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ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

”المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني“

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Feminism in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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Abstract

With the long centuries of patriarchal-based societies, women all around the world slowly started to realize of how much of an inactive and limited role they have in their social communities. The oppression women faced was also a crucial factor that called for an outcall of action. The thoughts of rebellion and objection had never surfaced before and the declaration of new movements started under the title of ‘feminism.’ Feminism is a set of active movements and ideologies that seeks to highlight the means of gender inequality. It also strives to take political and social action to change such an imbalanced reality. Concerning the literary field, reading a book written by a female author was never considered to be a work of art and that is why some female authors were forced into finding themselves a pen name that was more of a male’s name to get their works read and appreciated. Even female characters were given passive roles in the literary pieces barely giving any attention of what they suffer or experience. By the end of the eighteenth century and with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s book *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) a new wave erupted calling for women’s rights and equality. This research shall then discuss this feminist movement and the theory that endorses it, and how such feminist movements have affected the roles of female characters in the novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad*.



جامعة دهوك
كلية التربية الاساس



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الجامعة العراقية
مركز البحوث والدراسات

1. Introduction: Feminist Theory

Women's rights and their overall identity have been suppressed over the centuries with the creation of patriarchal societies. These overpowering social structures have been crucial to the formation of new movements based on what is known today as 'feminism'. Such movements started to call for equality and women's rights. They also championed female authors and that they are the only righteous people that can show off what women actually experience and feel. This was a direct announcement of the unreliability of how male authors choose to portray their female characters in their works (Culler 140). With the development of feminist movements over time, Modern Feminist Theory may be marked with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* in 1792. She heavily criticizes the inequality between men and women. Women should be open to practice similar social, legal and intellectual rights just as men do. Furthermore, John Stuart Mill, and with the support of his wife Harriet Taylor, continued the series of standing up for women's rights until Mill successfully introduced a bill in Parliament calling for women's rights in 1866. He also published *The Subjection of Women* (1869) where he called for equal rights for women in the social sphere, especially what has to do with marriage. With such a call, he demanded that the idea of the woman being the exact opposite of men should go extinct. By the end of the nineteenth century feminist movements extended and more demands were made calling for women's rights and empowerment (Castle 94). The first matter these movements called was women's right to vote. A literary movement



جامعة دهوك
كلية التربية الاساس



ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

”المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني“

(المجلد الثاني) 17-16 كانون الاول 2020



الجامعة العراقية
مركز البحوث والدراسات

also found light during this era, as female authors came forward, like Virginia Woolf, Hilda Doolittle, and Djuna Barnes. They dramatized earlier feminist ideas of Wollstonecraft and Mill in their works to highlight the power and importance of women. In Woolf’s *Room of One’s Own* (1929), she criticizes the portrayal of women by male authors. If there is a female identity that needs to be described, then it is a female author who should write that out in the literary piece. She also points out that the role of women is more than just being a traditional housewife. Nearing the 1960s, another feminist movement came into light. It was concerned with civil rights, social and economic rights to become equal with men. Of the many texts that were written, the most influential was perhaps Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949). This text challenged the idea that women are distinct from men because she was born different biological features and mannerisms. A woman could be as good as a man if she wishes to be. Kate Millet took a focus on the sources of power that were patriarchal in nature, being the center of women’s oppression (Castle 95). So all of these ideas contain a stand against inequality and the domination of patriarchal forces in the social fields as well as all the other fields where humans are included.

2. *Frankenstein in Baghdad: An Overview*

One of the most recent and eye catching Iraqi novels, is the surreal fiction *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) by Iraqi writer and film producer Ahmed Saadawi. The novel launches in post-war Iraq where disaster and chaos meet the citizens of Iraq. Its major character Hadi the junk dealer is set to collect not only pieces of furniture and old units but also human parts that were



جامعة دهوك
كلية التربية الاساس



ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

”المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني“

(المجلد الثاني) 17-16 كانون الاول 2020



الجامعة العراقية
مركز البحوث والدراسات

left behind after the horrific car explosions. Hadi eventually puzzles these parts together and manages to sew them into a complete human being. After his creation was completed and to Hadi's greatest surprise the full-fledged human started strolling through Baghdad's street to avenge the innocent people of which he was constructed of. Throughout the process of taking revenge, the body with no name loses his parts by time and seeks help from others to replace the disintegrated parts (Perry). Hadi created the monster as he believed that even if a person is reduced into smaller parts he still deserves a burial like every other. At some point however, the Whatitsname body parts starts to fall off and starts even killing innocent people to keep up his own body set up. The murders he commits take a twist in his personality as he slowly turns into a serial killer. His body becomes then the "first true Iraqi citizen," as he is a collection of parts of human beings from different sects and religions. He is also a result of the innocent and the terrorists and criminals, having therefore a mixed identity. This creation becomes more violent as the story develops further. This mixture includes "the idea of a multitude of parties, combined in one messy unstable body whose violence only gets more violence, is a functional metaphor for the war itself" (Shaw).

