Metaphor of Madwoman in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*: Truth Escaping War Zones

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Ahmed Al-Sadawi is the first Iraqi writer to win the seventh International Prize for Arabic Fiction for his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. Previously, novels about the Iraq war were written mainly by Americans, the works categorized as “post 9·11 literature.” Ahmed transforms Western image Frankenstein into Baghdad Frankenstein to denounce hegemonism, terrorism and sectarianism. The Baghdad monster and its maker related to the book title have been widely discussed. However, the “mad” woman Elishva has been overlooked while her story line is equally ingenious and important. Focused on Elishva, an old woman who waits for her son to return for over twenty years but suddenly leaves within a day, this paper explains her choices and the reasons why Ahmed arranges such a character and destiny. In this way, this paper explores the truth about religion through the recurring religious picture in the novel and the truth about body by means of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception, with the purpose to display the novel’s artistical condemnation of the destructiveness of war. In the end of this paper Elishva-centering community of shared destiny will be discussed to stress her true nature and others’ false attitude toward violence-invaded life.

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*Frankenstein of Baghdad* tells the post-American-invasion life of the people from different classes in Baghdad from 2005 to 2006. In the war zone, a rag-picker, Baghdad Frankenstein, sews up bombed body parts that scatter everywhere in the streets into a complete body. The body, or the Frankenstein’s monster, relives as the incarnation of “justice”, which leads to more widespread social unrest and panic. The novel is divided into nineteen chapters, with over ten characters’ internal and external perspectives scattered in the chapters. The novel has distinct post-modern features of fragmentation with multiple story lines interlacing. Apart from the Frankenstein story line, Elishva’s is the highlighting and confusing one. She has waited more than two decades for her enlisted but lost son, and finally ends up leaving Baghdad within a day with the head part of the religious picture of Saint George. Her zigzagging destiny reflects the destruction of war, yet her strange behaviors toward the religious picture in the very beginning and end of the novel try to tell us more.
Religious Pragmatist: Elishva with Head Part of Saint George Picture

The “madwoman” Elishva seems devoted to religion, but in fact she holds pragmatistic attitude towards religion and cares little about doctrines. Such pragmatism is reflected in both thought and action.

Hidden in her pragmatical behaviors is her straight forward pragmatical idea toward religion as shown in the picture of saint George. Elishva seems devoted to religion, but in fact she holds pragmatical attitude towards religion and cares little about doctrines. Such pragmatism is reflected in both thought and action.

Hidden in her pragmatical behaviors is her straight forward pragmatical idea toward religion as shown in the picture of saint George. The title of the novel’s first chapter, “the Madwoman” describes Elishva. On the one hand, she talks to others in the hope that her son would be found alive, but others believe “he was just one of many who’d died over the years.” On the other hand, she lits candles every night, lulling herself into conversation with Saint Georgethe Martyr in the religious picture. Therefore, everyone thinks her old enough to be “mad”.

The Saint’s picture reveals her pragmatistic thought towards religion. The saint motif is recurrent through Elishva’s storyline, and it triggers much more curiosity of readers by contrast of “two other pictures of the same size, one of the Last Supper and the other of Christ being taken down from the cross, and three miniatures copied from medieval icons, drawn in thick ink and faded colors, depicting various saints, some of whose names she didn’t know…” (Chapter one, Section five). At the end of Elishva’s storyline, her grandson, encouraged by his family to disguise himself as her son Daniel, persuades her to leave war-torn Baghdad. Before she leaves, she cuts off the head part of the picture and took it away. Such strangely arranged plot draws readers’s attention to the details of the head.

