 marked a major shift in the Iraqi regime's approach to religion and governance. This campaign, which lasted until Saddam Hussein's fall in 2003, involved several key changes, such as increasing the focus on religious education and Islamic studies in schools and implementing stricter Islamic punishments. While some scholars view this campaign as a genuine ideological shift from secularism towards Islamism, others like Dr. Samuel Helfont argue that the campaign was primarily about the regime's effort to control and shape religious narratives rather than embracing Islamist ideology. In other words, it sought to mould religious institutions to support Saddam Hussein's regime (Helfont 353). Nevertheless, this campaign may have inadvertently created an environment more

conducive to the formation of radicalized groups. The increased emphasis on Islamic practices and education potentially opened spaces for more extreme interpretations to take root.

As mentioned above, the implemented punitive measures, combined with the existing financial issues and the Faith Campaign, exacerbated the dire situation. What Saddam deemed as a solution to Iraq's economic problems proved to be a catastrophic miscalculation that prevented Iraq from recovering and led to its continual downward spiral into another destructive war in 2003.

Iraq War 2003

After the notorious terrorist organization Al-Qaeda carried out the September 11 attacks against the United States, the US government decided to respond by fighting the Taliban regime, which housed Al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan. After weakening the Taliban and establishing a new administration in Afghanistan, the US shifted its focus towards Iraq. The American government assumed that Saddam and the Ba'ath party had connections to Al-Qaeda, who were working together to develop weapons of mass destruction, mostly chemical weapons with the intention to use them against the United States. Additionally, the failure to settle the WMD issue in the late 1990s and the findings of the U.N. inspections during and post-Gulf War may have renewed suspicions despite the readmission of inspectors in the period between 2002 and 2003, who found nothing significant to report on (Hourly History 8).

The lack of evidence on WMD resulted in a worldwide dilemma, concerning the decision to support military intervention in Iraq. Nonetheless, "[t]his was most actively supported by Britain, where the government of Prime Minister Blair released a dossier in September 2002 that claimed that Iraq not only had WMDs but was capable of delivering these using missiles 'within 45 minutes' […]. The British government made it clear that it would provide direct support to any US military intervention in Iraq" (10). Despite Britain's support, other countries like Germany did not agree with this claim and stood against the invasion of Iraq.

The outrage, nonetheless, did not stop the Bush administration from intervening in Iraq. In the State of the Union Address in 2002, Bush stated:

> Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax and nerve gas and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens, leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world. States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic (The Washington Post).

While this speech successfully garnered support for military action at the time, it is strongly reminiscent of Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden", which reflects imperialist attitudes in the 19th and 20th centuries toward non-white people. Bush's portrayal of the Iraqi regime as a threat to global peace and the frequent emphasis on humanitarian rhetoric, such as the utilization of chemical gas against the Kurds, exemplify the "white man's burden" narrative of freeing oppressed people from totalitarianism and introducing them to democracy. The belief that Western ideals are superior and should be imposed on other nations completely disregarded the complexity of Iraqi society and left Iraq in ruins.

The coalition forces were able to make significant military progress and occupy major Iraqi cities in a short period. However, the sudden power vacuum it created caused anarchy and resulted in brutal sectarian conflicts. The collapse of the ruling Ba'ath party and the short-sighted decisions made by the CPA (Coalition Provisional Authority), which was in command of Iraq with the support of the Iraqi Governing Council, had catastrophic ramifications. The CPA's decision to dismantle the Ba'ath party by dismissing them completely from the political sphere meant that Iraq had no more experienced politicians since no one outside of the party had been allowed to hold public office in the time before the collapse of the government. Additionally, the agreement to dissolve the Iraqi Armed Forces and intelligence services, in other words, anyone who supported Saddam and the Ba'ath party, pushed countless men into unemployment. These events led to the

emergence of Islamic factions who sought to gain power after the fall of Saddam and increased anti-imperialistic sentiments among Iraqis (Hourly History 26-30).

Iraq Post-2003

The terrorist attacks by Al-Qaeda and the violence that erupted between different religious and ethnic groups, as well as the insurgency against the American invasion led to the formation of the Green Zone. This area in central Baghdad, where the administration of the Ba'ath Party was located, turned into a "fortified safe zone" for the coalition forces. The high number of casualties among US soldiers and the intense battles in some Iraqi cities, such as Najaf and Falluja, shifted public opinion towards the war. According to a poll conducted by the New York Times/ CBS News in 2004, support for the war among Americans was diminishing:

> Asked whether the United States had done the right thing in taking military action against Iraq, 47 percent of respondents said it had, down from 58 percent a month earlier and 63 percent in December, just after American forces captured Saddam Hussein. Forty-six percent said the United States should have stayed out of Iraq, up from 37 percent last month and 31 percent in December (The New York Times).

The killing of 37 American troops in the First Battle of Fallujah and the growing sectarian violence turned the city of Fallujah into a battlefield between coalition forces and armed insurgent groups. A second battle ensued, causing the death of more civilians and coalition troops. Despite the coalition victory, the battle proved to be one of the bloodiest combats in Iraq, which led to long-term instability in the city and the destruction of the majority of Fallujah (Hourly History 36-38).

Another reason for the diminished support for the Iraq war was the circulation of violent images, which showed extensive humiliation and torture of detainees in Abu-Ghraib prison by U.S. military personnel. This resulted in a massive scandal that shifted attitudes towards the war and treatment of prison detainees. Several scholars in different fields, such as Judith Butler, wrote extensively about the abuses and torture tactics used by the U.S. soldiers that contradicted their alleged objective to spread democracy in Iraq.[4]

[4] Butler's *Frames of War* and the article "Empire, Desire and Violence: A Queer Transnational Feminist Reading of the Prisoner 'Abuse' in Abu Ghraib and the Question of 'Gender Equality" by Melanie Richter- Montpetit are relevant works that deal with the Abu-Ghraib practices from a critical lens.

After the fall of Saddam, the power dynamic shifted completely. The Shi'ite majority alongside the Kurds, who were repressed during the Ba'athist rule, were able to hold political office. The Shi'ite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the Kurdish President Jalal Talabani were the first to be elected under Iraq's new constitution. Despite the formation of a new government, the situation did not improve. Instead, it was exacerbated by the bombing of the Askari Mosque in the city of Samarra, which is a significant holy site for Shi'as around the world, by Sunni extremists. This mosque was attacked several times in the following years mainly by Al-Qaeda militants and this triggered a wave of counterattacks by Shi'a militants, leading to a civil war between Sunni and Shi'a insurgents (Hourly History 38).

In 2007, the Bush administration decided to send more US troops to Iraq to contain the insurgency. In the following months, Tony Blair stepped down from his office as British Prime Minister, leaving the US alone in its fight against rising violence in Iraq. Despite the efforts to enlist Sunni leaders to oppose members of Al-Qaeda, an estimated number of 900 US troops were killed by the end of the year. This meant that in the span of five years, over 4000 American soldiers died (42). The situation, nevertheless, did not improve in 2008. The Shi'ite militants, who followed a major Shi'a cleric called Muqtada Al-Sadr, launched an attack on Iraqi and US troops in Baghdad and Basra. The failure to stabilize the violence in Iraq led to an agreement to withdraw US forces from the country by 2011 (43-44).

During Obama's tenure as US president, it was announced that the last US troops would leave Iraq, signifying the end of the war. This did not indicate the start of a peaceful decade though, due to several factors, such as the regrouping of the Al-Qaeda members, who reestablished themselves as ISIS, and the discontent with the Iraqi government led by Nouri al-Maliki, not to mention the political instability in the region, which was mainly caused by the Arab Spring. These factors combined led to another brutal war against IS which lasted from 2013 until 2018. Up until this day, the number of Iraq war casualties is not exactly known. Several surveys were conducted to estimate the total number of casualties. However, they were rather sporadic and did not cover enough data. According to a scientific study published in the *PLOS Medicine* Journal, around half a million Iraqis died during the war: "Covering almost the entire duration of the Iraq occupation, including, for the first time, a critical period of violence from 2006 to 2008, they conclude that approximately half a million avoidable deaths in Iraq can be attributed directly and indirectly to

the invasion and subsequent occupation and related insurgencies" (Rawaf). This study, which only covered 2000 households in the whole 18 Iraqi governorates is still not fully reliable, partly due to displacement, unreported deaths, and thousands of missing people, whose state is unknown.

Although the situation in Iraq has relatively stabilized, there are still tensions between different factions, especially due to interference from neighboring countries like Iran. The two-trillion-dollar war proved to be a failure, despite the success in removing Saddam's regime and executing him in 2006. Unfortunately, there is still no complete peace in Iraq and full stability has not been achieved, especially due to the aftermath of over four successive wars. As of 2023, there are 1.2 million Iraqis, who are internally displaced (UNHCR). Following the American invasion alone, millions fled Iraq to seek refuge in other countries: "In addition to those internally displaced, millions more Iraqis became refugees. At their peak in 2007, more than 2.3 million Iraqis had fled the country, and 80 percent had ended up in neighbouring Syria and Jordan" (Duggal). Aside from human casualties, there was a severe impact on Iraq's economy and infrastructure. Many religious and cultural sites were harmed or destroyed and the quality of education decreased heavily. The National Museum of Baghdad lost around 15,000 objects in 2003 and a significant number of educated Iraqis were either killed or forced into exile (Duggal).

It is important to note that the impact of these numerous upheavals can be seen in the Iraqi novel. Many Iraqi novelists have reflected on the aftermath of the American occupation and the decades of repression during Saddam's regime by combining fiction with realism, where they recreate landscapes of violence and lawlessness similar to what the authors themselves experienced during their lives. Through the works of writers like Ahmed Sa'adawi, Sinan Antoon, and Ina'am Kachachi, readers gain a better understanding of the experiences of the Iraqi individual. These works address a wider perspective beyond the scope of political oppression and colonization. For example, Inaam Kachachi's work *Tashari* (The Dispersal) sheds light on the scattered nature of Iraqi families nowadays, due to forced migration and sectarianism. Themes like alienation and longing for one's homeland are central in many contemporary Iraqi works, especially the ones written by authors in the diaspora. Therefore, it is worth emphasizing that:

> [W]ar cannot be confined only to military fighting and war tunnels but also has psychological and ethical destruction upon civilians. War results in an orphanage, familial miseries, the death of beloved ones and sons. The Iraqi war fiction not only documents

such miserable and devastating conditions of Iraqis and the calamities and catastrophes inflicted on them but also exposes the humanistic and psychological suffering of war victims (Ismail Mousa and Jaber Alhomoud 165).

The several decades of turmoil and violence had a devastating toll beyond the immeasurable loss of life and widespread destruction of infrastructure. The repercussions of this sustained unrest and violence inflicted deep psychological trauma on the collective Iraqi consciousness, which left an indelible mark on literature and culture. Sa'adawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* captures vividly the daily lives of Iraqis post-2003 through the portrayal of bombings and murders that haunt Baghdad. The social fragmentation and moral ambiguity faced by the characters are heavily connected with the historical context of Iraq, particularly the timeframe after the US invasion. Therefore, understanding the situation in Iraq during this period is crucial to grasping Sa'adawi's narrative and themes, which serve as a commentary on the dire consequences of war and corruption on the Iraqi nation.

Theoretical Background

1. The Politics of Violence

Before delving into the theoretical perspectives that deal with violence, it is useful to remind oneself of the basic definition of this term. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is defined as follows: "The deliberate exercise of physical force against a person, property, etc.; physically violent behaviour or treatment; (*Law*) the unlawful exercise of physical force, intimidation by the exhibition of such force. Formerly also: †the abuse of power or authority to persecute or oppress (*obsolete*)" ("Violence," def. 1.a).

Understanding the concept of violence is important for analysing its manifestations and implications in the context of the novel and its historical background. Violence is a multifaceted phenomenon and encompasses a wide range of behaviours that inflict harm on different levels, whether physical, psychological, or structural. It can manifest in overt forms, such as physical assault or warfare, as well as in more subtle ways, such as systemic violence and emotional or

psychological abuse. Moreover, the varying definitions and interpretations across different cultures, disciplines, and historical periods add to the complexity of this term. Therefore, theoretical perspectives on this phenomenon vary significantly, reflecting its intricacy and the diverse contexts in which it takes place, particularly in the current world that is heavily characterized by conflict and social upheaval.

Due to the catastrophic social and political implications of violence, especially in the 20th century, many prominent theorists, such as Hannah Arendt, contemplated the nature of violence and the motivations that drive human beings to commit such acts. In this chapter, the definitions and frameworks of violence as articulated by notable figures, such as Agamben and Mbembe, will be discussed, to elucidate its impact on victims of war and its interconnectedness with grief and politics. This theoretical background will provide a foundation for understanding how violence is not merely an act of physical aggression but a convoluted social and political phenomenon influenced by power dynamics and historical contexts. In many ways, it has been exploited by nation-states to subjugate their citizens and to enforce civil law. Through this lens, the relationship between colonization, war, and violence will be investigated to gain a better understanding of its repercussions on a country like Iraq.

1.1 Hannah Arendt's Understanding of Violence

The German-American philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote extensively about politics and the dynamics of power and violence. Arendt's conceptualization of violence will be briefly explored in this section, serving as a basis for the subsequent analysis of other theorists' perspectives. In her work *On Violence,* she distinguishes between several key terms that are often used synonymously, to dispel the confusion between these terminologies. She sheds light in particular on the distinction between power and violence, where she says: "*Power* corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together" (Arendt 37). On the other hand, Violence is "[…] distinguished by its instrumental character. Phenomenologically, it is close to strength, since the implements of violence, like all other tools, are designed and used for the purpose of multiplying natural strength until, in the last stage of their development, they can substitute for it" (39).

Simply put, Arendt views these two terms as separate concepts. For her, power stems from collective agreement, while violence relies on instruments or tools to increase one's strength. Thus, strength, unlike power, stems from the "individual entity". Furthermore, violence cannot create power but rather annihilates it: "Violence can always destroy power, out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience" (46). In a political context, when a state implements violence as a means of enforcing its ideology, it signals a decline in its authoritative power. She explains that, despite the successful subjugation and control over a nation, the consequences are dire for the government, since the loss of power creates the conditions for increased violence. Therefore, the diminishing power of a government presents an opportunity for resistance groups to retaliate. This, in turn, results in a cycle of violence that tries to eliminate the ruling power (46-47).

Nevertheless, if the political system that emerges due to the use of violence, does not yield and continues to assert its dominance, then this would create what is known as terror, where every opposition force has to be obliterated (47). Arendt, argues that violence cannot achieve an effective political system because it is meant to disperse and destroy: "Violence, Arendt teaches, can indeed crush political power: you can occupy a country by force, you can bully citizens into silence, you can terrorize populations with your futile rage and you can guard your borders with spite and barbed wire. But what violence can never do is produce genuine or lasting power" (Stonebridge xv).

The conflation of politics and violence in the modern world is a result of the increased brutality that many forms of governments practice, especially on marginalised people. Therefore, violence is not necessarily inherent to the political sphere, instead, it is the complete opposite of power and arises when power is in jeopardy. According to Arendt's view, violence is not a mere manifestation of power, but rather it is destructive to actual political action and discourse. All in all, political formations based on violence and coercion do not produce sustainable outcomes, whereas those that are grounded in non-violent approaches and emphasize mutual consent and a collective understanding of political power are more likely to succeed. It is crucial to note, that Arendt's theory on violence and politics is highly complex. The aim here is to explore how her ideas connect with those of other thinkers and relate to themes of grief. This exploration will ultimately lead to a deeper understanding of the nature of violence in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*.

