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## **Infinite Monstrosity:**

### **Justice, Terror and Trauma in *Frankenstein in Baghdad***

Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, first published in 2013 and appearing in English translation in 2018, does remarkable things with a fictional figure conjured up two hundred years earlier in a Europe reeling from the monsters of industrial and political revolutions and the ravages of imperial war. Formally its textual interrogation of monster-making, fantasy and power return to narrations of otherness, humanity and justice. But its use of Mary Shelley's novel is multiply reframed and the "Frankenstein" it creates acknowledges popular transnational remediations of her "hideous progeny," relocating them to a city ravaged by global geopolitical forces in the last three decades and refracting them through newer iterations of monstrosity that attempt to grasp and interrogate the shadowy, pervasive and transnational reverberations of power, war and fear. The monster that roams the lanes, squares and ruins of an occupied and embattled city is, as one expects from the title, fabricated from disparate parts, but the limbs, organs and sinews of which it is composed have a particular and horrifyingly contemporary source: the explosively intermingled corporeal fragments of the victims of bombings. An effect of terror's devastation, the monstrous body that is assembled is, however, animated by intensities of loss, grief and trauma and armed by powerful demands for reparation, revenge and justice.

## Infinite Justice

Responding to the unanimity of political and media reactions to the events of September 11 2001, Arundhati Roy published an essay entitled “The Algebra of Infinite Justice.”

Concerned by pressures intent on swift, violent retaliation for attacks in New York and Washington (already an “International Coalition Against Terror” had lurched into being), the essay set out to unravel and contextualise many of the assumptions embedded in the immediate, but always mediated, claims of commentators and politicians all-too ready to turn abstract and hateful “Enemies of Freedom” into specific living objects of destruction. Recognising that, at a time of “grief, outrage and anger,” the idea of an assault against a way of life characterised by freedom and democracy is “an easy notion to peddle,” she attempts to separate a people’s grief from political opportunism: it was not the Statue of Liberty that was targeted but the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, symbols of US economic and military power starkly contrasted to a culture of freedom and democracy in their “record of commitment and support to exactly the opposite things – to military and economic terrorism, insurgency, military dictatorship, religious bigotry and unimaginable genocide (*outside America*)” (Roy 197).

Concerned that media-political unanimity will be used “as an opportunity to usurp the whole world’s sorrow to mourn and avenge only their own,” Roy takes a different perspective. She notes that, while shocking and “unconscionable,” the attacks were not, for many around the world, a surprise (Roy 198; 195). Neither a sign of hatred nor of indifference, the “absence of surprise” came from a sense of “augury” stemming from direct experience of the effects of US foreign policy: they knew “that what goes around, eventually comes around,” recognising terror as a part of a global order, without country,

transnational, “as global an enterprise as Coke or Pepsi or Nike” (Roy 198; 207). In contrast to the experience of people in other countries, Roy suggests the US public had been insulated by its national media against seeing the global effects of US economic and military policy. America’s media bubble occludes perspectives from recipients of its aid, investment or arms. Its new “Enemy of Freedom” also does not “appear much on TV,” contributing to the scale of shock when global violence returns home and perpetuating the occultation of historical factors that help explain events (Roy 195): the brief history of US involvements in Afghanistan, for example, shows that this new enemy and nursery of terrorism was formerly an ally, from the late 1970s, against the Soviet Union; groups like the Taliban, along with thousands of mujahedeen (including Osama Bin Laden), were recruited and funded by the CIA to wage what Roy describes as “America’s proxy war” (Roy 202). The cycle of alliances and enmities traced by Roy acknowledges further ironies and reversals complicating polarisations of good and evil and freedom and terror: intimate and interdependent, oppositions conflate, turning into monstrous mirror images of global power. Roy resorts to a language of doubling to characterise their shadowy inter-implication: Bin Laden becomes America’s disturbing “family secret,” its President’s “dark doppelganger,” “savage twin” of its purported civilisation (Roy 210). Events in New York and Washington, in this argument, emanate from global forces of darkness and obscurity: attacks are seen as “a monstrous calling card from a world gone horribly wrong,” a message that “could well have been signed by the ghosts of the victims of America’s old wars” (Roy 211-2).

Global polarisations of “us” and “them” (“US” or “terrorism”) are rejected due to their complicity and for the monstrous overpowering logic they impose. That logic is evident in the term “infinite justice.” Initially used as the codename for the US-led military response against Afghanistan, “Operation Infinite Justice” was changed to “Operation Enduring

Freedom” in order not to offend Muslims: only Allah can deliver infinite justice. For Roy, the codenames, despite masquerading as absolute and universal appeals, are telling in the interests and divisions they expose: “Infinite Justice/ Enduring Freedom for whom?” (Roy 199) “We know,” she elaborates in a companion essay, “that Infinite Justice for some means Infinite Injustice for others. And Enduring Freedom for some means Enduring Subjugation for others” (Roy 218). “Justice” and “freedom” thus point, not towards universally shared human values, but to rhetorical legitimations of the enforcement of prevailing iniquities which have to be suffered (“endured”) without end (the imposition of law and liberty is “enduring,” if not “infinite”). Worse still, the values invoked, already politically expedient, are also rendered calculable in an “algebra” that brings priceless lives down to mere economic measures. Roy cites the answers of a US Ambassador to the United Nations when, in 1996, confronted with statistics suggesting that economic sanctions against Iraq had contributed to the death of 500,000 Iraqi children: though a “hard choice,” the ambassador affirmed the “price” to be “worth it” (Roy 200). Here is the basis of “infinite justice,” an “equivocating distinction between civilization and savagery” that unfolds according to the unconscionable notion that value is reducible to the costs quantified in economic equivalence: “how many dead Iraqis will it take to make the world a better place;” “how many dead Afghans for every dead American?” (Roy 200) “Infinite Justice” envelops incalculable values and ethical judgements in a global order ruled only by market exchanges and considerations and in the absence of more permanent criteria of evaluation associated with irreducible or transcendent qualities. Economic calculations of profit and loss do not, moreover, reach a final point, hence the infinity of its justice and the constant necessity of an abstracted and shadowy Enemy alterable enough to become an object on which justice and freedom can exorcise and delimit their lack of legitimacy, value or ultimate good

