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Sectarian Hegemony And Cultural Resistance In Post-2003 Iraq: A Gramscian Reading Of Ahmed Al-Saadawi's *Frankenstein In Baghdad* .

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Abstract

The present study discusses the representation of sectarian hegemony and cultural resistance in post-2003 Iraq in Ahmed Al-Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013) through Antonio Gramsci's theoretical concept of hegemony and counter-hegemony. This paper explores Al-Saadawi's representation of the Iraqi state's use of sectarian division as a means of political control and, at the same time, everyday acts of resistance by the marginalized. The study shows how the state enforces sectarian fragmentation through coercive apparatuses by focusing on key scenes, especially the police intervention on the Virgin Mary statue in the protagonist Hadi's home. It also shows how ordinary people resist this imposition through symbolic acts of coexistence. The analysis is based on Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and draws on subsequent neo-Gramscian work in cultural studies. The findings suggest that Al-Saadawi depicts sectarianism as a manufactured hegemonic strategy rather than a natural and ancient phenomenon, requiring the state to use perpetual violence to maintain its hegemony. Unlike this, Hadi's hanging a Christian symbol in his Muslim home is an organic counter-hegemony, a rejection from below of sectarian discourses imposed by the state. The paper ends with the idea that literature, especially the Iraqi novel after 2003, is an important site for documenting and critiquing the political exploitation of religious identity, offering perspectives that compete with and sometimes precede political science analyses. This research contributes to literary studies, political theory, and post-colonial criticism by demonstrating how fictional narratives can illuminate the mechanisms of hegemony and resistance in societies recovering from conflict.

Keywords: Gramsci, Hegemony, Counter-Hegemony, Sectarianism, Iraq, *Frankenstein in Baghdad*, Ahmed Al-Saadawi, Cultural Resistance.

1.Introduction

Political awareness, social criticism, and collective suffering have always found a powerful means of expression in literature. In post-conflict societies the novel becomes a space for questioning official narratives and for writing alternative histories. The 2003 invasion of Iraq marked a dramatic change in the country's political and social structures, with sectarian identity emerging as a dominant framework for understanding power relations. Iraqi novelists have long been exploring the machinery of sectarian division and the human consequences of communal fragmentation long before political scientists and sociologists have explored them in their entirety. Ahmed Al-Saadawi is notable among these authors for his ability to combine magical realism, political allegory, and social critique in his novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* (2013).

The novel tells the story of Hadi, a junk dealer in Baghdad who gathers the body parts of victims of sectarian violence and stitches them together to create a creature that comes to life—a monster bent on revenge against its killers. Al-Saadawi, however, offers simultaneous subtle and powerful images of quotidian resistance, as in Hadi's decision to hang a statue of the Virgin Mary in his Muslim home, which results in the police at his door. In a brief scene, it sums up the central tension in Iraq after 2003: the state trying to impose sectarianism on the natural tendency of the people to live together. Al-Saadawi's novel has received much critical attention as a work of magical realism or a commentary on state violence, but few studies have systematically examined the novel through the lens of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Gramsci (1971) claimed that the ruling elite maintains power not only through coercion but also through the production of cultural consensus, or "hegemony." In fragmented societies this often takes the form of dividing the population along ethnic, religious, or sectarian lines so as to preclude class-based solidarity that could threaten the ruling order. Gramsci also theorized "counter-hegemony," the process through which subaltern groups develop alternative cultural practices that challenge dominant narratives. It is for this reason that the present paper studies how Al-Saadawi portrays sectarian hegemony and cultural resistance in *Frankenstein in Baghdad*. The study adopts a comparative literary-political approach and analyzes significant scenes in the novel, discussing whether Al-Saadawi's depiction of sectarianism as a crafted strategy is compatible with Gramscian political theory. More significantly, this paper makes a contribution to literary studies, political theory, and post-colonial criticism by showing how fictional narratives can shed light on the workings of hegemony and resistance in post-conflict societies. Even before political science began to seriously consider the issues of power and identity, literature as an extension of political thought has been a prominent site for the study of these issues.