1.2 Giorgio Agamben's Bare Life and Homo Sacer

In this chapter, Agamben's concepts of bare life, homo sacer, and the state of exception will be introduced. His theory of violence intersects with other philosophical frameworks, such as biopolitics and sovereignty, which builds upon the work laid by thinkers like Carl Schmitt, Walter Benjamin, Hannah Arendt, and Michel Foucault. In the introduction to his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life,* Agamben notes that Foucault's study of biopolitics (how modern states exercise power over life and death by using disciplinary mechanisms that regulate different aspects of one's biological and political existence) does not allude to Hannah Arendt's work, despite its relevance. Nearly two decades before Foucault's *History of Sexuality,* Arendt had already analysed the process by which biological life (in the form of *homo laborans*) came to occupy the centre of political life and wrote extensively on totalitarianism. Agamben, thus, critiques the fact that Foucault did not fully extend his analysis to the concentration camp, which represents an exemplary biopolitical space, where the state's control over life is starkly evident (Agamben 3-4).

Therefore, Agamben seeks to bridge the gap by integrating both Arendt's and Foucault's insights, addressing what he perceives as gaps in their respective analyses. Through both of their works, he develops a more comprehensive framework for understanding the intricate relationships between sovereign power, biopolitics, and the production of 'bare life' in recent political systems. His theoretical foundation on homo sacer's relationship with sovereign power will be applied in the following chapter to examine Sa'adawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and the complex political situation in modern Iraq. This will provide a clearer understanding of how violence and the production of bare life operate during times of conflict and political instability and how violence correlates with Butler's notion of grievable and ungrievable lives.

Agamben explains that defining *homo sacer* is challenging, due to its paradoxical features. In archaic Roman laws, the sacred man or *homo sacer* was defined as: "[…] the one whom people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide" (Agamben 71). The situation at hand is rather ironic, while the sanctity of this figure prohibits sacrificing him to the gods, killing him is deemed permissible. Due to this figure's status as a criminal, they were regarded as unworthy by both; the gods and society. Another contradictory figure is the sovereign, who is "at the same time outside and inside

the juridical order" (qtd.in Agamben 15). The sovereign's status is described as an "inclusive exclusion", meaning that he is excluded from the law. Since he can decree and suspend laws, he is capable of declaring a state of exception. However, part of his legal authority is to issue orders and decide when the law does or does not apply. This puts the sovereign in a threshold position, where the boundary between inside and outside the law becomes blurry.

As a result, the sovereign and the *homo sacer* are both considered outside the law. The killer of the *homo sacer* is exempt from legal punishment, while the *homo sacer* themselves is denied legal protection. Thus, Agamben explains that the relationship between the two figures is "[…] correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *homines sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns" (84). From the sovereign's perspective, all individuals could be reduced to the status of *homo sacer*, since he can strip them from legal protection by suspending or changing the law. Conversely, from the standpoint of the *homo sacer,* every person becomes a potential sovereign. This is due to the fact that anyone can end their life without facing any legal consequences, which renders them vulnerable to violence. According to Ola Abdalkafor:

> [T]his implies that there are two types of violence. The first is that which is used by the sovereign to protect its authority and this violence is considered lawful simply because it is the sovereign who determines and suspends the law. The second type of this violence is that which is used by *homo sacer* against the sovereign and this violence is rendered lawless because *homo sacer* is the rejected outlaw excluded from the protection of the law in the first place (3).

The violence experienced by the *homo sacer* and their double exclusion from law and religion (divine sacrifice) reduces them to bare life. This vulnerable state, where *zoe* or biological life is exposed to sovereign violence, makes them part of the political sphere despite forsaking them. In *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*, Ikram Masmoudi infers that: "When *zoe*, biological or natural life, 'is included in the juridical order solely in the form of its exclusion from the polis (that is, of its capacity to be killed)'– that is, abandoned (the original act of sovereignty) – naked life or bare life is produced" (4). The sovereign's exclusion of certain lives from the political community strips them of their legal rights and protections, making them abandoned individuals, i.e., bare life. Paradoxically, however, their existence still operates within a legal and political framework

through the management and regulation of their lives. The law recognises the potential for violence against these individuals because the realities of these lives inform the political order's policies. Furthermore, the sovereign's power to change or abolish the law creates a space where bare life can exist, especially during times of crisis.

An example that Agamben uses to illustrate the logic of bare life is the concentration camp, where Jewish people and other groups who were not accepted during the Nazi regime, existed in a state of exception. The camp, hence, becomes a space where the sovereign power can exercise its authority over life and death without legal consequences (Agamben169-170). The exclusion and extermination of these lives proved to be essential for the Nazi regime because it allowed them to maintain control and carry out their racial ideology of Aryan identity. In recent times, refugees and asylum seekers exemplify the logic of bare lives, as they are usually placed in camps under precarious conditions. Their existence is governed by laws and policies that prioritise security over human rights, leading to practices such as deportation and restrictions on their freedom of movement.

In the introduction of *War and Occupation in Iraqi Fiction*, Masmoudi articulates Agamben's critique of modern democracies and totalitarian regimes concisely: "Agamben argues that today sovereign states exempt themselves and make themselves exception to their laws against killing and torture and in the name of the state can kill people through capital punishment, death in detention, and death by torture or in war", she then adds:

> Today, the sovereign's wars give the sovereign the capacity to kill with immunity, so that the sovereign is not committing homicide and cannot be punished for a crime. The sovereign's actions create new forms of life where individuals are exposed, targeted and exterminated in camps, whether they find immediate death or linger in a space between life and death, a virtual death in a waiting zone, where they are less than human (6).

To sum up, the concept of bare life raises fundamental ethical questions about the value of human lives in contemporary politics. The state of exception subjects marginalised and vulnerable populations to violence and biopolitical power, which favours state interests over human lives. This creates ethical dilemmas regarding the balance between national security and the protection of human rights. The dehumanization of individuals, who are abandoned by the sovereign state, promotes issues of othering and discrimination. Furthermore, if society fails to acknowledge the

suffering of these individuals, then this could render members of society complicit in perpetuating systemic violence and policies of exclusion. Agamben's work serves as a reminder for deeper political reflection on the implications of biopolitics and the treatment of human lives. However, it is not clearly stated how the *homo sacer* could reclaim their agency or challenge the existing power dynamics that render them politically invisible. Despite the limitations imposed by their status, there is arguably room for potential resistance and engagement in acts of civil disobedience or collective action.

1.3 Achille Mbembe's concept of Necropolitics

To provide a deeper understanding of the interplay between violence and politics from a neocolonial perspective, it is constructive to examine Mbembe's key concepts of necropolitics. This work draws upon Michel Foucault's notion of biopower, exploring how sovereignty is expressed through the subjugation of life to the power of death. Additionally, he makes use of Agamben's theory of bare life and the structure of the camp to support his analysis of power dynamics, especially in the context of necropolitics. This will offer a critical lens for understanding how certain populations are deemed disposable and subjected to precarious social and political conditions.

For this reason, Mbembe's framework is essential to analyze Butler's theories regarding violence and grievability. This is particularly relevant for examining the repercussions of war in post-invasion Iraq, where the characters in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* constantly navigate a landscape marked by dehumanization and the constant threat of death. Given the intricate nature of these theoretical frameworks, it is necessary to acknowledge that not all aspects can be thoroughly covered within the confines of this thesis. The aim is to explore how these theories interact with each other in a broader context of contemporary political violence and how they resonate with the novel's engagement with themes of violence and death.

Mbembe expands on Foucault's work on biopower and poses important questions about the relationship between sovereign power and mortality. Death is crucial for the continuity of life and the protection of the human species. Foucault's writing makes it clear that the motivations for engaging in armed conflicts are no longer centred on the protection of a ruler:

> Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital. It is as managers of life and survival, of bodies and the race, that so many regimes have been able to wage so many wars, causing so many men to be killed (Foucault 137).

For Mbembe, war has a paradoxical nature. He describes it as "the pharmakon of our time" (Mbembe 3). The Derridean term 'Pharmakon' originates from the Greek word *phármakon*, which refers to two opposite meanings: cure and poison. [5] War is both a necessity and an objective, hence, its dualistic quality indicates that actions taken in the name of democracy and progress can end up causing violence and suffering. One example would be the war on terror that was waged after the September 11 attacks. Mbembe adds that "[w]ar is, after all, a means of achieving sovereignty as much as a way of exercising the right to kill" (66). This indicates that governments utilize the threat of death to maintain authority over their territories.

Mbembe says that, according to Foucault, biopower categorizes people into different groups, mainly people who deserve to live and others who deserve to die. This act of division, which is referred to as racism, allows the state to exercise its right to kill. Arendt reached a similar conclusion when she stated that "the politics of race is ultimately linked to a politics of death" (71). Moreover, Mbembe connects the emergence of biopolitics and terror to slavery. The slave represents Carl Schmitt's notion of the state of exception:

> This figure is paradoxical here for two reasons. First, in the context of the plantation, the slave's humanity appears as the perfect figure of a shadow. Indeed, the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a 'home', loss of rights over one's body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether) (74-75).

This is reminiscent of Agamben's theory of bare life and the paradigm of the camp, where the individual is shunned completely from political and social life. Nevertheless, figures like the slave are not killed, due to their value as labourers. Instead, as Mbembe suggests, they are kept in a "state of injury", in which they are subjected to continuous pain and violence by their masters (75).

[5] This term is discussed in Jacques Derrida's philosophical work "Plato's Pharmacy" In: *Dissemination.*

In other words, they are stuck in a liminal space between life and death. Additionally, Mbembe believes that race is an important factor that was exploited by the colonial world and is heavily linked to terror and biopower. Here, he draws on Arendt's thesis that the interconnection between imperialism and National Socialism is rooted in the dehumanization of colonial subjects by imperialism. These practices then served as a template for the treatment of Jews and "undesirables" within the Nazi regime (76).

The distinction between European colonial powers and colonised territories (or those that could be colonised in the future), as well as the centrality of the notion of the state, made it possible to wage wars in the name of civilizing the inhabitants of these territories. The colonies represent "the site par excellence where controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended — the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of 'civilization'" (77). Thus, individuals in the colonies are not viewed as regular citizens but rather as subpar if not animal-like. For this reason, the coloniser believes that achieving lasting peace with them is unfeasible. Mbembe concludes that "the sovereign might kill at any time or in any manner" because war in this context is not governed by laws (78).

Necropower and occupation, argues Mbembe, is still apparent in the present age. What differentiates modern occupation is the merging of "the disciplinary, the biopolitical, and the necropolitical" (80). He illustrates the dynamics of necropower by referencing the wars in South Africa and Palestine. Furthermore, areas occupied by colonial forces are often subjected to surveillance, control, and isolation (81). The superior technology of Western military equipment enables a new form of warfare – known as *infrastructural warfare,* which targets the enemy's urban infrastructure. This approach aims to destroy critical systems like electricity and telecommunication networks, among other vital components. As Mbembe describes, "[t]he state of siege is itself a military institution. It allows for a modality of killing that does not distinguish between the external and the internal enemy. Entire populations are the target of the sovereign. Besieged villages and towns are sealed off and isolated from the world. Daily life is militarized" (82). The lack of distinction between internal and external enemies means that countless lives could be considered as potential threats, leading to widespread violence that does not discriminate between combatants and civilians. The isolation of these areas serves to establish control over the flow of information and aid, further exacerbating the suffering of the besieged population.

It can be argued that contemporary forms of power are increasingly employed to sustain and propagate terror. Hence, it becomes almost impossible to distinguish between politics and war in states of exception, such as colonies. Mbembe then turns his attention to the question of survival and martyrdom, primarily focusing on the Palestinian context. His understanding of the "logic of survival" references Elias Canetti and this quote will later be useful for examining *Frankenstein in Baghdad:*

> [T]he survivor is one who, having stood in the path of death, knowing of many deaths and standing in the midst of the fallen, is still alive. Or, more precisely, the survivor is the one who has taken on a whole pack of enemies and managed not only to escape alive, but to kill his or her attackers. This is why, to a large extent, the lowest form of survival is killing. Canetti points out that in the logic of survival, 'each man is the enemy of every other.' Even more radically, in the logic of survival one's horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. It is the death of the other, his or her physical presence as a corpse, that makes the survivor feel unique. And each enemy killed makes the survivor feel more secure (88).

For the necropolitical subject, survival changes one's perception of other individuals. It entails killing potential enemies to ensure one's safety. As a result, the sight of someone else's death becomes a source of relief for the survivor. In other words, the enemy's corpse is viewed as a reminder of one's security. On the other hand, the "logic of martyrdom" blurs the line between "spaces of everyday life" and war. Mbembe explains that the suicide bomber appears as an ordinary citizen and would likely set his trap in places of congregation, such as the marketplace. The difficulty stems from the inability to identify the suicide bomber due to the invisibility of the weapon, which is the suicide bomber's own body. This act of violence is possible when the target is close enough to their body, indicating that "the will to die is fused with the will to take the enemy down with [them], that is, to slam shut the door on the possibility of life for everyone" (89). Unlike the "logic of survival", the perpetrator does not wish to survive, instead, they long for eternity.

By sacrificing one's body, the "besieged" subject can escape suffering and occupation. The decision to take agency over one's mortality arises from the notion that one's essence endures even after killing the physical body (90). Mbembe contends that humans, who are subjected to late-modern occupation, live in a continuous state of pain. The severe violence that one has to witness

combined with the destruction caused by warfare trigger "painful memories of humiliation, interrogation, and beatings" (91). Consequently, the constant exposure to violence haunts the necropolitical subject, rendering the future bleak as the prospect of a secure life seems unattainable. Mbembe refers to the necropolitical subjects as the *living dead* and concludes his essay by stating that "necropower blurs the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom" (92). Therefore, self-sacrifice could arguably be read as an attempt to resist subjugation by claiming agency over one's fate.

The concept of bare life put forth by Agamben is similar to the situation in which both the *living dead* and *homo sacer* reside in a state of exception. Both cases employ death as a means of control, either to maintain authority over populations or to reinforce the sovereign's power. In either case, the lives of these individuals are devalued and they are reduced to mere existence. Since they are viewed as inferior lives, subjecting them to torture or even killing them does not entail any legal consequences. It is essential to note that Mbembe, however, does not clearly define the concept of the *living dead*, which only appears towards the end of his essay. He uses the term mainly to refer to the individuals living under colonial occupation and in the context of slavery. In the following section, the focus will shift toward grief and Butler's theory on precarious lives and the dynamics of violence in contemporary society. Subsequently, the interconnections among these theories will be explored to evaluate how violent practices influence the experience of grief.

2. The Meaning of Grief and its Socio-political Implications

One of the major consequences of war and extreme violence is the overwhelming sense of loss it inflicts upon individuals. Victims of violence, whether they experience it firsthand or witness its aftermath, are forced to navigate different forms of losses, each with its own unique emotional and psychological implications. The death of a loved one, the destruction of a home, or the displacement from one's homeland can trigger a state of grief that is both deeply personal and inextricably connected to the broader social and political context.

The traumatizing experience of losing a valued person or a cherished object sets in motion a range of grief responses, from acute trauma to complicated mourning. Survivors may find themselves grappling with disbelief, numbness, and haunting images, combined with intense

emotions like anger, guilt, and fear. In several cases, grief can develop into depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, requiring professional intervention. This occurs especially among war survivors, who are often afflicted by persistent and debilitating symptoms that place them at a higher risk for complicated grief. Therefore, the question arises: what is grief and how is it connected to political violence? Which lives are worthy and unworthy of mourning?