judgement. The spectacular subjection of Afghanistan to “Operation Enduring Freedom” offers ample evidence of the imbalance, interminability and cruel excess of the process: the mightiest military and economic nations in the world unleashing their “justice” on a land already flattened by war and poverty is drawn beyond justice, reason or necessity to produce mass starvation, innumerable wounded orphans scabbling for artificial limbs dropped as aid, so many devastated farms become mass burial grounds or opium plantations and unending lines of refugees: “witness the infinite justice of the new century” (Roy 201). The algebra of infinite justice seems possessed by an inhumane, unending logic unchecked by reason, law or ethics. Its “algebra” pertains to more than matters of quantity, measure and calculation; it has, as Roy’s concerns with media attest, an impact on political and aesthetic representation that excludes other cultures from any perspective not already bound by prevailing norms and abstractions (“Other;” “Enemy” etc.). Such representations operate in the same manner as linguistic forms: occluding through abstraction the actuality of things, a formal “algebrization” engenders detached, vague but familiar images that turn cognition and perception of, and affective relation to, the world into merely habitual and automatic effects (Shklovsky, 25).

### **Spectral Infinity**

Roy’s essay, questioning the cruel logic of global political and media univocity and the proximity, if not complicity, of its polarisations, also embraces figures from a spectral lexicon to help grasp more obscure and disturbing patterns in transnational representation. Her case finds support elsewhere. Naomi Klein, for instance, criticising political commentaries on the attacks, cites South African and Iranian friends who were “furious about the outpourings

of grief demanded of them in response to the attacks,” a demand all the more arrogant in its occlusion of the many other deaths around the world that remained un-mourned (Klein 167). For Klein, Western media’s powers of occlusion were calibrated to the culturally differential and habitual valuations of life: “the idea that death are murder are tragic, extraordinary and intolerable in some places and banal, ordinary, unavoidable, even expected in others” (Klein 164). Ethical value and media violence are explored by Judith Butler as she addresses questions of “what makes for a grievable life?” “What counts as human?” At base lies the interdependence of self and other constituting humanity, the “social vulnerability of our bodies” that may be exposed in violence (Butler 20). The position implies a relation to alterity in line with a Levinasian ethical approach in which the “face” of an obscure, impersonal yet palpable other being demands (in its very vulnerability to violence) a fundamental respect for life. The other in this context is not a subject of immediate presentation. Yet not every face commands respect. Some lives and some deaths matter less than others; some lives are grieved and some deaths go un-mourned. An “unseen” violence at work in the framing and the differentiations of human and other gives rise not only to exclusion but to dehumanisation: others may be given faces that make them appear unreal and inhuman. Rendered perceptible only in unreal or dehumanised form, the other can be negated over and over again (Butler 33). According to Butler the second pattern emerges quite vividly in narratives dealing with the attacks on the World Trade Center, thereby participating in the process that “shaped what was grievable” (Butler 38). The media work of giving form to – and deforming – events was sustained by a powerful array of obscure corporate monopolies and interests and involved itself in “deciding what will and will not be publicly recognisable as reality” (Butler 147). Here, the other falls out of human reality, consigned to an “interminably spectral” status (33). Lurking at the borders of

the real, this spectre is allowed to play a significant, if ambiguous, role in media productions of reality and meaning: in the same way that the “war on terror” harnesses emptiness and urgency, spectral alterity – unreal, abstracted, malleable and endlessly re-imaginable – can be repeatedly deployed in many forms and contexts as a renewable object of exclusion, execration and vigilance, an outlet of questionably legitimate or inherent violence. It manifests the “spectral infinity of the enemy” (Butler 33).

The spectre of terror displays a curious figure of otherness, a figure of difference always hauntingly close to the subject. Sameness rather than alterity constitutes a prevailing factor in relations between East and West. Jean-Pierre Dupuy observes a global “logic” that is determined not by difference, but by “identity similarity, imitation and fascination” (Dupuy 36). He challenges a dominant account of geopolitical conflicts (Huntingdon’s “Clash of Civilizations”) with the argument that Islam is part of the same religious grouping as Judaism and Christianity. For him, a “*jealous ambivalence*” informs a global “mimetic rivalry” defining terror not as cultural or religious hostility but as a resentful recognition of being a subordinate part of the same world system (Dupuy 40). Slavoj Žižek follows this line of argument, regarding neoliberalism and fundamentalism as “two sides of same coin”: a political cartoon from 2002 depicting George Bush as a bearded Muslim cleric encapsulates how “global capitalist liberalism” is “itself of mode of fundamentalism” (Žižek 2008 31). At the same time, Islamic fundamentalism is itself “a product and phenomenon of modern global capitalism” (Žižek 2008 65). The respective quality of religious faith does not sustain a difference: the fundamentalist prepared to sacrifice life for belief is not a person of greater conviction than his or her comfortably empty liberal counterpart: “deep in themselves, terrorist fundamentalists also lack true conviction – their violent outbursts are proof of it” (Žižek 2008 73). When it comes to war, the suicide bomber appears as the “dark opposite,



the gory doppelganger” of the “safe bodiless soldier” operating remote missile technology (Hardt and Negri 2006 45).