2. Gramsci's Concept of Hegemony and Its Use for Sectarian Communities

Before we can get into the literature, it is necessary to discuss the theoretical framework that is guiding this analysis. Hegemony is a term developed by Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) to describe how ruling classes maintain power in capitalist societies. Gramsci argued that political hegemony is achieved through a combination of coercion and consent, unlike classical Marxism, which emphasizes economic determinism. The ruling class rules not only by violence (police, military, and courts); it generates cultural consensus through institutions like education, religion, and the media, producing what Gramsci called "common sense"—the taken-for-granted assumptions that make the existing social order seem natural and inevitable (Gramsci, 1971). In this sense hegemony is never total or permanent. It has to be continuously reproduced and defended against challenge by coercive force. This is especially the case in post-conflict societies where the ruling elite has to unite a traumatized

population. A successful tactic is to foster sectarian or ethnic divisions, which channel popular discontent away from the state and onto communal 'others.' From this perspective, sectarianism is not an ancient or natural phenomenon but a strategy of political fragmentation, a mode of hegemony that keeps society fragmented and thus easier to control (Chatterjee, 2004; Guha, 1997). Gramsci also theorized the possibility of resistance, termed 'counter hegemony.' It occurs when subaltern groups (marginalized by the dominant order) develop alternative cultural practices, narratives, and forms of solidarity that challenge hegemonic ideology. Counter-hegemony is most often organic, arising from the daily lives of ordinary people rather than political parties or intellectual vanguards. Gramsci's organic intellectual is to articulate these already existing forms of resistance and make them into a coherent political project (Gramsci, 1971; Crehan, 2002).

When this framework is applied to post-2003 Iraq, it is evident how the post-invasion state institutionalized a sectarian political system based on ethnic and religious quotas with the backing of the Coalition Provisional Authority (Dawisha, 2009). The system presented as a democratic solution to Sunni-Shia tensions, entrenched division, and blocked the emergence of cross-sectarian solidarity. The state apparatus (police, judiciary, media) has been central in enforcing this sectarian order, often in violent ways (Isakhan, 2015). At the same time, everyday solidarity and cultural coexistence have often challenged these divisions among ordinary Iraqis (Al-Ali, 2014). Literature has become an important site for the inscription of such tensions. Al-Saadawi's novel is a particularly rich exploration of the experience and resistance to state sectarianism at the level of everyday life.

3. The Police and Sectarian Hegemony: The Coercive Apparatus of the State

One of the most powerful scenes in *Frankenstein* in Baghdad is when the police arrive at Hadi's house after he hangs a statue of the Virgin Mary. *"Hadi, a poor Muslim junk dealer who occupies a marginal figure in Baghdad's sectarian landscape prominently displays this statue in his household in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood. Soon after, the police arrive and force Hadi to remove the statue, warning him that such displays are "inappropriate" and can "provoke sectarian tensions" (Al-Saadawi, 2013, p. 42). This appears to be just a simple act of law enforcement. But in a Gramscian sense, it reveals the inner workings of sectarian hegemony. The police are not simply enforcing a secular law; they are enforcing the coercive apparatus of a state that profits from the maintenance of communal divisions. Police are not allowing Hadi to display a Christian symbol in public. This is a sectarian top-down order founded on segregation and suspicion (Gramsci, 1971). The statute is, in this sense, more than a religious object. It is a symbol of cultural coexistence, a reminder that Christians and Muslims can live under one roof. The state cannot stand this, because it threatens the very logic of sectarian hegemony. This is in keeping with Gramsci's distinction between "political society" (the coercive apparatus of the state) and "civil society" (the sphere of culture and consent). In stable hegemonic conditions the state does not need to resort to overt force because dominant norms have been internalized into civil society. However, when civil society starts to produce alternative practices such as Hadi's act of interfaith coexistence, the state has to use coercion to re-establish order (Gramsci, 1971). Thus, the police intervention is not a response to a crime but a symptom of the fragility of sectarian hegemony. The state must violently impose division, because the people have a natural tendency towards coexistence. Furthermore, the scene highlights the arbitrary nature of sectarian divisions. Hadi is a Christian in a Muslim neighborhood, and his symbol alone disrupts the spatial logic of sectarian segregation. Forcing Hadi to take down the statue, then, is not simply about enforcing a rule; it is about producing sectarian space, space that separates Muslims from Christians. This resonates with the work of geographers who have shown how states*