The simplest way to begin answering these questions is to define the term. As per the *Oxford English Dictionary,* grief means "[m]ental pain, distress, or sorrow. In modern use in a more limited sense: deep or violent sorrow, caused by loss or trouble; a keen or bitter feeling of regret for something lost, remorse for something done, or sorrow for mishap to oneself or others" ("Grief," def. 7.a). The keywords "violent sorrow" and "mental pain" highlight the emotional responses to loss and can be further explored by understanding Judith Butler's theory on grievability, where they emphasize that grief is not merely an individual experience but is deeply embedded in social and political contexts.

The intersection of grief and political violence will provide a framework to analyse Sa'adawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad.* In the context of political upheaval, the definition of grief expands to include not only personal loss but also collective trauma and the societal implications surrounding who is permitted to mourn. Moreover, Butler's framework of grievability and precariousness aligns with Agamben's notion of *bare life* and Mbembe's *living dead* – those individuals whose lives are stripped of political significance and reduced to mere biological existence. The goal of this chapter is to emphasize the importance of recognizing the grief experienced by these marginalized communities and to highlight the far-reaching impact of political violence. This expanded perspective will then be applied to *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and will allow a critical examination of the aftermath of the Iraq War.

2.1 Exploring Grief and Violence in Judith Butler's *Frames of War* and *Precarious Life*

The prominent American philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler, has made significant contributions to understanding the interplay between grief, politics, and violence. In their works, particularly *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable* and *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence,* they introduce a theory of grief that challenges the conventional understandings of loss and argue that the ways in which lives are framed—whether as worthy of protection or

expendable—are influenced by power dynamics. Butler seeks to illuminate these power dynamics that underlie public mourning and to question the ethical implications of selective recognition.

Their work invites a rethinking of political life, urging a more inclusive approach to mourning that acknowledges the interconnectedness and interdependency between all human lives. The concept of "grievability" argues that not all lives are equally deemed worthy of mourning. This notion is deeply intertwined with the question of "precarity" and "precariousness", which highlights how lives are differentially valued and vulnerable. They highlight the potential for grief to foster community and solidarity, even amidst violence and conflict. Nevertheless, this simultaneously challenges the reader to reconsider their understanding of violence—not only as a physical act but as something ingrained in the very frameworks that determine whose lives are grievable and whose are not. Through this, Butler encourages us to reflect on how the politics of grief can shape and be shaped by broader systems of power and oppression.

Both of Butler's works *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable* and *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* will be throroughly analysed and supported with secondary literature to gain a better understanding of the mechanisms of grief and mourning during war and political unrest. Towards the end of this chapter, the theories introduced in this thesis will be summarized, to highlight the points of similarities and divergence, forming a theoretical framework for examining violence and grief in conflict-ridden countries like Iraq.

2.2 Precarious Life and Grievability

While Butler is most known for their gender performativity theory, Birgit Schippers argues in her book *The Political Philosophy of Judith Butler* that the events of 9/11 are "[…] a catalyst for a shift in thematic orientation, towards an increasing engagement with international or global issues such as the political fallout from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, US foreign policy, and the conflict in Israel-Palestine" (3). Indeed, Butler dedicates a huge chunk of their essay towards global issues. They critique the US government's response to 9/11 and explore possible non-violent approaches as an alternative to military interventions. Given the range of topics covered in *Precarious Life,* particular emphasis will be placed on chapters two and five, as they present the most important ideas relevant to this thesis.

Butler starts their first essay in *Precarious Life* by addressing the rise of anti-intellectualism and censorship that surfaced in the United States following the 9/11 attacks. They mention that the public questioning of the rationale for launching a war against Iraq only became evident after the invasion began in 2003. Prior to this, there was significant support for the invasion due to the widespread belief that Iraq posed a threat to world peace and possessed weapons of mass destruction. However, critical viewpoints on the Iraq War were largely ignored by the media, and many feared censorship. Butler attributes this to President Bush's binary rhetoric, summarized in the phrase, "Either you're with us or you're with the terrorists" (qtd. in Butler 2), which discouraged dissent by equating criticism of the war with siding with terrorists.

Thus, Butler highlights the importance of expanding one's intellectual horizons beyond binary thinking, arguing that such a mindset limits the ability to adopt a nuanced perspective that opposes both war and terrorism. Moreover, they express a concern over the lack of accountability among American citizens and the US government, emphasizing the need for a more critical and ethical engagement with global political issues. Butler openly states that "[w]e do not, however, take the sign of destroyed life and decimated peoples as something for which we are responsible, or indeed understand how that decimation works to confirm the United States as performing atrocities. Our own acts are not considered terrorist" (6). Here, Butler addresses Americans and asserts that the destruction and loss of lives resulting from their country's military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan are viewed as necessary to protect national and global security, Nevertheless, there is a failure to recognize the dreadful consequences of such actions. This critique is part of their broader argument concerning a more nuanced understanding of violence and responsibility, moving beyond simplistic binary distinctions.

In their renowned essay "Violence, Mourning, Politics", Judith Butler seeks to answer why certain lives that do not conform to specific norms of gender, religion, nationality, or sexuality are regarded as ungrievable. They begin by explaining that these lives are generally more susceptible to experiencing violence due to the "social vulnerability of [these] bodies" (20). Humans are inherently connected to their kin, and this social attachment increases their vulnerability to the notion of violence. Subsequently, Butler expresses their opinion on successful mourning. They depart from Freud's theory of object cathexis, that mourning involves replacing the lost person

with another object or person[6]. Instead, they propose that mourning occurs when one acknowledges that the loss experienced will bring about a complete shift in oneself, which can be unpredictable at times: "One mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever" (21). In other words, the person who mourns does not forget the lost person or the object of cathexis simply by finding a new object of interest or entering a new relationship

For Butler, mourning serves as a powerful reminder of the connections that bind individuals to one another. When a significant person is lost, the bereaved may find themselves becoming unintelligible to their own sense of self. Hence, Butler challenges the common perception that grief is a private matter, which leads to a depoliticized state. Rather, grief fosters a sense of political community by highlighting the interconnectedness and interdependence that bring people together (22). Moreover, they believe that human bodies are inherently characterized by vulnerability to external forces and influences, encompassing both being affected by others and having the capacity to affect them. This exposure is a fundamental aspect of human existence. However, it does not impact all lives equally, as societal structures often assign differing levels of value to humans. In other words, some communities are afforded greater protection and resources, while others are marginalized and exposed to a higher level of vulnerability (31-32).

The loss of marginalized lives is often completely overlooked and is not worthy of being grieved. Their unacknowledged vulnerability leads to their dehumanization because "a vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter" (43). Butler suggests that the relationship between violence and ungrievable lives lies in the fact that their very existence is often ignored. As a result, violence is directed against them because their persistence in living challenges the societal norms that render them invisible. This dynamic creates a "spectral state", akin similar to Mbembe's concept of the *living dead,* where these lives exist in a marginal space between life and death, unnoticed and unvalued. Butler adds that this situation breeds a state of paranoia that justifies subjecting these lives to endless violence. Because they are considered less than human, their deaths often go unnoticed, further perpetuating cycles of violence and dehumanization (34).

[6] See *Mourning and Melancholia* by Sigmund Freud, p: 243-258

To illustrate this, Schippers mentions that "[t]he grieving for enemy combatants and for Afghan and Iraqi civilians are not a constitutive part of the Western politics of grieving; no exact figures are obtainable, and only a few images or names enter the public discourse" (43). For Butler, an obituary is a way of commemorating a life and is the process that determines whether a life is recognized as publicly grievable or unacknowledged. The lives that go unnoticed become "unmarkable as if they never existed" (35). Hence, not grieving publicly for a life, creates the conditions for melancholia, the Freudian notion of pathological mourning when the individual cannot release the lost object. This occurs due to state-imposed prohibitions that deny acknowledgment of the loss of certain lives.

Furthermore, Butler explains that the 9/11 attacks revealed the porosity of national borders, leading to a state of "racial hysteria" due to the perceived threat of terrorists infiltrating the United States. This "loss of First Worldism" heightened fears about national security and resulted in increased surveillance and suspicion, particularly towards Arab individuals and other groups of people who might be mistaken for Arabs (39). The terrorist attacks indicated that developed countries are not immune from retaliatory violence and that their borders can be transgressed. The lives of citizens who adhere to normative values are considered valuable, and any threat against them is often seen as sufficient justification for waging war against perceived enemies.

The last essay revolves around Levinas's idea of the face, which embodies vulnerability and signifies an ethical demand for care and responsibility. Butler summarises his idea by saying that, "[t]o respond to the face, to understand its meaning, means to be awake to what is precarious in another life or, rather, the precariousness of life itself" (134). This is a relatively abstract concept but could be interpreted in such a way that encountering the face is a pivotal moment in acknowledging the humanity of the Other. However, Butler questions whether the face is consistently humanizing in every instance. They argue that the media and cultural narratives accompanying these images influence how the recipient perceives the face, such as Osama bin Laden's face which is associated with terrorism. In the context of war, these narratives often result in the "defacing" of the face, stripping it of its humanizing qualities and reducing the Other to an object of violence or indifference (143). The absence of the faces of war victims in the media or the distortion of them—indicates that the ethical demand that Levinas describes is never

encountered. Butler argues that the absence of the images serves to censor the reality of war, thus avoiding public outrage and maintaining support for military actions.

All in all, what distinguishes Butler is their interrogation of the ethical dimensions of mourning within the context of political violence. The reader is compelled to confront the differential allocation of grievability, which is ingrained in socio-political structures and media respresentations. By illuminating the precariousness inherent in human lives, Butler challenges the prevailing paradigms that unequally delineate whose suffering is grievable and whose is disregarded. Their critique calls for a shift towards a politics of empathy and non-violence. In the next chapter, a thorough analysis of *Frames of War* will be provided to gain a broader understanding of how framing makes certain lives ungrievable.

2.3 Framing and Grievability

Butler's next work *Frames of War* delves into the cultural and ethical dimensions of warfare, particularly focusing on how societal frameworks shape public perceptions of whose lives are deemed worthy of protection and mourning. Butler explores these frameworks by examining the narratives surrounding war, particularly in the aftermath of 9/11 and during the Iraq war. They reveal how these frames shape the media and public discourse in the context of global conflict. Moreover, they encourage the reader to critically assess the power dynamics embedded in these narratives and to reconsider the ethical implications of media representations and societal norms. This chapter will explain the above-mentioned points with particular attention to the Abu-Ghraib scandal.

In the introduction, Butler argues that technological devices, such as the camera, are instruments used to frame reality: "Of course, persons use technological instruments, but instruments surely also use persons (position them, endow them with perspective, and establish the trajectory of their action); they frame and form anyone who enters into the visual or audible field, and accordingly, those who do not" (IV). This indicates that technological instruments are not merely tools that people use; rather, they are part of larger systems that can shape and constrain human behavior and perception. Butler describes the passive consumption of war coverage as a form of recruitment. The way war is framed by the media and the government, meaning how it is portrayed and the discourse that is shown to the public, shapes reality and directs the recipient's

attention to certain angles. Therefore, it is crucial to be mindful of these framing methods to prevent the justification of war.

Butler strongly emphasizes the "circulability of images" and describes this act as irrepressible. This means that images, through their circulation, can unsettle both the creator and the viewer because images simultaneously challenge and reinforce the intentions that they were created for. They have the potential to expose the mechanisms of restriction and control, prompting public outrage and criticism. However, they can also perpetuate war narratives and normalize the idea that killing in war is inevitable (VI). Through this lens, war becomes an "assault on the senses" as it manipulates and conditions the public's affective and ethical responses, often normalizing violence and death.

The main question that intrigues Butler is if "[…] the visual also become[s] the field in which we are solicited to assume responsibility to resist unjust war and to affirm convergent precarious conditions" (IX). In other words, images and visual perception constitute a vital arena for ethical and political engagement, especially in the context of resisting wars and acknowledging shared vulnerabilities as human beings. Butler argues that war generates precarity and is inherently criminal because innocent people will inevitably get harmed in the process (X). Nonetheless, destroying ungrievable lives is a redundant act. These lives are already shattered and belong to a devastated area so their death does not count as a loss.

Additionally, Butler addresses the issue of counting war casualties as another method of framing. They argue that these numbers are not reliable because they do not accurately represent the true extent of loss. The census depends on how each institution defines and understands specific categories, such as 'civilian' or 'child' (XI). This counting reduces war victims to mere statistics, which can obscure the ethical and political significance of their deaths. This numerical representation makes it difficult for the public to fully grasp the precariousness of these lives, leading to desensitization of the senses.

It is important to note that there is a difference between precariousness and precarity. Butler defines the former as: "the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all" (13). Precariousness is an existential and social condition shared by all human beings, emphasizing the fragility of human life. It indicates that humans

cannot sustain themselves without establishing a connection with their environment and its inhabitants. On the other hand, precarity describes "that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death. Such populations are at heightened risk of disease, poverty, starvation, displacement, and of exposure to violence without protection" (24). To put it differently, precarity affects disadvantaged groups, such as the marginalized and the poor. They are more exposed to state violence and social exclusion due to social and political structures, which assign different levels of value to different lives, often causing a disparity in wealth distribution and rights.

One might wonder about the factors that lead to the prioritization of certain lives. According to Butler, normative frameworks dictate which lives are deemed valuable and worthy of grieving. This mindset justifies initiating a war against anyone who does not identify with the state's ideology and challenges its norms. As a result, Butler perceives war as "an effort to minimize precariousness for some and to maximize it for others" (52). Here, the reader is urged to re-evaluate the ethical and political dimensions of war. The statement challenges the notion that war is a legitimate means of establishing security and stability because it is always at the expense of other lives. However, one undeniable truth is that everyone is vulnerable to injury during times of war, what varies is the degree of vulnerability.

In the following essay, Butler discusses Susan Sontag's reflections on the photographic image and its effect on the viewer. According to Sontag, the proliferation of photographed images has led to a decline in their capacity to provoke shock and emotion in the viewer. Therefore, she believes that this overabundance reduces political and moral reactions, especially in the realm of war photography. She acknowledges that images have an affective power but simultaneously they do not provide an understanding of the viewed object (68). However, Butler argues that photographs are not merely passive objects that require interpretation, instead they actively partake in interpreting the captured scene (70). This interpretation happens against the viewer's will because the way the photograph is framed is not neutral. To put it simply, photographs could be structured to reinforce existing power dynamics and cultural narratives, evoke certain emotions, or emphasize or downplay a specific aspect. For instance, when the photographer decides what to capture, this automatically indicates that something was excluded from the picture. The chosen

angle, the degree of zooming, and the context in which a photograph is taken all elicit different emotional responses. A close-up shot of an injured child would evoke more empathy in comparison to a wide shot that depersonalizes the subjects.

Butler suggests that the release of the Abu-Ghraib images, which depicted the torture and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by American soldiers in the Abu-Ghraib prison, caused panic among American politicians, such as the U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld:

> When, for instance, Rumsfeld claimed that publishing the photos of torture and humiliation and rape would allow them 'to define us as Americans', he attributed to photography an enormous power to construct national identity itself. The photographs would not just show something atrocious, but would make our capacity to commit atrocity into a defining concept of American identity (72).

This highlights the power of photographs to shape national identity and public perception. The leaked photos caused worldwide outrage and demanded accountability from both the perpetrators and high-ranking U.S officials like Donald Rumsfeld. This was particularly intensified after Seymour Hersh's article in *The New Yorker,* which brought the scandal to bright light.[7] For Butler, the Abu-Ghraib images serve as a stark example of how certain lives are presented as less than fully human, and thus not grievable, due to the norms and frames that opted to debase the nameless prisoners. Although it is difficult to know the original intent behind taking these photos, Butler argues that these images ultimately served various purposes, including blackmail, war documentation, and as a reminder of the immorality of torture. What they want to convey is that photographs themselves are neither inherently torturous nor redemptive. However, their impact can vary greatly depending on how they are "instrumentalized" i.e. framed and presented within different media contexts (92).