3. Female Characters in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

3.1 Elishva: The Assyrian Christian Widow

The novel's major feminine protagonist is Elishva, an elderly woman who has lived all her life in Al-Bataween neighborhood in Baghdad. She is seen to be holding on to her house and her



جامعة دهوك
كلية التربية الاساس



ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

”المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني“

(المجلد الثاني) 17-16 كانون الاول 2020



الجامعة العراقية
مركز البحوث والدراسات

country by refusing to let go of her house and neighborhood. She shows a strong sense of belonging and believes that immigrating to another place is a decision that should not even be considered. Although her daughters Matilda and Hilda have immigrated to Australia for safety concerns, Elishva remains firm and strong by refusing to join her daughters as much as her strength allows (Haliloglu).

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. The 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 (Saadawi 125).

She also manages to kick off those who had the desire to manipulate her just because she is a lonesome old woman like Hadi the junkdealer. He collects ancient and secondhand objects and hopes Elishva dies or leaves her house and sells all of her goods to him so he can finally sell them for a great price, but Elishva is not very pleased with this man and brushes him off every time he tries to get near preventing him to even have a glimpse inside her house. The fact that she is being presented by a male author, the author does not hesitate to show how intelligent and powerful a woman may be at her own will, regardless of all the pressure she might face.

ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني
"المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني"
(17-16 كانون الاول 2020 (المجلد الثاني)

Of these antiques, some of which dated back to the 1940s, Hadi had asked Elishva, "Why don't you sell them, save yourself the trouble of dusting?" his eyes popping out of his head at the sight of them all. But the old woman just walked him to the front door and sent him out into the street, closing the door behind him (29).

Another character named Faraj the Realtor also tries to take advantage of Elishva by trying to persuade her to sell her house. It is a traditional house where Faraj could highly benefit from, especially because war had just broke out. In such conditions, people usually sell their properties for a rather cheap price to escape and survive such a toxic environment. He even makes his attempts to get her live with the neighbors or join her daughters who left for a different country. The secret aim was just get his hands on her property.

Over the past few years Faraj had tried repeatedly to persuade Elishva to sell her old house, but Elishva just flatly refused, without explanation. Faraj couldn't understand why an old woman like her would want to live alone in a seven-room house with only a cat. Why, he wondered, didn't she sell it and move to a smaller house with more air and light, and use the extra money to live the rest of her life in comfort? (Saadawi 28)

She might appear helpless due to her age, but again stands firm against characters who think they are superior just because they of their gender. With her intelligence and the power of her Christian beliefs she believes she can overcome any obstacle and even has an intuition of seeing



جامعة دهوك
كلية التربية الاساس



ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

”المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني“

(المجلد الثاني) 17-16 كانون الاول 2020



الجامعة العراقية
مركز البحوث والدراسات

her lost son again. By the end of the novel, however she finally leaves her home and sells her house and antics to Hadi and Faraj but on her own will nevertheless. She even comes out victorious when these two men thought they had won their ultimate price. It is not long after they get their greedy hands on Elishva’s possessions that a massive explosion takes place and destroys the entire block and its houses. While Faraj and Hadi lose their dreams within seconds, Elishva manages to escape in the perfect time with the help of her grandson, whose name is Daniel as well. It is her pureness and power that determined her safety and well-being in the end.

3.2 Umm Salim: Elishva’s Neighbor

Umm Salim is Elishva’s long time neighbor. She believes Elishva to be insane. It would be impossible for Elishva’s son to return and all that she is waiting for is hard to be even real. She and the other women in the neighborhood have different opinions of her. At times they do not believe she is completely insane, but that there is also something supernatural about her. It is almost as if she is a protective armor that shields the block from any danger. Nothing dangerous happens and that is why many believe that she is the blessing that can deflect the evilness and danger away (Forbes). Regardless of being insane or in possession of supernatural powers or not, there is no denial that such ideas are created through capturing Elishva’s strength and willpower. Her patience of awaiting her son and her stubborn attitude of not wanting to leave her homeland and her possessions behind are markers of her inner feminist core. She has successfully deflected and overpowered men’s will and controlling attitude. Umm Salim’s character is a somewhat



جامعة دهوك
كلية التربية الاساس



ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

”المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني“

(المجلد الثاني) 17-16 كانون الاول 2020



الجامعة العراقية
مركز البحوث والدراسات

traditional one as she limits herself to being a traditional housewife who raises her children and interests herself on the latest gossip:

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 (Saadawi 16).