Acts of violence and counter-violence display the “stunning mirror games in which Al Qaeda and the West have become entangled” (Dupuy 42). Both follow the same logic, invoke the same justifications, use the same tactics: refusing to distinguish between military and civilian targets, their actions are retaliations against prior assaults, positioning everyone as victims (Dupuy 43; Zizek 2008 107). Transnational, the mobility of terror mirrors the “reciprocity of exchange” of goods, information and workers, while the mode of dying that makes roles of terrorist, hostage and victim “substitutable” manifest the “ambivalent and reversible” aspect of global systems caught up in an “uncontrollable eruption of reversibility” (Dupuy 42; Baudrillard 1983 115-6). The interplay of abstraction and realisation, too, situates war and terror alongside capitalism: just as portfolio managers in financial services sit at screens in offices making decisions that affect the lives of millions on another continent, so the console operator at a base in Virginia can, in real-time, target the drone or missile that explodes on a bunker or a school in a city thousands of miles away (Zizek 2012 44). Technology and timing are crucial. They distinguish the hypermodernity of the attacks, exploiting “‘real-time’ images,” “instantaneous worldwide transmission,” “stock-market speculation, electronic information and air traffic.” (Baudrillard 2002 27) In this respect, too, terror mimics other military operations, like the US bombing of Libya on 14 April 1986. Coordinating the airstrike with live coverage at peak viewing time presented, Edward Said noted at the time, a powerfully synchronised and networked political message. It subordinated the bombing itself to a media event which overrode any dissent or negative connotation by reiterating the same enjoyable message: “kicking Libyan (i.e. nigger) ass and feeling good about it was the unspoken message” (Said 3).

The timing of the attacks in 2001 similarly served to harness media programming and visual spectacle in a dramatic escalation of martial effects. Media, Butler noted, had become as much a part of warfare as bullets and bombs, an example of “shock and awe”. Just as the reporting of the Iraq war offered “a visual spectacle that numbs the senses” two years later, presentations of events in New York exceeded the “aesthetic dimension to war” and exploited “the visual aesthetics as part of a war strategy itself” (Butler 148). Klein concurred: the aim was to cause “profound disorientation, extreme fear and anxiety, and collective repression” (Klein 42). “Shock and Awe” is more than an aesthetic effect, coming to prominence in the 1990s as part of the military strategy of “Rapid Dominance”: designed as a combination of overwhelming physical and technical force crushing resistance and an extreme psychological disorientation of military and civilian populations, shock and awe was touted among strategists preparing for the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Ullman and Wade 23). It has a longer history in post-World War II US economic expansion as an opportunistic strategy exploiting the “collective shock” of massive disruption (war, natural disaster, local crisis) to take advantage of a disorientated people’s readiness to “give up things they would otherwise fiercely protect” (Klein 17).

“Shock and awe” is designed to produce intense and overwhelming physical and psychological effects on individuals and populations. Not reserved for military use alone, it is a tactic that has economic, political and aesthetic – or rather “anaesthetic” – dimensions. Disorientation, numbing, paralysis, the collapse of objective, cultural and subjective coordinates engender a traumatic loss of boundaries and security, leaving no space safe and little room for recovery. “Shock and Awe,” ironically, seems too weak a term to grasp the scale of global and subjective devastation with which it is associated. Unlike the sublime that draws on “awe” and “terror,” current forms of global violence refuse any wonder,

distance or recuperation. Where overwhelming aesthetic sensation gives subjects of the sublime some space and time to recover (in the wake of sensory overload or imaginative inadequacy, an idea of reason or an impulse of self-preservation reinvigorates subjectivity), the terrifying violence called “shock and awe” is more pervasive and consuming. Even “terrorism” as a term for the use of extreme and shocking violence seems inadequate, as Adriana Cavarero proposes (in a book that opens with two accounts of bombings in Iraq). Instead of “terrorism,” she advances “horrorism” to describe all-embracing acts of destruction respecting no bodies, boundaries or laws, caring nothing about guilt or innocence and dissolving the most basic ideas of human corporeal integrity, uniqueness and dignity. “Horrorism” is “a body that blows itself up in order to rip other bodies apart,” obliterating the singularity of living being with a direct and irrevocable assault on “ontological dignity” (Cavarero 29; 44). As a “killing of our uniqueness”, suicide bombing stands out as a powerful illustration of the new type of destruction at work (43). Following Jacqueline Rose’s account of the “unbearable intimacy” displayed by acts which see killer and victim fatally joined and fragmented in the same blast, Cavarero speaks of an “intimacy of bodies that explode together and become mingled” (Rose 22; Cavarero 57). Bodies have become destructive material that explodes to turn themselves and others into “heaps of meat” (Cavarero 95-98). Horrorism occurs in a world increasingly exposed to “extreme violence” of political dislocations dividing the planet into “life” and “death” zones, wealth and poverty separated in geographical splits of North and South and across urban expanses: on the margins of more prosperous cities lives subsist in vast, crowded shanty-towns; refugees are forced into camps; homeless and workless people beg on streets, surviving on rubbish. The violence suffered is not only that pertaining to physical destitution of poverty, insanitary housing and precarious subsistence: it also enacts a dehumanising, psychological

impact, robbing people of recognition, dignity, esteem and human status. Without value as workers or consumers, they do not even warrant exploitation as objects of cheap labour, entirely dispatched from a world of exchange and commodification. Utterly disposable in economic and symbolic terms, these people have a new non-status: “garbage humans” (Balibar 15).