In the third essay "Sexual Politics, Torture, and Secular Time", Butler critiques how secularism and sexual freedom are used to justify acts of torture and oppression against those deemed less "advanced". Civilizational wars and missions are problematic because they aim to "seize control over the construction of the subject of torture" (127). In other words, the goal of torture is to create a subject that would collapse under the pressure to violate religious and cultural

[7] For more information, please refer to Seymour Hersh's article:
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/05/10/torture-at-abu-ghraib

codes. This "exploitation" of freedom perpetuates the logic that positions state power and its mechanisms of violence as operating outside the boundaries of the law (128). The dehumanization of certain groups of people due to them being viewed as a threat to the prevailing norms validates the use of sexual torture. According to Butler, a skewed understanding of sexual freedom is the reason for this justification: "we embody that freedom, you do not; therefore, we are free to coerce you, and so to exercise our freedom, and you, you will manifest your unfreedom to us, and that spectacle will serve as the visual justification for our onslaught against you" (131). The irony of this mindset followed by the perpetrator, specifically in the context of Abu-Ghraib, is that it embodies homophobia and misogyny.

This highlights the importance of critiquing state violence as a means to acknowledge existing alliances among various minority groups. Solidarity is built by understanding how coercion is used to divide humans from one another and distract them from noticing the violence practiced against them. Thus, real freedom is established by fostering unity among marginalized communities, who are often targeted by state violence. Butler concludes *Frames of War* by explaining that violence is an essential factor in the formation of human beings (167). This, in turn, suggests that non-violence is the struggle to suppress one's aggression and violent urges: "It denotes the mired and conflicted position of a subject who injured, rageful, disposed to violent retribution and nevertheless struggles against that action (often crafting the rage against itself)" (171). Despite the pull towards violent retaliation, the subject chooses to actively resist that impulse, meaning that non-violence is not a passive choice, but an active struggle against the human tendency towards retaliation.

Butler adds that "[t]he desire to commit violence is thus always attended by the anxiety of having violence returned, since all the potential actors in the scene are equally vulnerable" (179). This reiterates the idea that all individuals are susceptible to injury and violence, regardless of their position or power. The statement implies the internal conflict between violent impulses and the fear of consequences, which emerges from the awareness of one's own vulnerability. Hence, understanding this notion of shared vulnerability could act as a deterrent to committing violent acts.

Although not every aspect could be covered in this chapter, Judith Butler's *Frames of War* offers a profound exploration of how different frameworks shape our perception of war, violence,

and human vulnerability. The complex interplay between precariousness and precarity, emphasizes how political structures can exacerbate vulnerability for disadvantaged communities. Butler's analysis of photographic images in the context of the Abu-Ghraib scandal highlights the power dynamics embedded in war narratives that deem certain lives inferior. Additionally, Butler critiques Western liberal discourse on secularism and sexual freedom, exposing how these concepts are often weaponized to give grounds for violence against other nations. They challenge the simplistic narrative that portrays Western societies as symbols of liberation while positioning other cultures as backward. Instead, they advocate for a more nuanced analysis that recognizes diverse expressions of freedom and cultural practices. Ultimately, Butler provides an alternative framework of non-violence, which acknowledges our shared vulnerability as a human species and the potential for violence in all of us. In doing so, they suggest a more ethical and inclusive understanding of human rights and global conflicts.

2.4 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter shows that violence and grief are inextricably linked in the context of conflict and political upheaval, shaping both personal and broader societal dynamics. The theoretical frameworks provided by key thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, Achille Mbembe, and Judith Butler showcase the interplay between violence, grief, and political power. Their insights into the nature of these forces are essential to comprehend the situation in war-torn countries like Iraq. Moreover, the frameworks provide a critical lens to analyse literary works that addresses these themes. Ahmed Sa'adawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is a striking exploration of violence and grief, embodying many of the concepts articulated by the above-mentioned scholars.

While these thinkers approach these subjects from different angles, they all have a similar outlook on the role of state power in determining which lives are valued. For instance, Arendt distinguishes between power and violence, emphasizing that violence is not capable of creating genuine political power but rather destroys it. However, she argues that violence is an indicator of the sovereign's diminishing power, and this shift usually leads to a cycle of retaliatory violence. This distinction between power and violence suggests that genuine political discourse is undermined by violence, potentially affecting how societies grieve. Namely, when a government

uses violence to suppress dissent, it discourages people from genuine political discourse. This results in a situation where public mourning for victims of state violence becomes dangerous.

Agamben, on the other hand, defines the concept of *homo sacer* and the production of *bare life* through sovereign power and the state of exception, which builds upon Arendt's work on totalitarianism and Foucault's biopower. Agamben illustrates how sovereign power can reduce individuals to *bare life*, exposing them to violence without any legal repercussions. His concept raises questions about the grievability of those excluded from political and social life, connecting to Butler's concept of precarious lives. This is demonstrated in the context of the camp, where individuals are subjected to all kinds of violence. Therefore, this management of life and death by the sovereign state, as highlighted by Agamben and Foucault, culminates in Mbembe's concept of necropower.

Necropower extends beyond biopower, focusing on how contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death reshape the relationships between resistance and terror. This notion explains how certain marginalized populations are subjected to vulnerable life conditions that reduce them to the status of *living dead*. In other words, sovereignty is expressed through the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die, especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Hence, Mbembe's necropolitics highlights how certain populations are considered disposable and susceptible to violence. This aligns with Butler's notion of precarity, which arises from violence, rendering certain lives unmournable. Nevertheless, the act of mourning these marginalized lives could serve as a form of political resistance. For instance, individuals and communities can challenge the necropolitical order and assert the value of human lives, by collectively grieving for the *living dead*. Mourning, thus, turns into a powerful non-violent tool to confront the systems that perpetuate violence and dehumanization, potentially changing social attitudes towards those previously considered ungrievable.

Analysis

After introducing the theoretical framework and historical context, the analytical section of the thesis will focus on dissecting the intricate descriptions of violence and grief within the narrative structure of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. The analysis will begin by exploring how violence is framed

in the novel, utilizing the perspectives of significant theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Giorgio Agamben, and Achille Mbembe. Their insights into the nature of violence, power, and the state of exception will be applied on key characters, particularly the figure of the Whatsitsname (*Shisma*). This character, a grotesque assemblage of body parts from various victims, embarks on a vengeful killing spree, seeking justice for those who once inhabited his body parts.

The analysis will then turn to the theme of grief, drawing on Judith Butler's theories of grievability and precariousness. The novel's portrayal of grief will be examined to understand its impact on the characters and to explore its connection to violence. Through the characters Hadi and Elishva, Sa'adawi explores the ways in which loss and mourning shape the psyche of individuals living in a war-torn society. Occasionally, references to Iraq's historical context will be integrated to ground the analysis in a more concrete and realistic framework.

Finally, Butler's *Frames of War* will be applied to examine media representation and the framing of violence in the novel. This will be useful to understand how media and governmental institutions shape public perception of conflict and its impact on determining which lives are considered grievable. Sa'dawi's novel uses narrative techniques to mirror the confusion and instability of the setting, where the distinction between victim and murderer, becomes increasingly difficult. Through this analysis, the thesis will demonstrate how *Frankenstein in Baghdad* operates as both a literary work and a social critique, offering insights into the human condition in the face of pervasive violence and loss. The aim is to underscore the significance of Iraqi authors' narratives in modern and contemporary discussions on various issues such as war, identity, and mourning.

Violence in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

The first chapter of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* starts immediately with an explosion scene, which sets the tone for the rest of the novel, highlighting the pervasive danger and lack of stability in Baghdad: "The Explosion took place two minutes after Elishva, the old woman known as Umm Daniel, or Daniel's mother, boarded the bus" (Sa'adawi 5). The opening scene establishes the novel's setting in post-invasion Iraq and introduces one of the key characters, Elishva, who narrowly escapes the explosion. Right from the start, the reader realizes that violence is commonplace and that everyday life is permeated with the threat of losing one's life.

The narrative then turns its attention to Elishva and does not provide details about the perpetrator or the reason for the explosion. Only the aftermath is described: "The slaughter had ended several hours ago, but the destruction was still clearly visible. It might have been the neighborhood's biggest explosion. The old deacon was depressed; he didn't say a word to Elishva as he parked his car next to an electricity pole. There was blood and hair on the pole, mere inches from his nose and his thick white mustache. He felt a tremor of fear" (7). The brutality of the explosion is conveyed through words like "slaughter", "blood", and "hair", which serve as a stark reminder of the lost lives and the fragility of life itself. The deacon's "termor of fear" reveals that even religious figures, who provide strength and comfort during times of crisis, are not immune to the terrifying situation. This fear suggests a moment of vulnerability and a realization of one's mortality and powerlessness in the face of destruction. This is highlighted by the deacon's awareness of the violence being "mere inches from his nose", making the violence even more haunting and pervasive.

This passage resonates with Kumarakulasingam's close reading of Cavarero's Horrorism, where he states: "Anyone, regardless of ideology, faith or any other attributes, can now be in the wrong place at the wrong time. In other words, violence can occur anywhere or at any time, and be directed against anyone without discrimination" (Kumarakulasingam 255). This "indiscriminate" violence threatened everyone living in Iraq not only because of the American occupation but also due to the sectarian war that erupted after the fall of Saddam's regime.

The explosion scene in the novel unveils an important object found by Hadi, that changes the story's trajectory. Elishva's neighbour, Hadi Al-Attag, is a middle-aged junk-dealer who always tries to persuade her to sell him the antiques that clutter her spacious house. One day, he describes what he witnessed during the incident to an unnamed German journalist and an Iraqi journalist called Mahmoud al-Sawadi. Amidst the chaos of ambulances rushing to rescue the injured and put out the fire, his eyes fix on something:

> Hadi watched the scene with eagle eyes, looking for something in particular 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. He wrapped it in his canvas sack, folded the sack under his arm, and left the scene (Sa'adawi 21).

Later on, the object turns out to be a deformed nose that he obtained specifically to sew onto the face of an abandoned corpse (25). Throughout the novel, Hadi is described as a liar and a drunkard who is known for spinning exaggerated tales that others in the neighbourhood often dismiss as lies. Elishva is also treated in a similar manner, when she is described as a hallucinating madwoman, who talks to a dead saint. Nevertheless, their roles are significant in the narrative, because they recreate the chaotic environment in Baghdad. Hadi and Elishva embody the uncertainty and the elusive nature of truth in a country marked by violence and lawlessness. Due to the narrative ambiguity, the reader also finds it challenging to trust Hadi's storytelling. In a broader sense, this aligns with Butler's argument in *Frames of War* that frames impact one's perception of reality: "The frame does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality" (IV). Media and political frames can distort or dismiss the realities faced by individuals affected by violence. The blurred lines between truth and fiction in Hadi's stories highlight the struggle to construct coherent narratives in the midst of destruction and could potentially indicate a sign of trauma.

Throughout the novel, Sa'dawi frequently depicts body parts, both in terms of their loss and reassembly. According to Bahoora, this "establishes the centrality of a dismembering violence […] to the contemporary Iraqi experience" (185). Bahoora argues that the portrayal of decapitated and disfigured body parts in literary and artistic works became a recurrent motif after the American invasion. Hadi's attempt to restore the body parts into a single corpse signifies his refusal to reduce individuals to *zoe*. This reduction of individuals to mere body parts after their death is reminiscent of Agamben's *bare life*, where they have absolutely no political or social significance. Moreover, Mbembe's concept of necropolitics is quite relevant here. The fragmented body parts that will later constitute *Shisma*, exemplify the *living dead, a* repurposed body that lingers between life and death, who is excluded from social and political life.

The violent death of Hadi's close friend, Nahem Abdaki, causes a major change in Hadi's personality: "By the time Hadi sat in Aziz's coffee shop with Mahmoud al-Sawadi and some old men, […], Nahem had already been dead for several months–from a car bomb that had exploded in front of the office of a religious party in Karrada, killing also some other passerby and Nahem's horse. It had been hard to separate Nahem's flesh from that of the horse" (Sa'adawi 24). This loss

may have been the catalyst for Hadi's obsession with collecting body parts. The inability to honor Nahem's death, due to the difficulty of disentangling his flesh from the horse's carcass, may have driven Hadi to stitch the dismembered body parts into a single corpse, offering it a semblance of wholeness for a proper burial.

At a later stage in the novel, Aziz, the Egyptian coffee-shop owner, reveals an important detail to Mahmoud Al-Sawadi about *Shisma.* Aziz believs that the Whatsitsname in Hadi's stories is a symbolic representation or a metaphorical stand-in for Nahem: "Aziz explained that after the explosion, Hadi had gone to the mortuary to collect the body because Nahem didn't have any family other than his wife and young daughter. Hadi was shocked to see that the bodies of the explosion victims were all mixed up together and to hear the mortuary worker tell him to put a body together and carry it off—take this leg and this arm and so on" (221). This appalling incident explains the sudden shift in Hadi's personality. It simultaneously serves as a poignant critique of violence against civilians, who are often nothing more than collateral damage to the perpetrator. As Butler explains in their last essay in *Precarious Life,* dehumanization is maintained through the systemic indifference to the suffering of victims of violence and its misrepresentation by the media. Hence, Nahem's death forces the reader to confront the gruesome reality of living in a war-torn country and grapple with the dire consequences of living under the constant threat of violence. Through this, Sa'adawi's narrative urges readers to comprehend, if not condone, the extreme measures individuals might take in response to loss caused by brutality.

The chapter that explains Hasib's death is crucial in explaining how the corpse stitched-up by Hadi becomes animated. Hasib, who was a young hotel guard with a small family, died due to "an explosion caused by a Sudanese suicide bomber driving a dynamite-laden garbage truck stolen from the Baghdad municipality" (Sa'adawi 35). The suicide bomber planned to crash into the hotel and destroy the hotel building. However, Hasib sacrifices himself to protect the hotel from the attack. As a result, his body is obliterated in the explosion and all that remains for his family to bury are "his burned black shoes; his shredded, bloodstained clothes; and small charred parts of his body" (35). As Alkhayat explains; the recurrent theme of dehumanization throughout the novel exposes the grim reality that most of the coffins in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* are buried with little to no body remains (59). Another example is the empty coffin of Elishva's son, whose whereabouts are unknown, and presumed dead. This is a major problem in Iraq, which does not get talked about

often in the media. The United Nations reported that since 1968, there have been five waves of unexplained disappearances, with an estimated 250,000 to 1,000,000 people going missing. [8] Sa'adawi gives the reader a glimpse of the physical effects of violence and sheds light on the stories of countless war casualties whose remains are nowhere to be found.

In an attempt to document the true horrors of war, an American photojournalist named Kenneth Jarecke, captured an image of a charred Iraqi soldier in a burned-out vehicle on the "Highway of Death" during the Gulf War. Due to its gruesomeness, the photo was rejected by American media outlets but was later published in *The Observer* in the UK and the French news outlet *Libération.*[9] The censorship of such images reiterates Butler's argument in *Frames of War* that the circulation of images "provide[s] the conditions for breaking out of the quotidian acceptance of war and for a more generalized horror and outrage that will support and impel calls for justice and an end to violence" (11). Despite the taboo around photographing dead bodies, Jarecke believes that showing graphic images is important to provide a more realistic perspective on war beyond statistics and glorified or sanitized perceptions of war. Similarly, Hasib's death and the subsequent creation of *Shisma* highlight the human cost of war, which becomes more personal as the story unfolds in the novel.