He was holding a long pointed lance and sitting on a muscular white horse that had reared up to avoid the jaws of a hideous dragon encroaching from the corner of the picture, in tent on swallowing the horse, the saint, and all his military accoutrements. Elishva ignored the extravagant details. She put on the thick glasses that hung from a cord around her neck and looked at the calm, angelic face that betrayed no emotion. He wasn’t angry or desperate or dreamy or happy. He was just doing his job out of devotion to God. (Chapter one, Section five)

This detailed description unexpectedly reveals the imperceptible change of the spiritual world of Elishva as well as that of countless ordinary people in war zones. The saint seems about to be swallowed by the evil dragon in a second, but his face remains peaceful and tranquil. The fighting Saint and the overwhelming dragon are just like the ordinary civilians and the pervasive danger in Baghdad. In the war zone, people may be injured, maimed, or just even killed by the bomb at any time and any place. Thus everyone lives under stressful and oppressed state of mind. In that circumstance, the saint’s face offers an amazing example of being calm against such life-and-death moment.

The recurring picture of St. George in the novel reflects the struggle of ordinary human beings in the flames of war. Moreover, the writer Ahmed designs this surprising plot to praise human pursuit of truth and criticise meaningless sectarian conflicts. Elishva doesn’t care about religious teachings. She appreciates the religious art work from her own point of view, and learns to keep a calm and peaceful heart in the face of desperate situation.

“The function of thought is to guide action, and that truth is preeminently to be tested by the practical consequences of belief” (Merriam-Webster’s, 2012). For Elishva, the religious work is not of popularity but of whether it illuminates her in life. Elishva only talked to St. George because of his peaceful spirit in a riotous environment, which is needed in Baghdad at war.

By way of contrast, the rather famous religious painting Last Supper is overlooked, as well as other art works. Take Last Supper for example. Its depictions are generally melancholy, as Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure. It means Elishva does not believe in the existence of God although she often talks to a holy figure
whose peaceful face comforts her. She does not care about the ranks of the holy or the popularity, but what suits her—the tranquil, brave state of mind against violence and enemy. There is no convincible and reasonable basis for sectarian strife. Religion is not worthy of war, nor need it be an excuse for war. The truth is religious works of art may comfort our hearts and display their existing value.

Such pragmatic religious thought directly guides her in daily practice. When her enemy dies, she goes to different churches to fulfill her vows, but she is not as pious as she seems. Usually, she doesn't go to church to pray, but to make long free calls with her daughter to pour out her love for her son who she believes will return. In the consequent liturgy, “she followed the Mass, mouthing her favorite prayer silently: ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’ But her mind was on the phone call that was three weeks late” (Chapter seven, Section two). If she were truly grateful for the Lord, the liturgy should be the perfect location to express her gratitude, but all she is thinking is the moment she is going to call her daughters to speak how much she misses her son.

Her behavior seems grateful for Lord, yet rather pragmatical. Her diligence of visiting the churches ostensibly aims to thank God for realizing her wish. However, she achieves several critical purposes. Firstly, she ends “the heartache at the loss of her son.” Secondly, she “see the justice of the Lord.” Her Nemesis Abu Zaidoun “used to track down people avoiding military service, and Daniel had been late in responding to the draft. He had refused to sign up and go to the training camps, wanting instead to finish studying music” (Chapter five, Section five). It is rightful of Zaidoun to prosecute, but he also receives bribery to replace the one who pays with the other who does not pay. The bribe-taking informant deservedly becomes Elishva’s enemy. He symbolizes the injustice of fate and the cruelty of war. The death of her enemy stands for triumph over injustice and cruelty for herself and other individuals. Thus she is filled with hope and gratitude for life. The flowers she puts in the churches are symbols of hope, and her “ostentation” of visiting churches is a powerful response to her sympathizers, as if to say she were lucky enough to sympathize with. Elishvavisits several kinds of churches including the Jewish one and the Islamic one. In this way, the author expresses his hope for peaceful coexistence between religions, which is also the natural hope of many original people in the battlefield.