The horror is psychological and physical, to the extent that neither “shock” nor “trauma” seem adequate terms for what becomes a widespread and irreversible condition defining a new global population: the “new wounded”. Like those with brain lesions who lose every vestige of self (memory, identity), the “new wounded” undergo experiences shattering their entire “neuronal organization and psychic equilibrium” (Malabou 9). Without cure or recovery, this “post-traumatic” condition “reigns every where today,” symptom of “an indivisible intimacy between the outside and the inside” (Malabou 17; 11). Bypassing traditional divisions of public and private space, the condition results from experiences of war, abuse, captivity, accident, disaster and terrorism as well as among groups at the receiving end of economic crisis, political upheaval, and social exclusion. It leads to a “new age” defined by “the renunciation of any hope of endowing violence with political sense” (Malabou 155). Without direction, identity, self-consciousness, will or memory, the new wounded are the definitive figures produced in the image of an all-pervasive violence.

### **Imperial Monstrosity**

If the new wounded seem to take a form comparable to the zombies recently dominating global media, it is no surprise. But zombies are not the only fantastic entities remade in the image of new world (dis)order. Theories of the powers shaping contemporary global

political and economic organization have, taking a cue from Marx's use of the "vampire" to describe the driving force of capitalism, repurposed figures from fantasy fiction. "Empire," a dominating, dispersed and obscure global framework composed of post-industrial, creative, networked, immaterial and biopolitical mechanisms organising exchanges of information, services, perceptions, values and identities as well as commodities, is considered a "vampire regime": an abstract yet terrifyingly real figure of control, its "spectral reign" allows it to feed off the living energy of the diverse common wealth of living bodies called "multitude" (Hardt and Negri 2000 48; 62). The multitude is also monstrous: a multiple, diverse and fluid agglomeration of singular creative beings living in common: exceeding the control of vampire-Empire, this multiplicity embraces those on the fringes of normative existence. Its monsters are the freaks, outcasts, deviants subject to exclusion yet able to reconfigure and recreate identities and relations beyond prescriptions of empire (Hardt and Negri 2006 193). In contrast to the almost irrepressible and uncontrollable diversity manifested by multitude's monsters, the various techniques of imperial control resort to an absolute if intangible spectre which, without legitimacy, operates a "permanent" and "general" "state of exception" (Hardt and Negri 2000 7). Here terror becomes significant: the events of September 11, for instance, consolidate the ongoing emergence of Empire, underlining the "generality and inescapability" of war, marking a suspension of democracy and a pervasive abstraction of enmity and violence with a biopolitical indifference towards life and death (Hardt and Negri 2006 4). The "war on terror", moreover, displays an important aspect of spectral control in that it mobilises action on the basis of imaginary enmity: a spectral "Enemy" (an "ever present" and "hostile aura") has a double role, simultaneously "banalized (reduced to an object of routine police repression) and absolutized (as the Enemy, an absolute threat to ethical order)" (Hardt and Negri 2000 13). As a permanent,

omnipresent and malleable threat demanding constant vigilance, the Enemy serves to justify whatever military or police action may be deemed necessary. It operates in much the same way as the “spectral infinity” identified by Butler.

The “Enemy” distinguishes the phantasmagorical – even “phantasmagoreal” – dimensions of Empire as it operates without any stable frameworks of law or reality and opens onto a proliferation of monstrous and ghostly figures. In *Multitude*, the golem is invoked to give a fresh image “of unlimited war and indiscriminate destruction, a symbol of new monstrosity” (Hardt and Negri 2006 10). Frankenstein and creature, too, are cited, the former as a figure of a callous and indifferent humanity while his creation is seen to embody the capacity for love and fellow-feeling among the outcasts of traditional social institutions (Hardt and Negri 2006 193). In colonial terms, anti-modern and dissident groups can be “cast as monsters in order to rein in their power and legitimate domination over them”. Deployed to police the norms and practices of unjust rule, these figures of exclusion can seize and invert their threatening image to instigate a different, resistant narrative: the epitome of the colonized monster, Caliban, displays the manner in which oppressive and negative constructions can be “revalued from the other side to tell the story of the suffering of the colonized and their liberation struggles against the colonizers” (Hardt and Negri 2009 95-7). Gestures of anti-modernity and assertions of primitivism, however, remain aspects of colonial power that its monsters refuse. Recent rises in occult phenomena reported in South Africa, Indonesia, as well as in parts of Latin America and Russia, are not returns of “primitive” energies but registers of the contradictions and tensions experienced in different cultural encounters pressed by global imperatives: “these are all societies in which new dreams of wealth in the global capitalist economy have for the first time been plunged into the icy realities of imperial hierarchies. Magic and monsters are means to understand in each of these

contexts this shared and contradictory social situation (Hardt and Negri 2006 126).

Monstrous figures here mark attempts to apprehend the obscure effects of global division and conflict. As the Warwick Research Collective suggests, fantastic and occult fictional forms are often better equipped than realism to capture the uneven and disturbing instantiations of global practices (WRec 96-114).

In a global context monstrosity assumes multiple, divergent and polarising functions.