Hasib's death in a suicide bombing reflects Mbembe's statement in *Necropolitics:* "To mete out death is therefore to reduce the Other and oneself to the status of pieces of inert flesh, scattered about everywhere, and pieced back together with difficulty before the burial" (89). Suicide bombings are presented as one of the ways in which bodies are fragmented and dehumanized in the context of war. This lawless violence illustrates how the security vacuum in Iraq, which was caused by the dismantling of Iraq's security forces by the American invasion, led to the establishment of insurgent groups that targeted Iraqi civilians with suicide bombings and exposed them to arbitrary violence. The rise of militias and non-state armed groups complicated the situation and made it harder for the state to take effective measures against terrorism.

After Hasib dies, his soul seeks to attach itself to a body in an effort to return to life. As a result, he encounters Hadi's stitched-up corpse in Al-Bataween district and decides to merge with

[8] For further details, see https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1135342
[9] The image and complete article could be seen here: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/the-war-photo-no-one-would-publish/375762/

it. This act is what animates the corpse known as *Shisma,* who embarks on a quest for vengeance against those responsible for the death of the individuals that constitute him. In his dissertation, Karzan Mahmood makes a compelling case that Hadi is not assuming the role of God by resurrecting an individual who has died of natural causes; instead, he is reconstructing a person whose life was violently cut short by terrorists. From Mahmood's point of view, Hadi is innocent because he only intended to honour the dead by giving them a proper burial (118). If it was not for Hasib's lost soul, *Shisma* would not have existed.

On a different note, the novel vividly conveys how the Iraq War led to increased insecurity and violence. This scene illustrates how it affected familial and social relationships: "But then when the Americans invaded Baghdad, their missiles destroyed the telephone exchange, and the phones were cut off for many months. Death stalked the city like the plague, and Elishva's daughters felt the need to check every week that the old woman was okay" (5). This passage highlights the profound disruption caused by the war, where the destruction of communication not only exacerbated the sense of danger but also undermined the social fabric that holds the people together. Likewise, this scene reflects Mbembe's assertion that modern power often operates through the management of life and death. Hence, the state's inability to protect its citizens from missiles results in a normalization of violence, where death becomes omnipresent like a "plague" that indiscriminately affects all regardless of their identity.

Just as Masmoudi explains, during war "the defenceless Iraqi citizen ends up as a bare life in the new Iraq, with only a desire for life but without any protection or rights" (181). She draws upon Mark Danner's essay "Iraq: The War of the Imagination" to support her argument:

> As Iraqis do their shopping or say their prayers they are blown to pieces by suicide bombers. As they drive through the cities in broad daylight they are pulled from their cars by armed men at roadblocks who behead them or shoot them in the back of their neck. As they sit at home at night they are kidnapped by men in police or army uniform who load them in the trunks of their cars and carry them off to secret places to be tortured and executed, their bound and headless bodies to be found during the following days in fields or dumps or by the roadside (84).

The pervasive violence that erupted following the American invasion did not only result in physical destruction and killing but also had a detrimental impact on the economy. Abu-Anmar's financial

struggle to maintain his empty hotel, which barely attracts any customers due to the dire situation, illustrates the overall economic downturn in Iraq (Sa'adawi 11-12). The inflation and rise in unemployment, as well as the increased poverty, resulted in the displacement of many Iraqis and caused a prolonged recession that was difficult to recover from.

Another factor that compelled people to flee their cities was the rampant corruption that took over Iraq. Unscrupulous individuals and networks exploited the instability and chaos to further their interests, often at the expense of the vulnerable population. This corruption, which manifested in various forms such as bribery, embezzlement and nepotism, eroded public trust and forced many to leave to other places. Several characters illustrate this dynamic, among them Mahmoud al-Sawadi, who was forced to relocate from Amara to Baghdad due to serious threats and accusations he received from a criminal known as the Mantis. This situation arose after Mahmoud published an article advocating for the enforcement of the law against him (173-174). Additionally, Faraj, the realtor seeking to purchase Elishva's house, is depicted as a greedy individual intent on increasing his power:

> Faraj, on the other hand, had many relatives and acquaintances, and when the regime fell, they were the means by which he imposed authority, winning everyone's respect and legalizing his appropriation of the abandoned houses, even though everyone knew he didn't have the papers to prove he owned them or had ever rented them from the government (12).

Faraj's corrupt nature is most evident when Elishva adamantly refuses to sell him her house, yet he still believes that it is his rightful property (14).

Another character that is motivated by self-interest is Brigadier Majid who "would have no qualms about using brute force to serve those in power, whether Saddam Hussein, the Americans, or the new government" (167). In this case, war creates an excuse for different factions to attain power and sovereignty while also serving as a means to end people's lives (Mbembe 66). The declaration of a state of exception during wartime provides those in authority with an opportunity to exploit their power. Because of the suspension of normal legal protections, many are granted the latitude to act without accountability. In such cases, the boundaries of legality become blurred, allowing for infringement of civil liberties and power abuses. In the article "Infinite Monstrosity", Fred Botting argues that Brigadier Majid, who is the commander of the Tracking and Pursuit Department, gathers unusual tales "to get more control, to provide

information about sources of violence and the incitement to hatred, and to prevent civil war" (19). Botting clarifies that Brigadier Majid regards the story published by Mahmoud al-Sawadi not as mere fantasy, but as a genuine event (Sa'adawi 169).

Furthermore, Botting makes the notable observation that narrative and framing play a significant role in the novel: "*Frankenstein in Baghdad* is composed of official reports, indirect first-person accounts, magazine articles, digital audio recordings, emails, media forms circulating to a background of other media forms, from TV news bulletin, movie images, mobile phones conversations and numerous stories told in coffee shops, restaurants, offices, and homes" (20). This interplay of various media forms in the novel mirrors the information war that accompanies real-life conflicts, where the truth is difficult to discern by the competing narratives. This is evident in the scene where the Brigadier observes the news coverage of the mass stampede on the Imams Bridge: "As the brigadier read the report, the big television screen in his grand office flashed breaking news that dozens of people had been killed on the Imams Bridge. A rumor that there was a suicide bomber among the pilgrims had caused panic, and some of the pilgrims were trampled to death while others threw themselves into the river and drowned" (Sa'adawi 110). This is based on the real Al-Aimmah Bridge disaster that took place during the summer of 2005 in Baghdad. Hundreds of Shiite pilgrims lost their lives due to a widespread fear triggered by a false rumour of a suicide bomber in their midst.[10] Aljanabi expounds on this scene and states that the media is responsible for creating sectarian divisions in Iraq: "Targeting 'Imams Bridge' (a link between two sectors of Baghdad: Sunni-Majority A'zamiah and Shiite majority Kazimiah) as a site for spreading fabricated yet deadly stories reveals the complicity of the media in igniting sectarian clashes" (95).

In the novel, the brigadier attributes this tragic event to *Shisma* and makes up his mind to capture him. His frustration that he could not stop the stampede asserts Butler's argument that "[t]he photograph, shown and circulated, becomes the public condition under which we feel outrage and construct political views to incorporate and articulate that outrage" (*Frames of War* 77). Hence, the images shown in the media are not passive because they actively shape how the recipient responds to suffering and violence. For instance, it frustrates Brigadier Majid that "some

[10] For more details about the Al-Aimmah Bridge stampede, read here:
https://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/01/world/middleeast/950-die-in-stampede-on-baghdad-bridge.html

officer in the National Guard or in the Ministry of the Interior would appear on television or in front of his subordinates and take all the credit for the success of the security operation, with no mention of the curious Tracking and Pursuit Department or of the diligent work by a team led by a dedicated and meticulous man called Brigadier Sorour Majid" (Sa'adawi 110) as the reports he wrote on the criminals were ignored and no arrests followed. This is in line with Butler's theory, which posits that media constructs selective narratives that make certain actors visible while rendering others invisible. It illustrates how those in power manipulate public perception through their control over media representation. The Tracking and Pursuit Department is likely not given the same weight as other political institutions, pointing to the marginalization of certain departments that are seen as secondary within the state, even if they play a vital role. It reflects a form of institutional injustice, in which success is attributed to those who are in positions of visibility and authority, not necessarily to those who do the most work.

Revisiting *Shisma's* character, one can observe that the construction of his body is unique. Initially, he seeks to avenge the deaths of the individual body parts that make up his own form. He sees himself as a vessel for justice, hunting down and murdering those responsible for the deaths of the people whose body parts he consists of. He aims to "set an example of vengeance—the vengeance of the innocent who have no protection other than the tremors of their souls as they pray to ward off death" (142). However, as the story progresses, *Shisma*'s purpose becomes more ambiguous and problematic. The Magician, his most devoted assistant and follower, informs him that his body parts begin to deteriorate once vengeance has been carried out (148). As his body melts away, he realizes that he needs to acquire new body parts to stay alive, meaning that killing becomes essential to his own survival.

Davies argues that the stitching of *Shisma*'s body parts is similar to how Sa'adawi constructs his narrative: "This multi-layered fabrication allows Sa'adawi to reveal the consequences of biopolitical governance that, contra the hegemonic US war story of security consolidation and social stabilization, in fact produces a pervasive *insecurity*" (12). The Special Committee's decision to arrest the Writer once again, following his release after he turned *Shisma's* story into a novel, underscores the state's role in suppressing the truth and manipulating the narrative surrounding Iraq's situation (Sa'adawi 2). By targeting the writer, the state seeks to silence dissenting voices who dare to challenge its version of reality, illustrating the lengths to

which authorities will go to ensure their narrative prevails. This reveals how the act of storytelling and publication itself becomes a form of non-violent resistance against the state's attempts to censor other narratives.

On a different note, the need to constantly replace *Shisma's* decaying body parts with those of new victims perpetuates a cycle of violence that is difficult to break. Just as the character's physical form is in constant state of flux, the narrative structure reflects the chaos and uncertainty that permeated the lives of Iraqis after the 2003 invasion. The novel's fragmented storytelling, characterized by multiple perspectives, time jumps, and a nonlinear progression, mirrors the disintegration of *Shisma's* body. It can be deduced that the inability to maintain a stable physical form or a coherent narrative indicates the struggle to rebuild a cohesive national identity in the face of ongoing violence and sectarian tensions. This decomposition of narrative parallels Talal Asad's observation regarding the horror of suicide bombing, which arises from the disintegration "of social and personal identity and thus with the dissolution of form" (Asad 3; Davies 19). Asad contends that suicide bombing represents the breakdown of the coherent self. Just as the identity of the suicide bomber is obliterated, *Shisma* symbolizes the loss of identity wrought by violence and war. The victims whose limbs are severed collectively form *Shisma*, who embodies the disintegration of personal identity.

Although *Shisma* strives to secure justice for those who lost their lives unjustly, his determination to survive in order to achieve this goal, coupled with his need to "salvage the spare parts he needed from the bodies of those who deserved to be killed" (Sa'adawi 200), ultimately leads to the perpetuation of further violence. This aligns with Arendt's argument that "[v]iolence is by nature instrumental; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues" (44). In other words, violence requires a rationale that justifies its use to achieve particular goals. Despite the potential for violence to achieve specific objectives and instigate change, it cannot produce authentic political power nor the foundation for an enduring authority. According to Arendt, "[t]he practice of violence changes the world but the most probable change is to a more violent world" (XV). Alhashmi agrees with Arendt and explains that *Shisma's* "pursuit of justice changes its course and becomes the perversion of justice instead" (100). This raises questions about what ends are worth pursuing through violent means, and whether those ends can ethically justify the harm caused by violence.

Consequently, the overwhelming chaos, characterized by an inability to discern the innocent from the guilty, leaves *Shisma* feeling completely lost:

> The Whatsitsname was now at a loss for what to do. He knew his mission was essentially to kill new people every day, but he no longer had a clear idea who should be killed or why. The flesh of the innocents, of which he was initially composed, had been replaced by new flesh, that of his own victims and criminals (Sa'adawi 199).

Here it can be argued that each act of violence not only perpetuates further violence but also contributes to his internal conflict. On a broader level, his experience serves as a commentary on the political level in a war-ridden society. The inability to distinguish between the innocent and the guilty mirrors the complexities of moral judgment in contexts of political conflict. Oppression and lawlessness generate the ideal conditions for violence to thrive and intensify, a reality particularly evident in a country like Iraq. Here, radical ideologies took root and sectarian tensions escalated as a direct consequence of the exclusionary policies implemented by the Ba'athist regime. The repercussions of these policies became increasingly apparent in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion.

Throughout the novel, *Shisma* exhibits characteristics of a sovereign entity. As he seeks retribution against those he considers responsible for the deaths of its component body parts, he gathers a group of assistants and followers to help him locate his targets. Among them are the Magician, the Sophist, the Enemy, and the three Madmen. These figures project their own desires onto him, seeing in him a reflection of their own ideologies and agendas:

> The young madman thinks I am the model citizen that the Iraqi state has failed to produce, at least since the days of King Faisal I.
>
> Because I'm made up of body parts of people from diverse backgrounds—ethnicities, tribes, races, and social classes—I represent the impossible mix that never was achieved in the past. I'm the first true Iraqi citizen, he thinks.
>
> The old madman thinks I'm an instrument of mass destruction that presages the coming of the savior that all the world's religions have predicted. […]
>
> The eldest madman thinks I am the savior and that in the coming days he will acquire some aspects of my immortality and his name will be engraved to mine in any chronicle of this difficult and decisive phase in the history of this country and the world (146).

Shisma is revered as a saviour, a prophet-like leader who can deliver them from their troubles and bring peace to the country. Nevertheless, his followers end up replacing his decayed body parts with the flesh of criminals. The Magician and the Sophist acknowledge that his body is no longer made up of innocent victims, implying that locating people who are completely free from any wrongdoing has become an almost unattainable task in Iraq (157-158). The young madman's belief that *Shisma* is an ideal Iraqi citizen, transcending tribal and religious affiliations, ultimately proves unsustainable. This idealized vision crumbles as the madmen and the followers driven by their own conflicting interests, turn against each other and their supposed emancipator. This disintegration could be seen as a metaphor for the challenges of building a unified nation from diverse factions, especially in the aftermath of violence and a power vacuum.

In the beginning, *Shisma* views himself as a sovereign and a savior who "will finally bring about justice on earth" (142). Ola Abdalkafor states that he "decides the right of life and death of people according to their crimes" (10). The power he exercises on life and death reinforces his sovereignty and attracts more followers. However, once criminals become integrated into his flesh, he loses the capacity to differentiate between victims and perpetrators. Therefore, he acts outside the bounds of the law, which he created to bring justice to the innocent people. This lines up with Agamben's notion of the sovereign as one who exists in a state of exception and possesses the authority to suspend the law to serve his personal interests (Agamben 15).

Ola Abdalkafor and Bushra Juhi Jani suggest that his sovereignty can be interpreted as a reflection of Western occupation or a consequence of it (Abdalkafor 11; Jani 330). The interpretation hinges on Brigadier Majid's assertion that *Shisma* is a product of an American project (Sa'adawi 268). This perspective indicates that American authority assumes the role of the sovereign, while *Shisma* represents the figure of the *homo sacer*. Abdalkafor elaborates, stating that "[t]hey cause his creation but then condemn him as if they had no relationship with him" (12). As the narrative unfolds, *Shisma* comes to be known as Criminal X, prompting the media to announce that the state will issue a reward for anyone with information about his whereabouts (209). Ironically, the arrested criminal is revealed to be Hadi, leaving *Shisma* to wander freely (278). This twist reinforces the ambiguous relationship between authority and those it creates or controls.