War’s Destruction and Body’s Power: Elishva’s Waiting and Leaving

The immediate destructed object of war is the body, and the following consequence of the destruction of the body is Elishva’s illusion. When she finds a shabby ugly naked body on the ground of her neighbourhood, she does not hesitate at all to call out Daniel’s name. “She threw the clothes at him and told him to put them on. … All this time she had left her thick glasses dangling from her neck, but she still knew this man didn’t look much like Daniel. No matter. Not many people came back looking the same as when they left” (Chapter five, Section one). She does not care about his ugly appearance, because the war has caused so many disabilities and ugliness. Nevertheless, the old woman knows in her heart that he is not her son. Elishava takes the monster as Daniel, but in fact it is just to get herself a bit of relief and comfort from her years of lonely incomprehensible waiting. Internal perspective narrative of the monster in the third person writes, “He looked very ugly. How come the old woman didn’t seem startled by his dreadful appearance?” The question sounds ironic that the monster himself getsfrightened by his own appearance. In Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, man’s natural resistance to ugliness is the direct driving force of the monster’s getting evil (Chen, 2005). In Baghdad, the war destroys the body, the
ugliness spreading everywhere. In the war-torn place with frequent bombing attacks, the nature of human beings who detest ugliness and love beauty described by Mary Shelley has faded away.

Elishva’s tolerance for the monster’s ugliness and her desire for company intelligently display the importance of the body, or the flesh. Elishva’s embrace of the monster identifies with her nostalgia for Daniel’s physical form. She maintains the ritual of speaking to her daughterson Sunday about her great pain of losing a son, and “the darkness would lift and she would feel at peace” (Chapter one, Section one). As she takes the monster as Daniel, she keeps looking forward to the return of her real son.

“A contour is nothing but a sum of isolated visions and the consciousness of a contour is a collective being. The sensible elements that make up this collective being cannot lose the opacity that defines them as sensible” (Merleau-Ponty, 2016, p. 37). Elishva dresses the monster in Daniel’s clothes and cooks him Daniel’s favorite dishes. She expects to relive the past “isolated visions” with the “opaque” figure monster present, hoping to recreate the intimate relationship of the past.

When Elishva, self-deceptedly accepts the monster, we may only feel sympathy for the mad old woman. But when her grandson comes to Baghdad and she takes him as her son and fleetly ends her twenty-year wait at the end of her storyline, we probably feel her frank personality-innate need for flesh. When the similarly looking grandson comes to her and asks her to leave Iraq, she agrees and leaves without a thought. What one misses is actually the lively body. The title of the sixteen chapter describing Elishva’s reunion with her grandson and her decision to leave is “Daniel”. Just like the title of the first chapter “the Madwoman”, they both show the false appearance, or what others believe, whereas the truth is the opposite. Grandson Daniel is not son Daniel, and Elishva is not mad but true to herself. Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn’t, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness” (O’Brien, 2020). Cruel war compels people to equip themselves with false masks so they fail to confuse right and wrong.

The zigzagging destiny of Elishva waiting for the return of his son reveals the healing power of the body: stable long-term company; the reserving and arousing of the shared life experience. Elishva’s attitude towards religion is pragmatic. The works of religious art have the power to inspire and function in real life. In this way, the author advocates peace and criticizes the meaningless religious conflicts or conflicts excusing themselves with religion.

From the perspective of phenomenology of perception, Elishva’s attitude towards the body is also consistent with nature. The author designs for Elishva a relatively happy ending. It highlights the importance of the body through the comparison between her twenty years of persistence and her resolute departure within one day. Such contrast attacks the physical and spiritual damage caused by the war. Moreover, the author designs this way to call for facing truth and being true like Elishva. The opposite of Elishva covers a wide range of people. They do not have the courage to face the reality and call the real one crazy. The departure of the spokes woman for truth with the devil present in Baghdad further satirifies the illusive and conspiratorial nature of the war conflicts.

Author’s Appeal for Truth: Elishva-centering Community of Destiny

As the Fate of the characters in the novel, the author arranges everlasting safety for Elishva, which reflects his protection of the quality of being true. The invisible hand of the author is present in many places in the novel. As the Fate of the characters, the author emphasizes Elishva’s luck and other characters’ deification of her. What the
author highlights is her attitude towards religion and body. Ahmed hopes the people in Baghdad and in other battlefields to face the reality and become true to their own mind.