Naming the dominant world order “vampire” gives a dispersed and obscure formation a distinctly inhuman if unreal shape, enabling its contradictory conjunction of abstraction and cruelty to be apprehended and reviled. Identifying systemic monstrosity extends to the institutional and normative organs of control, challenging and redirecting images of deviance, dissent and abnormality. Institutions of difference and negations of alterity are disclosed as being unstable and insecure projections that, inverted, disclose artifice, injustice and unreality: in producing monsters, it seems, vampire-empire only exhibits its own monstrosity as an arbitrary system of domination. Its manufactured markers of difference, monstrous guardians of unreal borders, are sustained only as far the intensity of fear, repulsion and horror allows. Matters become ever more spectral with the repeated insistence on and imagining of monstrosities as outlets for internal tension, violence and anxiety, failing to manage equilibrium: appealing to threats only accentuates fear and engenders further affective disequilibrium. A vicious spiral of monster-making and monster-killing provides the torsion for infinite monstrosity to emerge in a spin of sameness. Amid Empire’s world of all-too real phantasms and fears, no position is left secure. Yet, for subjects of this spectral regime, monstrosity may take a different rotation. Caliban learns to curse and monsters spin out of control, inverting projections of exclusion and negation and remaking identities as collective relations. Faced with incomprehensible and overwhelming

power, monstrosity may provide, at least temporarily, figures to apprehend the nonsensical excesses of war and horror, giving vent to inchoate anxieties or uncontrollable energies, giving form to unbearable loss and arbitrary suffering, and thereby delimiting devastation with objects that enable some kind of return – in mourning, in rage, blame, revenge – to self, sense and order.

### **Traumonster**

*Frankenstein in Baghdad* places monstrosity in direct relation to war, terror, trauma and justice. It is, so one reviewer observes, “an acute portrait of Middle Eastern sectarianism and geopolitical ineptitude, an absurdist morality fable and a horror fantasy” (Perry). It deals with “tribal cruelties in Iraq” and a “country’s trauma” (Garner). But, notwithstanding its depictions of urban bombings, devastated neighbourhoods and legacies of communal loss, local or regional issues are not its only concerns. Explosions may have become so commonplace as to necessitate swift routines of civic clean-up, washing blood, body parts and rubble from the streets so that everyday life can continue, but the banal reality of daily violence is perpetually shadowed by other – at times almost supernatural – forces. City streets are patrolled by armed police, national guardsmen and coalition forces, monitored by various agencies of military intelligence. They are also battlegrounds for warring Shiite and Sunni militia, for armed gangs of traffickers, for al-Qaeda bombers, for members of the old Baathist regime, Islamists and for the mercenaries employed as private security contractors. The same streets are also the venues where junk dealers, estate agents, sweet and cigarette sellers, and news vendors ply their trade, where journalists seek out stories or



wile away the time in coffee shops and brothels and where widows call their emigrant families, or go to market and to church.

There is another constant presence on these streets. It is a novel about how “the justice the American occupation aimed to deliver looks more like a dystopian wasteland” (Metz). US soldiers on patrol, at checkpoints or engaged in nocturnal firefights form a constant backdrop. Hummers prowl the avenues; Apache helicopters skim city skies. US intelligence agents observe government security committees, exerting pressure and influence. Their presence, visible throughout, remains in the background of a novel in which no single US character or American voice is to be heard. Nonetheless, it is a palpable and threatening presence, much like the omnipresent hostile aura of the “Enemy” that shadows Empire, only in reverse. One character, Faraj, an estate agent with dubious business ethics and strong entrepreneurial ambitions, remarks that he is “frightened of Americans” because they “operated with considerable independence and no one could hold them to account for what he did” (66). Arbitrary and unnerving, even in a city where bombs and gunfire are regular occurrences, there is something spectral about US forces. And inevitable: the novel is set in Baghdad in 2005. In the wake of the International Coalition that subjected Afghanistan to “Operation Enduring Freedom”, another US-led force motivated by concerns about “weapons of mass destruction” stockpiled by Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime invaded Iraq in 2003. Under the auspices of a “coalition” administration, the occupation continued until 2011.

In the novel, local events, like the localities of Baghdad itself, are traversed by global forces. The title of the novel, relocating a European monster to a Middle Eastern city, underlines the imbrication of global and local forces. Yet the “Frankenstein” to which it refers is not

primarily or exclusively the text written by Shelley: it denotes the American actor who assumed the monster's role in a 1994 film version (*Mary Shelley's Frankenstein* directed by Kenneth Branagh). Robert de Niro's hideously deformed monster is a repeated cinematic referent: his face is used to illustrate the magazine article entitled "Frankenstein in Baghdad" reporting stories of a monster in the city. Embedding the novel's title in a story published in its story formally and reflexively acknowledges and reworks Shelley's frame narrative. Saadawi's fiction, entangling Western monstrosities, produces a distinct "hideous progeny" of its own. But, drawing on figures and fictional forms from a Western tradition of horror, its combination of generic modes and moods operates differently: its horror overlaps with reality, its comedy and absurdity punctures its supernaturalism, as if generic integrity or continuity is untenable in traumatic times. Shock without awe signals a disruption of ordinary reality so extensive that any assertion of unity of perspective or tone is inappropriate if not futile.