Hadi is subsequently charged with the murders attributed to *Shisma*. Following a devastating explosion caused by a suicide bomber near Elishva's house, Hadi sustains severe injuries that leave his face disfigured, causing him to bear a striking resemblance to *Shisma* himself (267). Consequently, Hadi becomes a victim of suicide bombers and his own creation, with his only crime being his attempt to honour the dead. As stated here, "[b]y collecting and combining old materials and body parts, this ordinary creator confronts the established system as he intends to give value to body parts and old, broken and devalued materials by saving them from being thrown like rubbish (Mahmood 131). Hadi's refusal to treat human beings as *bare life* ultimately leads to his downfall.

Regarding *Shisma*, multiple parties are accountable for his creation, as each is complicit in one way or another; be it Americans or Iraqis. Khaled Hroub states this clearly in his article "Beyond Good and Evil":

> Ahmed Saadawi's Frankenstein monster is a deadly creature of legend that has many fathers: the Iraqis and their religious denominations, terrorist organisations of all kinds, the Americans and the West, the Arabs and Iran. Each claims it is the others who are to blame for the brutality, the bloodshed and the killing, each washes his hands clean of all sin. Shesma, however, lives among them, sleeps in their houses and looks very much like them until they finally chase him out of town. All of them hate the ugly monster, but none are willing to admit that they too had a hand in creating and protecting it (par. 14-15).

It can be argued that Sa'adawi is offering a scathing critique of the sectarian divisions and violence that haunted Iraq after the American invasion. The novel also implicates that the West, mainly the United States, has a hand in the creation of the conditions that allowed for the rise of extremism and violence in Iraq. Hence, the figure of *Shisma* underscores the absence of justice in Iraq and the collective culpability of those who claim to be innocent, resulting in the emergence of bare life, where individuals are stripped of their humanity. As the narrative suggests, "[t]here are no innocents who are completely innocent or criminals who are completely criminal" (Sa'adawi 214). This idea is pointed out in Najem Wali's novel *Baghdad Marlboro:* "Those who occupy Iraq, we know who they are, but those who occupy my house and other houses, nobody knows who they are" (234; Masmoudi 157). Here, the speaker acknowledges that the external invaders -as in the United States- are clearly identifiable as the occupiers of the country. However, the internal sources of violence -such as insurgents and militia groups- are shadowy. Their motivations and identities remain unclear to the average Iraqi citizen.

Ian Campbell's concept of Double Estrangement offers a compelling explanation for why the American invasion remains at the periphery of Sa'adawi's novel:

> A more comprehensive answer, however, is that by focusing on violence upon Iraqis by Iraqis, and never confronting the Americans at all, *FB* is engaging in double estrangement, a trope that critiques its own society's failings, which existed long before the American invasion and which continue to exist even in the time the novel was written, after an Iraqi government replaced the Coalition Provisional Authority (8).

By "rendering the familiar unfamiliar in order to facilitate a critical perspective on the familiar" (9), Sa'adawi examines longstanding societal issues that exist independently of foreign intervention and emphasizes the continuity of certain problems even after the end of the American invasion. Campbell highlights that despite the threat of Western presence, several characters are depicted as willing to collaborate with the American forces to further their own interests. For example, the actions and the rumours surrounding Brigadier Majid and Al-Saidi contribute to the novel's exploration of moral ambiguity in a war-torn society where legal justice is absent.

The narrative concludes on an ambiguous and unsettling note, leaving many skeptical that Hadi is the actual criminal: "Aziz saw the spontaneous celebrations but still wasn't convinced that Hadi was the criminal. It was impossible. But he went to dance outside the coffee shop anyway" (Sa'adawi 279). The authorities' portrayal of Hadi as a criminal serves to distract from the larger systemic issues at play, such as the sectarian divisions and political corruption that plague the Iraqi society. This manipulation fosters a culture of fear and suspicion, where the truth becomes obscured, and independent thought stifled. Moreover, it reflects the sovereign or the government's power to suspend the law and announce a state of exception without facing legal repercussions. The novel implies that those in powerful positions are able to manipulate perceptions of truth and justice: "Nobody could believe that this frightening criminal had been living among them, but what the government said must be true" (279).

Elias Canetti's observation, as referenced by Mbembe in *Necropolitics,* states that in the logic of survival, "each man is the enemy of every other" (88). To put it plainly, the terror felt at witnessing a dead body transforms into a sense of satisfaction that it is someone else who has died. The presence of a dead body reassures the survivor of his own existence, providing him with a distorted sense of security in the deaths of others, as he derives a sense of purpose from their

violent demises. This highlights the moral ambiguity present in the struggle for survival in a fragmented society. In *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, *Shisma's* survival at the end serves as a constant reminder of the bodies that have been lost and the deep scars left by violence on the collective psyche. The erosion of the lines between innocence and criminality turns every individual into a potential threat, thereby violence becomes a coping mechanism with the surrounding chaos.

Another way of coping with violence is through subversive humour, which is "an indirect way of expressing criticism within a totalitarian regime, where citizens are subjected to absolute control by the state apparatus" (Pannewick 72). In Iraqi novels like Sinan Antoon's *I'jam*, subversive humour is frequently employed as a means of expressing frustrations and critiquing the state while maintaining a degree of safety. This indirect approach allows authors to voice dissent without directly confronting oppressive structures, as open criticism can lead to severe consequences in totalitarian regimes. By transforming fears and anxieties into something that can be laughed at, often through satire or irony, Iraqi novelists create a communal space where individuals find relief and connection, even in dire circumstances. This type of humour is also evident in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. After narrowly escaping the blast from the garbage truck explosion, Mahmoud finds himself brushing the incident off with a sarcastic comment: "'You could be dead now. You were eager to keep chatting. Your wonderful stories saved you, my friend', said Mahmoud, with a stutter and dramatic pauses between the sentences, rather like the way Saidi spoke. Farid widened his eyes in a daze, maybe because what Mahmoud said was true" (Sa'adawi 52). As Hala Amin illustrates, "the dark humorous tone and flippant attitude towards violent death are effective tools for representing horrid Iraqi realities as well as dismantling traditional notions of the dignity and nobility of humanity" (226).

All in all, the characters in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* navigate the pervasive violence and chaos in various ways. For instance, the interactions among the characters particularly in communal spaces like Aziz's coffee-shop, foster a sense of solidarity, which helps them endure the daily violence. This is vividly portrayed through the 'absurd' stories that Hadi shares in the café, using dark humour and exaggerations to process the violence surrounding him. Furthermore, the digital recorder used by Mahmoud and *Shisma* could also be interpreted as an attempt to reclaim agency over their narratives. Their efforts to document the events around them highlight the power of storytelling as a means to make sense of trauma and violence. Faith and religion also

significantly contribute to coping with the situation, particularly in Elishva's case. The characters' persistence in surviving and their efforts to maintain a sense of normalcy amidst instability can be seen as forms of non-violent resistance. For instance, Elishva's resolve to remain in her house and Mahmoud's commitment to publishing articles that document the stories he hears from Hadi serve as ethical responses to the surrounding injustice. As Butler explains, "non-violence is a struggle" (*Frames of War* 170), a reality particularly evident in war-torn societies like Iraq, where resisting violence through peaceful means becomes a powerful yet an arduous form of defiance.

Nevertheless, beneath these struggles to cope with violence lies a profound and often unspoken experience: grief. The ongoing violence and loss experienced by Iraqis is mirrored in the emotional landscapes of the characters, which deeply influences their reactions and behaviours. Grief in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is not merely a personal struggle but a collective experience, deeply intertwined with Iraq's long history of political upheaval. It manifests in both overt and subtle forms, profoundly influencing the characters' relationships and sense of identity. The following section will elucidate how grief is depicted in the novel and analyse it through the lens of Butler's theories of grievability and non-grievability. Specifically, the intricate connection between violence and grief will be explored, meaning how the experience of loss not only impacts the individuals but also shapes their responses to the surrounding violence.

Grief in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

This analysis will delve into the ways in which the characters, particularly Hadi and Elishva, navigate their mourning amidst the chaos of their environment, revealing the complex interplay between personal loss and collective trauma. Furthermore, this section will investigate how grief acts as a catalyst for resistance and how unresolved grief can spiral into cycles of vengeance in a society where death is an everyday reality.

One of the most direct representations of grief in *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is found in the character of Elishva, the elderly Assyrian woman who mourns the sudden disappearance of her son, Daniel, during the Iran-Iraq war. Her mourning is introduced early in the novel when the reader learns that she has been waiting for her son's return for years, refusing to accept his death: "Nobody really listened to her when she spoke about the son she had lost twenty years ago, except

for her daughters and Saint George the Martyr, whose soul she often prayed for and whom she saw as her patron saint" (Sa'adwi 7). Elishva consoles herself by reaching out to the prominent Christian figure, Saint George, whose martyrdom serves as a spiritual anchor in the face of the overwhelming loss and violence. Most importantly, she believes that he has the power to bring her son back safely to her. This belief gives her a sense of agency and hope, offering her a way to cope with his loss.

Her emotional connection to the memory of her son is so strong that it shapes every aspect of her life —she refuses to move out of her dilapidated house because she is waiting for Daniel to return and does not want to leave her life in Iraq behind. The declining condition in Iraq forced many families to flee to other countries. As a result, Elishva's daughters persistently urge her to leave Baghdad, yet for a long time she remains resistant to their pleas:

> Many prisoners came home after the war over Kuwait and in the middle of the 1990s. Because of the severity of the economic sanctions imposed on Iraq, the husbands of Hilda and Matilda decided to emigrate. The two sisters wouldn't move away unless their mother came too. But like a stubborn mountain goat, Elishva refused. This disagreement continued for a full year, but the old woman wouldn't relent. Finally, she convinced her daughters that she would join them when they had settled down and she had completely given up hope that Daniel might come back. But she never did give up hope (63).

Elishva's grief is not only about personal loss—it reflects the wider national trauma. Her son represents the countless lives lost and gone missing in the country's long history of war and conflict. The former Ba'athist, Abu Zaidoun, is Elishva's nemesis. He sought out individuals who had evaded military service, and due to Daniel's delayed response to the draft, he was forcibly taken by Abu Zaidoun. After being deployed to the front lines, presumably in the Iran-Iraq War, Daniel never returned home (64).

The Iran-Iraq War, which lasted from 1980 to 1988, resulted in significant casualties. According to various sources, the estimates of dead soldiers vary widely. While precise numbers are challenging to ascertain, it can be said that almost half a million Iraqi men lost their lives during the war (Kurzman). Two years ago, the Iraqi Red Crescent Society announced the discovery of the

remains of 629 soldiers, who disappeared during the Iran-Iraq War.[11] The ICRC has reported that "Iraq is one of the countries with the highest number of missing persons in the world".[12] The article explains that the ICRC received numerous requests from many Iraqi families to locate relatives, who went missing during the Iran-Iraq and Gulf wars. The ongoing trauma faced by these families, as described in the article, is reflected in Elishva's story. The psychological consequences of living with the absence of a loved one demonstrate a grief characterized by uncertainty and a desire for closure. It can be argued that her grief is a form of resistance and hope that keeps her rooted in Baghdad for a long time, despite the chaos surrounding her. The fact that Elishva holds on to the belief that her son is alive can be seen as a refusal to let go of the past and allow the violence to erase the memory of her loved ones.

Elishva's relationship with grief also opens up a discussion about Judith Butler's notion of "grievability". In *Precarious Life*, Butler posits that societal norms dictate which lives are considered valuable. In their view, not all lives are perceived as equally grievable; some are marginalized to the extent that their deaths do not elicit the same emotional or social responses as those of more privileged individuals. This disparity is often rooted in factors such as race, religion, nationality, and socio-economic status. Butler states that "[c]ertain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as 'grievable'" (32). This differential treatment of human lives is reflected in Elishva's story, as she represents the profound pain of a parent whose child has vanished in a country where the lives of many civilians are rendered invisible.

Elishva and her family are Assyrian Christians, a 'minority' group that has historically faced discrimination and violence in Iraq. The American invasion and the ensuing sectarian division deeply affected minorities, leading to the displacement of many families. As reported by Gilgamesh Nabeel and Saad Salloum, following the Iraq War, "the number of Christians dropped by about 80 percent". [13] This decline intensified after IS took control in 2014, as systemic

[11] For more details, read here: https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/remains-of-over-600-missing-soldiers-from-iran-iraq-war-found/2491440#
[12] For the full report, see: https://www.icrc.org/en/document/iraq-families-missing-between-hope-and-despair-search-continues
[13] For the full article, read here: https://cfri-irak.com/en/article/christians-in-post-2003-iraq-fragmentation-dynamics-ethnic-and-sectarian-fault-lines-2023-08-11

persecution and discrimination escalated. Moreover, the majority of Christians did not return even after Iraq was liberated from IS. Nabeel and Salloum add that "[i]n central and southern Iraq, Christianity has turned into a museum of bygone existence, with nothing left but ancient ruins". They elaborate that the majority of Christians were forced to leave central and southern Baghdad and ended up settling in the northern Kurdish region; "particularly in the town of Ankawa, northwest of Erbil, which received hundreds of Christian families fleeing sectarian violence in Baghdad, Mosul, and southern Iraq". Currently, the majority of Iraqi Christians live in the diaspora, leading to a significant decline in their presence in the region.

Nader Shamouni's character underscores the precariousness of life for Christians in Baghdad, who are often caught in the crossfire of sectarian conflict. Despite his attachment to Baghdad, the instability and the constant threats drove him to settle in Ankawa:

> Many similar incidents had taken place over the past three years, and given the deteriorating security situation in Baghdad, there was no authority that could be trusted to help him. The father of one family in the congregation had recently been abducted. The family persuaded the kidnappers to free him only by paying a large ransom. Nader called his brothers and relatives in Ankawa and told them of his decision (Sa'adawi 205).

The failure of the Iraqi government to protect its marginalized communities and the lack of adequate Christian representation in the political sphere significantly exacerbates the precariousness of these communities. Larger political factions often neglect and undermine the Iraqi-Christians' interests. This exclusion not only diminishes their voice in governance but also jeopardizes their safety and rights. The combination of these factors has created an environment of heightened vulnerability for Iraqi Christians, resulting in a notable decrease in their population.

In chapter sixteen of *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Elishva meets her grandson Daniel, who bears a striking resemblance to her own missing son. Upon seeing him, she is convinced that "[i]t was definitely him—the very same young man with the slight gray smile that was in the old picture in her sitting room" (236). Elishva's daughters and Daniel have travelled from Australia to Iraq to persuade Elishva to leave Baghdad. This encounter helps her cope with the loss of her son, as her grandson provides a tangible connection to her past while also offering a pathway toward resolving her grief. The young boy's resemblance to her missing son Daniel evokes powerful emotions, allowing Elishva to feel a sense of closure and comfort in his presence: "She saw her cat, Nabu,

come into the small kitchen […] and at that moment she decided to accept the request of the son who was her grandson. She would do anything to make sure she would continue to caress his skin and his hair and smell his childlike smell, which she had never forgotten" (237). While the pain of losing her son does not subside, she understands that it is time to let go of the past, even if it means selling her house and leaving Baghdad behind. Therefore, her grief transforms from a state of denial and isolation into a more comprehensive understanding of loss.

Elishva's experience aligns with Klein's understanding of mourning, which proposes that the process occurs when the lost object is internalized: "We never let go of anyone or anything we have loved and lost. Instead, we take the lost one inside, where it becomes part of us for the rest of our lives" (Alford 3). Elishva carries Daniel's memory with her, and this internalization shapes her identity and emotional state. Despite the initial ambivalence towards Daniel, as he reminds her of her missing son, Elishva is able to move forward and acknowledge the loss. Before leaving Baghdad, she takes a final look at the picture of Saint George and decides to cut out the image of his face, intending to take it with her (Sa'adawi 242). According to Hani Elayyan, leaving the remaining parts of the picture behind, such as the sword and the shield, represents "leaving behind the memories of war and the binaries of good and evil, preferring rather to keep the peaceful memories of better times only (162).