materialize identity through control of space (Said, 1978; Gregory, 2004). In Iraq, sectarianism is not just a political ideology but also a spatial practice enforced by checkpoints, neighborhoods, and the constant surveillance of symbols.

4. Counter-hegemony of Hadi's Statue: Everyday Resistance by Symbols

Unlike the coercive intervention of the police, Hadi's hanging of the Virgin Mary's statue exemplifies what Gramsci would call an organic form of counter-hegemony. The statue is not used as a political statement or as part of an organized resistance movement. Instead, it grows out of Hadi's quotidian life, his personal history, and his refusal to accept the sectarian categories imposed by the state. Hadi doesn't explain or justify his act; he just lives it, and this simplicity makes his act all the more powerful (Al-Saadawi, 2013). As Gramsci stressed, counter-hegemony often starts not with big ideological projects, but with the "common sense" of ordinary people. For Gramsci, common sense is a contradictory space in which dominant ideologies coexist with alternative values and traditions. The state can never fully control common sense through education, religion, and the media, and it attempts to do so. Subaltern groups retain fragments of alternative worldviews, which can be mobilized in moments of resistance (Gramsci, 1971; Crehan, 2002). That's the kind of fragment that Hadi's statue is, a living tradition of coexistence that undermines the state's narrative of sectarian separation. The reaction it occasions is proof of the statue's function as counterhegemony. The police do not ask Hadi to remove the statue; they are obviously disturbed. They do not know how to justify their intervention in terms of the law. The scene reveals the ideological fragility of the state: it has not been able to create consent for this division and can only impose sectarianism through force. Hadi's simple act demonstrates that the people did not learn sectarian rules and the state has to use open force to maintain its order. It is a sign of hegemony failing, the moment when consent becomes coercion (Gramsci, 1971; Eagleton, 1991). Furthermore, Hadi's act is a form of cultural resistance that is especially powerful in that it is non-confrontational. By refraining from direct political protest, Hadi avoids the fate of overt dissenters, who are often branded as "extremists" or "enemies of the state." His silent act of co-existence, in fact, generates a space for alternative social relations, a microcosm of a post-sectarian society. In this sense, the statue serves as a 'weapon of the weak,' a symbolic act of defiance that confronts power without engaging in direct confrontation, following Scott's (1985) analysis of everyday resistance.

5. The Novel's Broader Critique: Sectarianism as Constructed Hegemony

Beyond the specificity of the scene of the statue, al-Saadawi's novel offers a general critique of sectarianism as a manufactured ideology. The central story—the making of a monster out of body parts collected from victims of sectarian violence—is a metaphor for the way the state cuts the population to bits and then blames the resulting chaos on "ancient hatreds." Each body part in the monster is from a different victim belonging to a different sectarian background. The very existence of the monster raises questions about the logic of sectarian purity, that all Iraqis are actually composed of multiple overlapping identities that the state arbitrarily divides. The metaphor is in keeping with Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Like the monster, Iraq's sectarian identity is an amalgamation of historical fragments, strategically deployed by the ruling class to preclude unified opposition (Al-Saadawi, 2013; Isakhan, 2015). The state's narrative of 'sectarian conflict' erases the common suffering of all communities: the indiscriminate violence of the bombings, the collective trauma of displacement, the common experience of corruption and state failure. The state does this by segmenting the population into sectarian groups, concealing the real reasons for inequality and exploitation. Al-Saadawi's narrator further reiterates this