The novel's global context sees reality traversed by phantasmal forms and figures. The latter appear in unconventional places. Like the upsetting of generic gravity that comes of the trope of monstrous creation (an alcoholic junk dealer builds the monster), supernatural sonorities are unexpectedly – and comically – bound up with military-political administration and counter-terrorism: the "Tracking and Pursuit" department employs "astrologers and fortune tellers" with the aim of monitoring "unusual crimes, urban legends, and superstitious rumours" and predicting future incidents like bombings and assassinations (71). Satirising incompetence and dubious "intelligence," its existence provides numerous sources of comic incongruity: at a bomb scene a senior astrologer decides it is prudent to remain in his vehicle given the suspicions – or laughter – that would be aroused at the sight of his "strange clothes, his tall conical hat with a tassel, his long hair, his thick beard

carefully combed, its pointed ends held together by a hair clip" (237). As if having a suicide bomber sitting in a car in one's street, did not already go beyond any kind of sense. There are crass verbal gags too, involving playfully stupid exchanges based on misunderstanding the monster's name (103). Given the senselessness of everyday events, however, comedy is as valid a response as any.

There are serious implications, however, that develop into a commentary on the way that spectral forces and effects are bound up with the (mis)management of political and social realities. The commander of the unit, Brigadier Sorour Mohamed Majid, considers collecting weird stories to be a means "to get more control, to provide information about sources of violence and the incitement to hatred, and to prevent civil war". Though "real war" seems imminent, "information civil war" is ongoing (71). Fantasy, fear, spectre and monster circulate in the gap between real and information war, all capable of precipitating the latter into explosive violence. Yet war itself, a strange combination of policing and information, is located between real and imagined powers and between actual yet incomprehensible effects. Information, as the Brigadier knows, is part of a repertoire of control: it manages expectations and perceptions, directs or assuages fantasy and fear, and brings things under a single authority – "reality". This is clear when the Brigadier emphasises that the story published as an urban legend is based on fact. "Frankenstein in Baghdad" must not be the idle fantasy of a drunken junk dealer, but a reality that he can capture and control: his job is to arrest "a useless, despicable, lowly person who has made himself into a myth by exploiting people's ignorance and fear and the chaos around them" (163). Control brings fantasy under its authority, containing objectless fears and unbounded violence in chains of criminality.

Control, itself partly spectral, exercises rather than exorcises myths, fantasies and fears. Texts remain, however, a problem: in the narrative two writers, the journalist who publishes “Frankenstein in Baghdad” and the unnamed writer who assembles the novel, are brought in for interrogation and censure. Texts, as Shelley’s novel readily displays, can assume monstrous forms. *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 bulletins, movie images, mobile phone conversations and numerous stories told in coffee shops, restaurants, offices and homes. It begins with a framing document, the report of a government intelligence committee suspending the operations of “Tracking and Pursuit”. A few pages later, the relation of events starts with the noise of a large explosion in Tayaran Square, a sound heard by the four characters whose stories interweave in the novel, all linked temporally and narratively to explosive, senseless events. The four stories overlap and supplement each other. Elishva, hearing the blast as she heads for church, has lost her son Daniel to the war with Iran. While she waits for his return her family have fled to a safer country. She will help give the monster purpose. Elishva’s crumbling house borders a ruin inhabited by Hadi, drunken junk dealer, notorious storyteller and monster-maker. His life, too, is marked by loss. At Tayaran Square in search of a body part, he is a passer-by and witness to the second blast that kills Hasib, a young security guard whose wandering spirit finds refuge in the monster’s body. With Mahmoud, a young journalist from the provinces, the different stories and their reverberations— including the monster’s – can begin to be stitched together, giving shape to a monstrous form.

## Whatsitsname

Loosely stitched together the text emerges as monster and as a singular but collective entity. Its monster too: it is one and many, singular but multiple, connected, disparate and decomposing. Made up of separate and scattered body parts, its composition changes daily: bits fall off, parts are attached. Singularity attends each piece, and each piece is replaceable: singularly multiple; uniquely monstrous and in perpetual yet partial flux. This “Frankenstein” is a collective creation born of the losses and traumas derived from terror and violence, assembled not only from the cast-off body parts of many bomb victims but from the suffering, grief, dreams and prayers of friends and family, all demanding some kind of reconciliation with the horror, some form of reparation, justice or revenge.

The monstrous body is completed as a result of the bomb in Tayaran Square: Hadi picks through the fragments and finds a bulbous nose which he takes home to sew into the gap on the face of the “massive corpse” in his shed (19-20). The composite of leftovers of many bombings is now finished, though Hadi remains unsure what to do next. As a dealer in junk he is used to gathering and repurposing what others discard. But his monster, made “so it wouldn’t be treated as rubbish,” stages an objection to the waste all around, the detritification of the remains of living beings especially: all the bodies and parts littering the streets deserve respect in death (24). Leaving human bodies devalued, as garbage, extends beyond the direct effects of bombings: dehumanisation is evident afterwards, in the morgues and forensic laboratories become so desensitised as to show little respect for the dignity of the remains. Hadi has the idea to return his corpse and exclaim: “it’s a human being guys, a person” (24). Yet a compulsion, only later disclosed, drives Hadi to trawl the streets collecting exploded body parts to stitch together, an index of his own traumatic

experience: not only was his friend and business partner, Nahem, killed by a car bomb but his trip to collect the body for burial confronts him with the fact that there is nothing left to go in the coffin, no objects around which rituals of loss can begin their process of repair (23). Worse, even the singularity of corporeal being has gone: shocked to see “the bodies of explosion victims were all mixed up together,” he is appalled to be told “to put a body together and carry it off – take this leg and this arm and so on.” (214) Horrifyingly intermingled in explosive death, human integrity is further dismantled as an arbitrary and careless assemblage. Not only are bodies explosively turned to waste, but that waste is often so meagre as to leave a coffin empty. The grave of Elishva’s son is without his body. Hasib’s family only buries his “burned black shoes,” “shredded, blood-stained clothes,” and a few “small charred parts of his body” (33).