In the beginning, Elishva projects her sense of loss onto *Shisma*, who becomes a temporary substitute for her son, Daniel. By referring to him as Daniel, she "animate[s] this extraordinary composite—made up of disparate body parts and the soul of the hotel guard who had lost his life. The old woman brought him out of anonymity with the name she gave him: Daniel" (Sa'adawi 53). This act of displacement allows her to bring her son back into existence, giving shape and identity to her grief by projecting it onto an unrelated object or person. It can be argued that Elishva undergoes melancholia, which happens when the bereaved is unable to fully detach from the lost object, often refusing to acknowledge the reality of the loss or to let go (Alford 2). Moreover, she shows no desire to move on or to reinvest her energy into new relationships or a new life, until she meets her grandson. This is another defining characteristic of melancholia, which Freud describes as "profoundly painful dejection [and] cessation of interest in the outside world" (244).

The novel does not explicitly explain whether Elishva is aware that *Shisma* is not her real son. Her neighbours like Faraj often refer to her as a senile old woman, suggesting that they believe

she is delusional. However, as the story progresses, it becomes more apparent that Elishva is aware that *Shisma* does not behave like Daniel. Despite this, she continues to treat him as if he were her son: "Apart from the crude stitches on his face and neck, he looked almost like him. The old woman had had that in mind. Given that her sight was definitely weak, when she came back into the sitting room she would see only what she wanted to see" (55). The last statement suggests that Elishva is not deluded but is actively choosing to maintain the illusion that *Shisma* is her son. It could be argued that this act is a form of emotional survival, a way of preserving her identity as a mother and holding on to the only source of closure available to her.

Intriguingly, *Shisma* treats Elishva with a blend of confusion, compassion, and a sense of obligation. He allows her to project her feelings of loss and longing onto him and plays along until the very end and does not correct Elishva's perception. After carrying out his missions, he returns to her house, drawn by the kindness and compassion she offers him. In her presence, he is momentarily able to escape the weight of the violence and trauma that has shaped his existence. In other words, he finds solace in the sense of human belonging, a feeling he has never truly experienced. Her willingness to listen to his anxieties in this scene makes him feel less lonely: "The Whatsitsname explained some of his worries to the old woman. She was listening and stroking the back of her old sleeping cat. She didn't seem capable of understanding such a complicated subject, but she was someone who would listen, and that's what the Whatsitsname needed at the moment" (199).

As a result, he treats her like a maternal figure and he seeks revenge on her behalf by killing Abu Zaidoun; the man who dragged her son to serve in the military: "He looked to be asleep, at least to anyone seeing him from afar, but the handle of a pair of stainless-steel scissors protruded from the top of his breastbone, at the base of his neck" (81). This highlights Butler's notion of recognition and interdependence in *Precarious Life* that human beings are all shaped by the relationships and social structures around them. Butler draws on Hegel and states that "the struggle for recognition in the Hegelian sense requires that each partner in the exchange recognize not only that the other needs and deserves recognition, but also that each, in a different way, is compelled by the same need, the same requirement" (44). This indicates that recognition is a reciprocal process and it is crucial to understand that both parties are equally vulnerable and reliant on each other's acknowledgment for their sense of self and identity. Both *Shisma* and Elishva are

vulnerable figures who need each other. Elishva's perception of *Shisma* as if he were Daniel allows her to find a renewed sense of meaning and purpose, while his acceptance of her nurturing provides him with not only physical shelter, but also a semblance of familial belonging and human connection. In this way, his act of killing Abu Zaidoun could be interpreted as a form of reciprocation, seeking justice on her behalf in return for her care.

The relationship between Shisma and Elishva can be more fully understood by interpreting *Shisma* as a manifestation of both collective and individual grief. He is an amalgamation of lost lives, and his very existence embodies the unresolved mourning for those deaths. His mission of revenge is fuelled by collective grief and demand for justice for the deceased, symbolizing how grief can evolve into a desire for retribution. In times of war, countless bodies remain unburied, unidentified, or missing, leading to unresolved grief as families are denied proper mourning and closure. As a creature, made up of multiple body parts, *Shisma* himself can be seen as experiencing a form of existential grief. He does not possess a coherent identity but is instead a patchwork of many different lives, each with its own story of loss. His fractured identity echoes the splintering effect of grief on the psyche. As he grapples to reconcile the diverse experiences of grief he embodies, *Shisma* wrestles with conflicting emotions these experiences entail.

The consuming nature of grief, coupled with his fractured sense of identity, transforms into an uncontrollable rage that drives him to continue killing without restraint: "'My face changes all the time,' the Whatsitsname told the old astrologer that night. 'Nothing in me lasts long, other than my desire to keep going. I kill in order to keep going.' This was his only justification" (Sa'adawi 267). The instability of his physical form reflects the broader instability in the lives of those affected by war due to the constant upheaval of their environment. Killing them turns into an endless cycle that sustains his existence, with his drive for survival outweighing any moral and ethical considerations. In such a context of extreme vulnerability, the need for survival erodes ethical concerns, as the denial of one's precarity leads to violence becoming the primary means of reclaiming recognition for abandoned lives. Butler's statement in *Precarious Life* illustrates the complex relationship between violence, recognition, and dehumanization:

> If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again). They cannot

> be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never 'were,' and they must be killed since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness. Violence renews itself in the face of the apparent inexhaustibility of its object (33).

Shisma's violence, therefore, can be seen as a manifestation of this paradox. Even though the individuals that constitute *Shisma* are no longer physically alive, their presence and memories persist through him. He embodies the failure to properly recognize and grieve these lives, making violence and the pursuit of justice a recurring way of addressing their stubborn persistence—an existence that should have been acknowledged but was instead marginalized.

On a different note, the death of Hadi's friend, Nahem, acts as a catalyst for Hadi's transformation throughout the novel and explains how *Shisma* came to exist. The shock of losing Nahem to an explosion deeply traumatizes Hadi, leading him to express his grief through aggression and rage:

> He swore and cursed and threw stones after the American Hummers or the vehicles of the police and the National Guard. He got into arguments with anyone who mentioned Nahem and what had happened to him. He kept to himself for a while, and then went back to his old self, laughing and telling extraordinary stories, but now he seemed to have two faces, or two masks—as soon as he was alone he was gloomy and despondent in a way he hadn't been before. He also started 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 (Sa'adawi 23).

Hadi's behaviour suggests that he is trapped in melancholia. His physical deterioration reflects Freud's definition of melancholia, characterized by isolation and a diminishing sense of self-worth (Freud 244). His rage towards the American forces and the National Guard indicates that personal loss is intertwined with the rampant violence in Iraq.

Hadi holds the regime and the American occupation accountable for Nahem's death. This can be seen as a reflection of the broader political and societal failure to account for the insecurity and chaos in Baghdad. Contrary to the American narrative of 'spreading democracy' in Iraq by dismantling the Ba'athist regime and establishing a democratic government, the invasion resulted in widespread political instability, exacerbated insurgency, and heightened sectarian tensions,

leading to immense human suffering and massive civilian casualties. As Butler explains in *Frames of War,* "If a form of power is imposed upon a people who do not choose that form of power, then that is, by definition, an undemocratic process" (36). The contradiction between the rhetoric of promoting democracy and the reality of external imposition highlights the failure to acknowledge local agency and choice in democratic governance. Furthermore, if the establishment of democratic systems happens by using coercive methods—through military interventions and authoritarian control—then the resulting system will ultimately lack genuine democratic agency, regardless of how it is framed. This aligns with Arendt's theory that violence is not capable of creating longstanding power (xv).

Hadi's sorrow and rage over Nahem's death seem to compel him to gather the body parts of other victims. He holds the belief that all bodies should be treated with dignity by being given a respectful burial: "I made [the corpse] complete so it wouldn't be treated as trash, so it would be respected like other dead people and given a proper burial" (Sa'adawi 26). By striving to create a complete corpse, he asserts the intrinsic value of human life and the importance of mourning. Hadi actively resists the forces that seek to dehumanize individuals through violence and neglect, standing in stark contrast to the necropolitical reality in which the bodies of marginalized people and war victims are often treated as mere waste.

In other cases, such as Hasib Jaafar's death, there is no physical body left behind. The gruesome nature of his death, with only "small charred parts of his body" remaining, highlights the trauma experienced by victims of suicide bombings. His family is left with minimal physical remains to bury, receiving only his burned clothes and a coffin to contain them. Hasib's family struggles to come to terms with his death, particularly due to the absence of his body. In their sleep, they attempt to conjure a body for Hasib, but it is not enough to provide closure or a resting place for his wandering soul: "Hasib's young wife wrapped her arms around [the coffin], wept bitterly, and wailed at length. Hasib's mother, sisters and brothers, and neighbors did the same, and his stunned little daughter was passed from arm to arm whenever the person holding her was overwhelmed by grief" (36). This absence of tangible remains to mourn and bury is a recurring theme in the novel, as it illustrates the lasting psychological impact of violence on both individuals and communities. Additionally, it describes how the process of grieving becomes complicated when intertwined with the physical devastation and emotional trauma caused by the war.

Mahmoud, the journalist, is another important figure who navigates the violent and chaotic environment of post-invasion Baghdad. He left his city Amara because of the Mantis, a criminal who "was accusing him of being a Baathist and was saying that his father, an Arabic teacher, was an atheist" (174). When Mahmoud expresses his desire to return to Amara to stay beside his ailing mother, his brother informs him that the Mantis has secured a high-ranking position at the provincial headquarters and advises him to stay in Baghdad. His job with Saidi provided him with a sense of purpose and by distancing himself from the daily anarchy surrounding him, he becomes emotionally numb. This allows him to channel his energy into his work as a journalist, using his writing to make sense of the situation in Iraq.

Moreover, his investigation into Hadi and *Shisma*'s stories reflects his deeper wish to understand the underlying causes of the political turmoil. Nevertheless, he grapples with his own sense of identity and responsibility as someone witnessing and reporting on the horrors happening in Baghdad. It can be argued, that he absorbs the grief of those around him through his work. As a coping mechanism, he slips into cynicism and dark humour to mask the grief and fear he feels for the country's future. The sudden disappearance of Saidi and the loss of his job deepen his sense of disillusionment with the situation in Iraq, as the country seems to be trapped in an endless cycle of violence. In the newspaper article that Mahmoud published about the Mantis's brother, he delineates three types of justice — "legal justice, divine justice, and street justice" (173). After the Mantis is killed, he loses faith in his theory of justice: "Mahmoud thought back to his theory about the three kinds of justice, but he wasn't convinced it was valid. It was anarchy out there; there was no logic behind what was happening" (273). This framework of justice represents his early, somewhat idealistic worldview. However, as he witnesses the escalating violence and unpredictability of life in Baghdad, culminating in the death of the Mantis, Mahmoud's faith in his own theory crumbles. As Ian Campbell explains, the breakdown of official legal institutions and the instrumentalization of religion force citizens to seek vigilantism in an effort to reclaim their rights (14).

Although *Frankenstein in Baghdad* explores various themes, young women in the novel are seemingly objectified and treated in an inferior manner. According to Al-Enezi and Al-Laithi, the male characters, such as Saidi and Mahmoud treat younger women as "objects of pleasure" that can be bought with money, signifying a broader societal issue of abuse and commodification

of women (808). This may be seen as an effort to reassert masculinity and power, with Mahmoud's sexual experiences representing an attempt to regain some control and affirm his manhood in a politically disrupted country, despite the emotional detachment and lack of fulfillment that characterize these experiences. His desire for genuine intimacy and closeness is reflected in his dreams involving Nawal:

> Mahmoud dreamed he was holding her hand, his fingers intertwined with hers. They strolled lazily past the Sheraton Hotel and toward Abu Nuwas Street, their hands doing the talking, passing messages between their souls like an electric wire. There were no sounds in the background—no car horns, no police cars or Hummers. The world around them was more cheerful, less dreary and depressing, and the future didn't seem completely unknown. There was an assurance of something better, making things seem less oppressive or, like the Midas touch, turning them into gold (Sa'adawi 218).

This dream sequence not only illuminates Mahmoud's inner emotional landscape but also shows the stark contrast between the dream's serenity and the chaotic reality. The absence of background noises from cars and military vehicles indicates a desire for peace and normalcy. Moreover, the Midas touch metaphor suggests a belief in the potential for intimacy and love to transform his bleak reality into a better one. However, his real-life sexual encounters with Zeina, the sex worker, are characterized by a transactional nature that highlights his emotional numbness and an inability to bridge the gap between his inner desires of making Nawal his lover, and his outward actions of relying on paid encounters as a substitute for meaningful relationships. This shows how political instability disrupts relationships and breaks the social fabric down, leaving women vulnerable to abuse and humiliation, often forcing them to rely on sex as a means of survival. Butler explains on multiple occasions that war leads to the exploitation and abandonment of vulnerable populations. Women, especially those displaced or living in war zones, often face heightened risks of violence and mistreatment. Thus, framing women in the novel as expendable or inferior reinforces their vulnerability.

To sum up, the novel portrays Baghdad as a city steeped in collective mourning, where death and loss have become commonplace. The frequent bombings, sectarian violence, and political instability have created an atmosphere of constant grief that permeates various aspects of society. It can be posited that *Shisma*, who embodies the amalgamation of countless unmourned

lives, serves as a powerful metaphor for the unresolved collective trauma of the Iraqi nation. Sa'adawi's own reflections on the societal impact of the successive wars further elucidate this interpretation. In an interview conducted by Karzan Mahmood, Sa'adawi explains that the American invasion and the following sectarian war were not anticipated and deeply traumatizing for the Iraqi population:

> No one expected the outbreak of an international war on Iraqi soil, al-Qaeda on the one hand, and the United States on the other, and suicide operations supported by the air states, the emergence of the Mahdi Army and Shiite militias. The ugliness of the killing that was taking place was an uncommon thing, and that a single explosion killed 40 or 50 people was a terrifying thing, as it was considered the spread of war into cities, and the horror became inside markets and transportation, which was making the people slow and losing hope of obtaining a decent life (Appendix II).

Frankenstein in Baghdad illustrates how unresolved trauma and grief can evolve into a desire for retribution, further perpetuating the cycle of violence and loss. Through characters like Elishva and Nader Shamouni, the novel highlights the diverse manifestations of grief and vulnerability across different religious and cultural backgrounds. Most importantly, the narrative demonstrates grief's transformative and healing power, showing how it can empower individuals to preserve the memory of lost loved ones, giving them agency in shaping how those memories are maintained and honoured, as seen in Elishva's eventual acceptance of her loss and decision to leave Baghdad. Additionally, grief becomes a catalyst for resistance and change. For instance, Hadi's determination to collect body parts symbolizes how grief drives him to take significant, even unconventional, actions in response to Nahem's loss. Therefore, Sa'adawi crafts a nuanced representation of a society grappling with the aftermath of conflict, where the boundaries between victim and perpetrator are blurred, as the narrative directly states: "There are no innocents who are completely innocent or criminals who are completely criminal" (214).

The Significance of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* in Iraqi Literature

According to Ronen Zeidel, the Iraqi literary scene has undergone a compelling transformation following 2003. Sa'adawi's work, along with other post-2003 Iraqi fiction, reflects a turn toward portraying pluralism within the Iraqi society, meaning that it departs from previously dominant

narratives that sought to enforce the notion of a homogenous national identity and often obscured deep societal divisions (1).