Her role in the novel is then rather secondary as if she has accepted the inequalities of this patriarchal society and their belief that women are born to be secondary. She makes no effort to be at least equal to men in a way or another. Therefore she cannot be considered as a feminist.

3.3 Zeina: A Prostitute

Another female character that appears in the novel is ‘Zeina’. She is a prostitute and Saadawi does not show any other detail about her personal life or whatsoever. She is nothing more than what he portrays her to be. She has taken this job boldly and with a cold heart as it is the only way for her to survive the devastating aftermaths of the American invasion on Iraq. In the novel she is with Mahmoud al-Sawadi who takes advantage of her and uses her to satisfy his sexual desires. He imagines her as being a totally different woman he is in love with and therefore does not really care for who Zeina really is. Zeina does not seem to be bothered at the beginning as she herself is not interested in who he is either. She laughs him off when he calls her ‘Nawal al-Wazir.’ She laughs and says that “the name Nawal was old-fashioned, older than the traditional greeting Assalam aleekum” (Saadawi 424). This shows how she has given in to



جامعة دهوك
كلية التربية الاساس



ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

”المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني“

(المجلد الثاني) 17-16 كانون الاول 2020



الجامعة العراقية
مركز البحوث والدراسات

men's desires to take advantage and therefore is considered to be far away from what feminism stands for. Attempts of taking advantage of women and considering them as the weakest part of society should be faced with a powerful answer of unacceptance and refusal to allow such things to happen.

3.4 Nawal al-Wazir: The Film Director

She is a film director who has many meetings at Ali Baher al-Saidi personal office; the owner and manager of a national magazine. She seemingly appears to be interested in creating and directing in cooperation with him, but not surprisingly it develops into a secret affair. Later Mahmoud al-Sawadi also shows off his interest in her and it is not too long where his mindset can be read of what he thinks of her. He is very interested in her, and views her in a rather inappropriate way. He knows nothing of her and that is what most traditional men think of women. Nothing more than a tool, that can be taken benefit of. Despite the multiple affairs and the pleasing of men, Nawal outsmarts them eventually having taking advantage of their stupidity. Despite her showing strength, she has a dark soul where no feminism cannot be comprehended.

4. Conclusion

Feminism is an important theory to be studied, especially in the field of literature as such theories and experiments may lead out to movements in reality. It is important for women to use their voices and make them heard to achieve the same rights men have. Being different according to biological standards or having no supportive community does not mean that the suppression of



جامعة دهوك
كلية التربية الاساس



ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

”المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني“

(المجلد الثاني) 17-16 كانون الاول 2020



الجامعة العراقية
مركز البحوث والدراسات

women rights and the continuation of living in an unhealthy patriarchal society is an excuse. All people should be treated equally and no advantage should be taken over women. Similarly, in literature it is only accurate that a female author can successfully express women's experiences. After all no one understands women more than a woman herself. In Middle-Eastern literature, patriarchal societies are strongly evident. The novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* embodies the idea of such a society where no root of feminism seems to exist, However a female figure, Elishva, shows off her feminine powers to resist oppression and any possible disadvantages. She should be taken as a role model where a necessary feminist movement must start to put an end to such unequal societies especially in the Middle East. Other female characters seem to be of little importance and that is unfortunately how many viewed the Iraqi society after 2003. Many women like Umm Salim knew nothing better than their traditional roles of being housewives. Characters like Zeina also show no power other than that she wants to survive her days with being a prostitute and therefore no importance to her was added. Nawal al-Wazir on the other hand appears to be somewhat more powerful than Zeina, but is also in constant speculations of having affairs with different men. The portrayal of women in such a limited way shows off that the author of this novel is not quite a feminist. Iraqi women have done remarkable things and led many fights, but no mentioning of that is done in the novel. Women are not limited to their traditional roles, but can enter the world of business and can be powerful just like man if they desire. Both genders should have a life of justice that offers them with all the necessary and equal human rights.



جامعة دهوك
كلية التربية الاساس



ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

”المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني“

(17-16 كانون الاول 2020 (المجلد الثاني)



الجامعة العراقية
مركز البحوث والدراسات



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جامعة دهوك
كلية التربية الاساس



ابحاث المؤتمر العلمي الدولي الرابع المشترك الثاني

”المستجدات الحديثة في التعليم العالي في ظل التعليم الالكتروني“

(المجلد الثاني) 17-16 كانون الاول 2020



الجامعة العراقية
مركز البحوث والدراسات

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