Dead body parts are not enough to animate Hadi’s gruesome creation. A manifestation of loss, the material components are collected on the basis of traumatic compulsion and further articulated through grief, prayer and dream, a collective process. Hasib’s family members, individually yet together, manifest the process of reassembly, contributing to and sharing a dream of loss: “they all dreamed something about Hasib. Parts of one dream made up for parts missing in another. A little dream filled a gap in a big one, and the threads stitched together to recreate a dream body for Hasib, to go with his soul, which was hovering over all their heads and seeking the rest it could not find” (34). Overlapping, in concert and yet apart, the dream mirrors the novel’s structure in giving form to absences underlying its monstrous articulation of disparate singularities. It becomes “a composite of victims seeking justice to avenge their deaths so they could rest in peace” (125). Physical disintegration and trauma shape the creation of the monster. Unity is provided by Hasib’s

wandering spirit. Justice and peace require some symbolic cohesion. “Get up, Daniel,” Elishva says to the inspirited corpse she finds in her house. Her interpellation, recognising him as her lost son, brings “him out of anonymity with the name she gave him” (51). The throwaway designation used by Hadi – “Whatsitsname” – is replaced with a name that provides past, place, personhood and purpose: the monster assumes Elishva’s mandate, ending her mourning and delivering her justice. The Baathist official who sent Daniel to war is soon killed, satisfying Elishva’s demand: “justice at some later stage would not do. It had to happen now.” While the “infinite torment” conferred by God is assured at a later date, she also requires it “to be done on earth” (78).

“I’m the only justice there is in this country”, comments Daniel (130). Assuming the role as avenger of victims of conflict, poverty, hatred and injustice, he describes himself as “saviour” and “sinews” of law animated by “prayers of victims and their families” (136-7). Every part of this monstrously metaphorical being screams for specific justice: every limb, organ, muscle and appendage that constitutes his form represents a singular life lost to a care-less and violent death. Each part demands reparation, setting in motion a series of righteous killings. Initially, the enactment of justice seems as finite as it is earthly: every act of retribution allows a body part to return to natural decomposition. To complete his task, however, “Daniel” must retain physical form and strength: each success and corresponding decomposition requires “new flesh from new victims” (129). And each new part will represent another victim’s call for justice: “in his mind he still had a long list of the people he was supposed to kill, and as fast as the list shrank, it was replenished with names, making avenging these lives an endless task” (207). The call for justice becomes infinite, his work interminable. Practical and moral problems are compounded, making the nature of his

justice even less clear. Confusion is noted over Hasib, killed by a Sudanese suicide bomber: “how can I kill somebody who’s already dead?” (124). His task, from the start, makes identifying guilty objects of retribution difficult. When it becomes an endless material imperative fuelled by replacement parts, the scope of his infinite justice raises further questions: “at a loss for what to do. He knew his mission was essentially to kill, to kill new people every day, but he no longer had a clear idea of who should be killed or why” (193). Sourcing new parts becomes an increasingly problematic practical and ethical issue. Principled at first, he refuses to use “illegitimate flesh” in his regeneration (149). But his religiously and politically diverse band of helpers have been less scrupulous in matters of selection, suturing the flesh of criminals – even terrorists – to his corpse of innocent victims (193). Righteousness is compromised as his endless task sheds legitimacy, entering a zone of indistinction in which guilt and innocence become impossible to determine.

Unsure whether to end the uncertainty shrouding the rectitude of his violence – and end himself – or refuse to neglect so many unavenged bodies, he decides to continue to “exploit his distinctive talent in the service of the innocent – in the service of truth and justice” (193). His appeal to his own exceptionality does not resolve questions of distinction or legitimacy but mean that he puts himself first, preserving his body and concentrating on his “own survival”, and carrying on killing while waiting for clarity to return (194). The shift is significant. Without clear rationale, divested of external legitimacy, his autonomous functionality as an indiscriminate mechanism of death becomes primary. He still has an “open-ended list of targets that would never end” (147). But these “targets” assume a more instrumental status, removed to a programme of command and control rather than following a path guided by a singular ethics. His “mission” has shifted from restitutions of (impossible) justice and (irreparable) mourning to obeying a logic of (perpetual) war and



(infinite) terror. He comes to embody the interminable disequilibrium of “infinite justice.” Any trace of the inestimable value and dignity of life fades: singular being slides, replaceable and decomposable, into the gutter, its life and death fuelling an unstoppable monstrous war machine whose only justification becomes its own existence. The monster, born as avatar of grief, trauma and loss, thus re-composes itself in and as the mirror of the state of exceptionality assumed by global order, working without legitimacy in a grey zone in which right and wrong, life and death are mutable, contingent, exchangeable and politically expedient abstractions of infinite monstrosity.