The novel's importance lies in its depiction of Iraq's diverse social fabric. Sa'adawi's narrative illustrates various segments of Iraqi society, mirroring a broader trend where writers, following the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, gained greater freedom to represent the country's heterogeneous nature openly. This aligns with the concept of *Al-Nasīj al-Watani* (the national fabric), discussed by several Iraqi intellectuals, which embraces all identities, no matter how small, within Iraq (Zeidel 5). As a response to the former Ba'ath party's homogenizing policies and the subsequent sectarian conflict, many intellectuals began stressing the importance of "coexistence and interrelations between the various groups" as a key solution to addressing the fragmentation and divisions that plagued Iraq throughout the years (6).

Frankenstein in Baghdad offers a realistic representation of Iraq and the lived experiences of its inhabitants, particularly focusing on the Al-Bataween quarter. This neighbourhood, once a thriving home to Jewish and Christian communities, witnessed a significant demographic change. In the wake of prolonged instability and conflict, many members of these communities were forced to flee Baghdad. This demographic shift has profoundly altered the character of neighbourhoods like Al-Bataween. Nowadays, the area is predominantly populated by Muslims and immigrants from Sudan and Egypt. However, to this day, the abandoned Meir Tweig synagogue stands as one of the few surviving vestiges of the area's Jewish heritage. The district's reputation has also shifted dramatically. Once known for its cultural diversity, the neighbourhood has unfortunately become notorious for prostitution and drug consumption.[14] The contrast between Al-Bataween's past and present serves as a microcosm of Baghdad's transformations and highlights the impact of political instability on urban spaces and communities.

Sa'adawi skillfully integrates the history of Al-Bataween into the narrative through the characters. Hadi and Nahem are depicted renovating what is referred to as the 'Jewish ruin', a poignant reminder of the neighbourhood's former Jewish inhabitants. This dilapidated structure becomes Hadi's residence after moving to Al-Bataween (Sa'adawi 22). Additionally, Zeidel explains that Sa'adawi, who is one of the most influential Muslim Iraqi writers, sheds light on the

[14] For more information, read here: https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/17/world/middleeast/iraqi-novelist-dodging-bombs-writes-to-clear-the-fog-of-war.html#

Christian presence in Iraq through the character of Elishva (131). This elderly Christian woman serves as a reminder of Iraq's dwindling Christian community and her narrative is used to explore themes of loss, hope, and the struggle to preserve cultural and religious heritage in the face of war.

In the novel, Al-Bataween is described as a neighbourhood where different sects coexist. One example of interfaith coexistence is the neighbourly bond between Umm Salim and Elishva. Their relationship, which bridges the Muslim-Christian divide, illustrates how individuals from different religious backgrounds can forge meaningful connections amidst societal tensions. This is particularly evident when Umm Salim, along with other neighbours, weeps after Elishva's departure (Sa'adawi 242). Alhashmi states in his article "The Maps of Identity in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*" that "the spectrum of the Bataween district mirrors a mosaic of a ruined infrastructure due to frequent explosions" (18). Acts of destruction and violence not only tear down buildings and public spaces but also result in effacing historical sites. This symbolizes the breakdown of cultural identity and coexistence in a society once characterized by its diversity. Building on this idea, Alhashmi observes: "Through the designation of the Whatsitsname, Saadawi consciously names all the Iraqi sects: Arabs, Kurdi, Turkmen, etc., without favoring any particular group, wherein all of them are equally represented by the Whatsitsname. In this manner, the Whatsitsname becomes a synonym of *Iraqiness* (Alhashmi 17).

Viewed through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of grievability, *Shisma* can be interpreted as a powerful form of public obituary. This creature serves as a physical manifestation of collective mourning, commemorating victims from diverse religious and ethnic groups who were previously denied proper grieving or forgotten in the chaos of war. By giving a tangible form to these losses, *Shisma* makes the human cost of violence visible and becomes a walking memorial that forces the community to confront the reality of widespread suffering. As Butler argues in *Precarious Life*, one should treat "the obituary as an act of nation building" (34). This implies that public mourning becomes a political act that establishes which lives are worthy of recognition and remembrance within society. *Shisma*, as an unconventional form of obituary, thus becomes a critique of the unequal distribution of grievability in Iraqi society, highlighting the need for a more inclusive approach to collective mourning— one that recognizes the value of all lives lost in conflicts.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to examine the themes of grief and violence in Ahmed Sa'adawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad,* providing a nuanced understanding of the ways in which these themes are intertwined within the socio-political landscape of post-invasion Iraq. Drawing upon key theoretical frameworks such as Judith Butler's concepts of grievability and precariousness, Giorgio Agamben's notion of bare life, and Achille Mbembe's analysis of necropolitics, the paper demonstrates how Sa'adawi's work encompasses the cyclical nature of violence, and the enduring impact of grief on both personal and collective levels.

Through characters like *Shisma*, the novel effectively illustrates the connection between grief and violence. The vague boundary between victim and aggressor indicates that everyone plays a role in shaping the current state of Iraq, reflecting the complex moral landscape born from successive wars and conflicts. The creature's composite nature and thirst for vengeance embody the shared trauma of the Iraqi nation who exist in a state of political and legal limbo. Viewed through the lens of Agamben and Mbembe, this highlights the precarious and vulnerable existence many Iraqis face in the aftermath of the U.S. invasion. The erosion of state authority and widespread corruption coupled with military operations led by the Coalition Forces, created a power vacuum that resulted in lawless violence and exacerbated sectarian tensions.

This breakdown of governance allowed various armed groups, including terrorist organizations, to gain influence and perpetrate acts of violence with impunity. The novel's depiction of this fractured state aligns with Agamben's concept of the 'state of exception', where normal legal and political procedures are suspended. Moreover, *Shisma* is a direct manifestation of the necropolitical environment —his existence is tied to the deaths and disposability of those it is made from. The depiction of war-torn streets, neighbourhoods, and government buildings as zones, where the distinction between life and death blurs, is similar to Mbembe's concept of *death-worlds.* These are areas where the state's sovereignty manifests not through protection but through the abandonment of its citizens, leaving them at the mercy of violent forces who are left unpunished. Many characters, like Hadi and Mahmoud, are constantly aware of their vulnerability, living in a liminal state where leading a stable life is not possible. It can be argued that *Frankenstein in Baghdad* critiques the necropolitical reality of Iraq, exposing how lives are systematically devalued and how violence becomes an accepted tool of control in the context of war.

Bushra Juhi Jani concludes her thesis by stating that the novel foresees the coming of ISIS. The novel's motif of violence begetting more destruction is compatible with the real-world escalation of sectarian conflict that facilitated ISIS's growth:

> *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, can be seen to be prophetic of the forming of Daesh, the terrorist group that has violently imposed a caliphate in parts of Syria and in northern Iraq in recent years. Al-Shismah's weird name is like that of Daesh, which is an adapted acronym of the group's Arabic name. This novel accurately predicts, as well as being an uncanny allegory of the campaign of terror that feeds the war-torn body of the countries mentioned, an unstoppable process that renews itself by creating more violence and more terror, so that Al-Shismah is a prototype of Daesh (323-324).

While Jani's interpretation offers an interesting perspective on the novel's predictive potential, it is important to balance this viewpoint with a broader understanding of the work's themes and context. The novel's ending certainly captures the possibility of escalating violence and extremism. However, its significance extends beyond being merely a prediction of ISIS or other radicalized groups. It serves as a multifaceted commentary on the nature of violence, grief, and identity in a society grappling with the aftermath of war and confronts readers with a nuanced exploration of how power, violence, and mourning intersect in post-colonial contexts.

Through its exploration of the dehumanizing effects of war and political instability, the novel denounces the societal structures that determine which lives are considered grievable and which are not. Sa'adawi's focus on Iraqi perspectives and experiences provides a crucial counterpoint to dominant Western narratives about the Iraq War. By centering Iraqi voices and stories, the novel offers a more nuanced portrayal of the long-term consequences of conflict on individuals and communities, such as the psychological toll on victims and the struggle to maintain a sense of normalcy amidst political chaos. Hence, the representation of diverse characters from various ethnic and religious backgrounds reflects the complex social fabric of Iraqi society, which remains in a state of flux due to ongoing political instability.

Therefore, despite *Shisma's* belief that he is a saviour and the solution to the injustice in Iraq, he is not presented as a straightforward answer to the lack of peace. Instead, he represents a complex manifestation of collective trauma and never-ending violence. The novel employs this figure to highlight the futility of violence and its deep physical and psychological consequences

for both individuals and society. *Shisma*, thus, emerges as a result of ungrieved 'bare lives' existing in a necropolitical 'death-world', as conceptualized by Agamben and Mbembe respectively. Rather than offering a simplistic resolution, this figure serves to illuminate the convoluted dilemmas confronting Iraqi society and the complex nature of loss and remembrance in an occupied country.

Since the novel does not provide a straightforward solution to the corruption and violence in Iraq, the reader is left to consider more drastic measures. For example, Elishva's departure from Baghdad raises the uncomfortable question of whether exile might be the most viable option for those seeking peace and safety:

> Characters with agency and wherewithal, such as the newspaper editor, flee the country for somewhere safer and less irrational. Characters with agency but without resources, such as Mahmoud, dream of fleeing in lieu of working to make Iraq a better place. Characters with no agency but with means are compelled to flee: in Elishva's case, she is too addled to understand that her home is unsafe, so her family in Australia fools her into thinking Daniel wants her to emigrate (Campbell 10).

While emigration may appear to be the most logical and safest option, it is not a universal solution to Iraq's challenges. The emergence of ISIS in 2013 and the persistent lack of political and economic stability have had major effects on population displacement. Despite the return of approximately 5 million people to their places of origin in Iraq, the humanitarian situation remains challenging. As of late 2023, around 1.14 million Iraqis continue to be internally displaced persons (UNHCR). The ongoing sectarian divides, especially in former ISIS-controlled areas, continue to deter many from returning. Moreover, the widespread destruction of houses and infrastructure, coupled with slow reconstruction efforts, further impedes resettlement. As a result, the inadequate government response to IDP issues and the insufficient funding allocated to relevant institutions make people prefer to integrate into their new communities or relocate somewhere else rather than return to their areas of origin.

All of these factors indicate that emigration and resettlement can be complex, time-consuming, and expensive. There is also the risk of being denied asylum or residency in the host country. If immigrants struggle to integrate or find stable employment, they may find themselves in marginalized communities or refugee camps, leading to further social and economic instability. Furthermore, the departure of skilled workers and professionals from unstable countries can

worsen existing challenges by contributing to brain drain, making political reform and economic recovery even more difficult. An article published by *The Guardian* in 2006 highlights the exodus of Iraq's educated middle class, particularly doctors, academics, and other professionals due to the targeted violence against them, general insecurity, and the breakdown of basic services. One of the interviewed Iraqis encapsulates the post-2003 situation with a noteworthy observation: "In Baghdad there is a threat to everything civilised. The attacks are targeting doctors, artists, university people, and everyone who represents civilisation, as well as all of civilisation's symbols, like the shrines in Samarra and Najaf" (Steele). Sa'adawi's novel vividly recreates the threatening atmosphere of post-invasion Iraq, where indiscriminate violence and destruction permeate every facet of daily existence, eroding the foundations of civilized society and cultural identity.

Remaining Questions and Further Research

While this analysis has shed light on several crucial aspects of the novel, there remains areas that warrant further exploration. The novel concludes on an uncertain note without explaining what happens to *Shisma*, implying that he is at large, watching the celebrations of Hadi's arrest. It leaves open questions of whether true justice can be achieved in such an anarchic setting. The ending suggests that in a world where violence and death are omnipresent, grief may never find resolution. Unresolved grief is often accompanied by guilt, as survivors struggle with the burden of having outlived others. This adds further complexity to the notion of closure and healing.

Additionally, the Writer's pursuit of storytelling and truth becomes perilous. This reflects the novel's commentary on the risks involved in voicing dissent or documenting the reality in war-ridden countries. The Writer's role and identity are left obscure. However, this figure deserves further investigation, particularly in examining how storytelling functions as a crucial instrument for resistance and collective memory formation. This aspect of the novel invites deeper analysis into the power of the narrative in shaping societal perceptions and challenging dominant discourses in post-conflict contexts. The narrative strategy employed by Sa'adawi raises important questions about the responsibility and impact of storytellers in documenting and interpreting traumatic historical events.

Another aspect worth researching is the way pluralism is depicted in the Iraqi novel. Zeidel believes that after the invasion "Iraqi intellectuals turned heterogeneity from a liability to an advantage, something to be proud of" (180). As Zeidel points out, there is a shortage of material

that analyses the development of the Iraqi novel. While Sa'adawi's work has garnered international recognition, numerous Iraqi and Arab authors have explored similar themes. However, many novels remain untranslated due to limited market demand and funding, with translations primarily favouring authors who won awards. Therefore, the exploration of grief, trauma, and violence extends beyond Sa'adawi's works to numerous literary pieces in Iraq. A comparative analysis of these themes across multiple authors would offer valuable insights into how different writers approach and interpret these complex political and social issues within the context of Iraqi and broader Arab experiences. For instance, Sinan Antoon, a prominent Iraqi author, has significantly contributed to literature exploring the Christian experience in Iraq. His novel *The Baghdad Eucharist* (*Ya Maryam*) delves into the complex dynamics of Muslim-Christian coexistence through a generational divide. The narrative centers on a debate between two main characters: Youssef, an older individual who maintains an optimistic outlook on sectarian tensions, and Maha, a young married woman whose perspective is darkened by tragedy. Maha's loss of her unborn child due to a nearby explosion shapes her pessimistic view of Iraq's future. This stark contrast serves as a microcosm for the broader societal challenges facing marginalized communities in Iraq.

Furthermore, while *Frankenstein in Baghdad* offers a groundbreaking narrative on post-invasion Iraq, it falls short in fully representing the diverse experiences of Iraqi women and the war's psychological impact on them. The novel's portrayal of female characters tends to be limited and relatively stereotypical. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of women's perspectives in Iraq, it would be valuable to examine works by female Iraqi writers such as Inaam Kachachi and Dunya Mikhail. For example, in *The American Granddaughter*, Kachachi weaves an intricate narrative around an Iraqi-American woman who decides to return to Iraq as a U.S. Army interpreter. The protagonist's journey becomes even more complex as she develops feelings for a militant in the Al-Mehdi army. By positioning the main character between two conflicting identities, Kachachi creates a nuanced portrayal of the problems faced by those with dual cultural identities in times of conflict.

All in all, expanding the application of Butler, Agamben, Mbembe, and other influential thinkers' theoretical frameworks to a wider array of Iraqi literature could yield profound insights into how contemporary Iraqi authors tackle themes of violence, grief, identity, and resistance. This broader analysis would not only enrich the understanding of Iraqi literary responses to conflict but

also illuminate the long-lasting impact of occupation on societies. By exploring diverse works through these theoretical lenses, the reader can better comprehend the complex, multigenerational process of healing and reconstruction in post-invasion Iraq. In other words, literature functions as a dual-purpose medium in this case. On one hand, it acts as a mirror, reflecting the intricate tapestry of societal trauma experienced by Iraqis. On the other, it serves as a powerful instrument for processing and articulating collective experiences within a landscape dominated by grief and loss. Hence, it offers a peaceful yet potent means of resisting political oppression and going against censorship, allowing authors to voice dissent and critique without direct confrontation. Simultaneously, literary works play a crucial role in raising awareness about the far-reaching repercussions of violence, both within Iraq and on the global stage. Sa'adawi's novel, along with other contemporary Iraqi works, masterfully interweaves personal narratives with broader societal and political themes, creating a vital medium for addressing national trauma and bridging sectarian and ethnic divides. Hence, these works serve as a catalyst for empathy and dialogue across different communities.

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