The author admires Elishva for her true ideas of physical dependence and religious utility, and offers her a safe ward, by which the community of shared destiny comes into being. German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies in 1887 published *Community and Society* where he extracted the concept of “community” from the concept of “society”. He believed that community was a “living organism” naturally growing up based on blood, emotion, faith and land (Ferdinand, 2001, p. 19). The neighborhood women gather together and relieve the war zone stress by chatting, complaining and even cursing. And the increasingly popular concept of “Community of Shared Destiny” suggests the connotation of common dilemma—uncertain life and forthcoming death in battlefields plus oppressive and boring life. As the women’s community of shared destiny is constructed by emotion and land, it does not grow naturally as Ferdinand defined, but an organism imagined by Umm Salim.

Elishva’s neighbor Umm Salim believed strongly, unlike many others, that Elishva had special powers and that God’s hand was on her shoulder wherever she was. … When Elishva came to visit and they sat with some of their neighbors in the shade in Umm Salim’s old courtyard, Umm Salim spread out for her a woven mat, placed cushions to the right and left of her, and poured her tea. (Chapter one, Section two)

The Elishva-centered community of shared destiny envisioned by Umm Salim bears two meanings. For one thing, the common dilemma confronting several women is life-and-death space-time. For the other thing, it is Umm’s fear of fate that leads to the establishment of the community with Elishva as the core.

And the same leads to the disintegration of the community. “Umm Salim predicted that disaster would befall the lane because of Elishva’s departure.”

Due to Elishva’s pursuit of truth, Umm loses her spiritual pillar. Its disintegration represents the author’s irony of the subject of imagination and the cause of the community. Everyone in Baghdad could be blown up, but Umm discovers there has been no attack where Elishva is present, so she decides that Elishva is the providence of fate and takes Elishva as her spiritual pillar. In this way, fate has become a scapegoat for the perpetrators. Instead of indicting the abusers, people consider the disaster to be accidental. In times of war, Elishva has successfully maintained the beauty of human nature, that is, the pursuit of truth. The “madwoman” in people’s eyes is instead the most real and normal person. The eventual disintegration of the community of shared destiny is expected to push Umm and her fellow frailties fleeing war to face the harsh reality.

The magic realist story reveals the emptiness and destruction of war, which can be frequently seen in many documents studying the novel. While “modernist difficulty is often the favored aesthetic mode” (Roger, 2012), Ahmed Saadawi has successfully produced defining literary texts that characterize the people and the events. His novel designs elaborately the image and destiny of the “madwoman”, in order to satirize the cowardice of war-zone people and call for the character of being true to oneself. Those who stand for truth such as Elishva have been driven out, those who see religion properly have left, and those who blindly engage in sectarian strife and who are exploited by violence are still clinging on. If everyone becomes true to oneself by showing disdain of the hypocrisy of sectarian conflicts and realizing the power of every single lively body, the violence would lose its excuse and gets paralyzed.
Conclusion

Elishva’s departure is the metaphor of absence of truth, or rather, being true to one’s own mind in regard to religion and body. As other people calls her “mad”, they are rejecting their true minds and escaping the reality.

Religious art and work could lead and cure people in real world. Elishva’s pragmatic attitude towards religion prioritizes the work itself regardless of the popularity, history or reputation. She cuts the head part of the Saint George’s picture and keeps the serene state of mind against chaos; she leaves behind the rest of the picture just as she leaves the war zones. The pragmatist possesses the rare quality of being true. The author calls for such quality to criticize false and complex religious conflicts which have been the excuses of war.

As the metaphor indicates, being true also means rejecting war that destroys body. Elishva never hides her desire for physical company as she waits so long and leaves so fast. In Mary Shelly’s Frankenstein, human being’s nature of avoiding ugliness as the main reason leads to tragedy. Yet in Baghdad, the nature is distorted since physical deformity and mental abnormality sprawl everywhere. The monster’s company fleetingly comforts Elishva whereas her grandson takes her away even though she knows clearly he is not her son. When one waits so long, she or he is not stubborn, but naturally lured by familiar physical company.

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