### **“Familiars of Fear”**

Fear accompanies the re-composition, changing shape amid the circulating names of monstrosity. The throwaway, inanimate “Whatsitsname,” the double of mourning, “Daniel,” and the “Frankenstein” imaged as the face of Robert De Niro’s cinematic monster name monstrosity diversely to signify an inchoate trauma, a stubborn denial of maternal loss, and a familiar Western fictional figure of fear. The monster’s significations spread further, invoking projections of local and global significance. For some of his fanatical entourage, he is taken as religious “saviour” and its “instrument of mass destruction;” for others, more nationalistically inclined, he assumes the shape of an entire nation, an as-yet un-embodied Iraq, a “model citizen” who is “made up of the body parts of people from diverse backgrounds – ethnicities, tribes, races and social classes” (140). More curiously he supplements failures of military justice. One sect led by the “Enemy” (the name for a disillusioned counter-terrorism officer) is “convinced that the justice he was looking for wasn’t being achieved on the ground at all” (140). Elsewhere he is described as “major

terrorist,” while TV shows portray him as the elusive, bullet-proof “criminal X” (131; 202). The legion of names fails to harness the ecology of fear in which they circulate: “fear of Whatsitsname continued to spread. In Sadr City they spoke of him as a Wahhabi, in Adamiya as a Shiite extremist. The Iraq government described him as an agent of foreign powers, while the spokesman for the US State department said he was an ingenious man whose aim was to undermine the American project in Iraq.” (259) Names condense specific fears and engender others. The monster assumes the form of abstract and real “enemy.” His is the face of fear. He has no face, no one face. It constantly changes, like other body parts. It is also a gash or a wound. A bruised and mouldy mess of rough scars and stitches (like de Niro’s monster) or the burned and blistered face of Hadi after being caught up in the third big bombing of the novel. It is the face of the faces of those rounded-up as suspects by the police, all ugly and deformed. Facial changeability and elusiveness is a danger for the senior astrologer: unable to picture the monster, his final encounter reveals only a “composite face” infused by projections from his own past (250). It is a face traversed by ethics, horror, and apprehension: every time fear and enmity is given face or name, fear slips away, a phantasm among phantasms.

Just as fear is difficult to check, so the face eludes apprehension. No one object, person, cause or name holds it at bay. Like the enemy, fear circulates in and amid monstrous forms, operating in tandem if not in complicity with more mundane (but no less devastating) modes of terror. The Brigadier reflects critically on reports from his astrologers that “ghostly figures” will be crossing the Imam’s bridge. He wonders whether it is djinns and spirits serving as harbingers of bombings or, given the religious calendar, simply pilgrims heading home to participate in festivals with their families. These “familiar of fear,” his train of thought goes on, are familiar in a more palpable, if still anxiously elusive, oscillation

between reality and fantasy: “if he had recruited the djinn, the ghosts, the spirits, the astrologers, and the fortune-tellers against multiple enemies, he couldn’t be sure his enemies wouldn’t mobilize them against him in the same way” (108). All security incidents come down to the same “one thing” – “fear” (117). It dominates the entire situation: “every day we’re dying from the same fear of dying”, locked in “a death machine” composed of fearful projections on and reactions to others and thereby trapped in a “cycle of killing” (118). In the terms of a novel in which monstrosity articulates fantastic figures of fiction with horrific realities, these observations serve as good an explanation as any other. But it presents a cycle that is almost impossible to escape, a mode already manifested in the repetitive and reversible pattern of Whatsitsname which renders differences between victims and perpetrators indistinct and indistinguishable: victimhood becomes endemic and responsibility diffused. Rumours suggest US forces are behind the making of the monster. Other rumours claim that the Brigadier’s department is not concerned with predicting and policing violence but is really a covert assassination squad working in US interests to “create an equilibrium of violence on the streets” (259; 170). The horror of such a military-political ecology of fear is the impossibility of escape, the unavailability of any alternative or external position: every action seems to serve same spectral and anonymous imperial master, the same perma-violence, all inextricably bound to infinite monstrosity.

Instabilities and insecurities stop, it seems, with the identification and apprehension of the monster: “Criminal X” is discovered and arrested, his scarred, barely human face plastered across TV screens. The announcement is accompanied by much relief and celebration in the streets of Baghdad. The cycle of killing seems to be broken with the reduction of a spectral terrorising monster to a mere criminal, everyday violence finding its outlet, infinite monstrosity at last contained with the capture and display of an object of general

execration. The dull and despicable criminal is named as Hadi. Severely wounded in the last suicide bombing, he now looks the part, his face disfigured by scars and burns. Despite the celebrations of his capture there remains a significant disjunction between the person and the monster: the gap between local-global monster of mythic violence and a lowly citizen seems too great to contain all violence surrounding a figure of such fear, terror and justice.

While the case of Whatsitsname is closed through the apprehension of Hadi as “Criminal X,” the story is not: the narrative shifts to another frame which, in adding a further layer of textual distance, opens up another “gray area” in imbrications of reality, fantasy, myth and fear. Having been interrogated, censored, duped and made redundant, the journalist, Mahmoud, who has pursued and published the account of “Frankenstein in Baghdad” is forced to leave the city, selling his things in the process. The sale includes computer, files and the digital recorder containing the monster’s tale. The buyer is another writer, a kindly if sceptical journalist identified only as “the author.” After enduring similar travails to Mahmoud (interrogation; censorship), he, readers must assume, assembles and publishes *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. The extra narrative frame resolves little and adds nothing to the horror or comedy of the story but, like the opening frame, suggests a broader network of administration, intelligence agencies and global forces that continue their shadowy operations. Removing the narrative from the immediacy of monstrous and fantastically realised violence, however, the textual framing also sustains a difference of perspective (critical, quite likely, humanitarian, perhaps) that briefly checks circuits of fantasy and fear and stands apart from any sudden rush to reaction, polarisation or violence.

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