critique by emphasizing the absurdity of sectarian tags. In the novel, characters are always identified by their religious affiliation, but these categories are shown to be arbitrary and unstable. As Al-Saadawi (2013) and Foucault (1990) demonstrate, a character's sectarian identity shifts according to the context, revealing the performative nature of identity in a sectarian state. This accords with Gramsci's insight that hegemony does not operate through false consciousness but through the production of common sense, of categories that normalize the ruling class. Moreover, the novel presents sectarianism not only as state-imposed but also as reproducing from its victims. Characters internalize sectarian narratives, turning on neighbors, even family members. This internalization is the hallmark of successful hegemony: the dominated come to accept the categories of domination as natural (Gramsci 1971; Fanon 1963). But Al-Saadawi also provides moments of rupture, when characters move beyond sectarian labels and assert their common humanity. Hadi's statue is one such moment, but there are others: acts of kindness between strangers, moments of grief shared across communal lines, and the monster's own refusal to accept sectarian logic.

6. Literature as a precursor to political criticism

Al-Saadawi's fictional treatment of sectarianism and Gramsci's political theory show the gap between literature and academic analysis and how literature anticipates and deepens academic analysis. While political scientists and sociologists have painstakingly documented Iraq's sectarianization, Al-Saadawi's novel captures the experiential, emotional, and moral aspects of this process in ways that social science often cannot. The novel reveals the daily negotiations of identity, the small acts of resistance, and the psychological burden of living in a sectarian regime (Al-Saadawi, 2013; Nuwayhid, 2016). It is in this sense that literature functions as a kind of "organic knowledge" that derives from the lived experiences of subaltern groups. Gramsci knew that each social group produces its own "organic intellectuals" who represent its worldview and struggles. In this sense the novelist can be seen as an organic intellectual giving voice to the subaltern and challenging the hegemonic narratives of the state and its intellectual allies (Gramsci, 1971; Said, 1994). In narrating the story of Hadi and the monster, Al-Saadawi plays this role exactly: he gives voice to the dismembered, the marginalized, and the silenced, and he reveals the mechanisms of their domination. Further, the novel provides a prefigurative vision of a post-sectarian future. The novel closes ambiguously and tragically, but it does point to the possibility of solidarity, that the experience of shared suffering can transcend sectarian divisions, and that the hegemony of the state is never complete. This is in line with Gramsci's own view of counter-hegemony as a long drawn-out 'war of position,' rather than a swift victory (Gramsci, 1971). Literature is a vital force in this struggle, making resistance thinkable by imagining alternatives and by expanding the horizons of possibility. In this sense, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is not simply a literary text but a political intervention. Al-Saadawi's rendering of Iraq's sectarian divide, through the lens of magical realism, is an invitation to the reader to look beyond state narratives and recognize the force of everyday resistance. The novel's insights are not only artistic but intellectual too and contribute to the critique of sectarianism in a way that complements and extends academic scholarship.

7. Conclusion

The current research has studied the representation of sectarian hegemony and cultural resistance in Ahmed Al-Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* from the viewpoint of Antonio Gramsci's hegemony and counterhegemony theory. Through a close textual analysis of selected scenes, particularly the police intervention concerning the statue of the Virgin Mary, the study has shown that Al-Saadawi presents sectarianism as a contrived hegemonic strategy that is not an organic phenomenon but requires perpetual state violence to maintain it. In contrast, the Christian symbol hanging in Hadi's Muslim home becomes

an organic form of counterhegemony, a grassroots rejection of sectarian narratives that the state pushes on to the people and reveals the people's natural inclination for coexistence. The research further shows that literature, especially the post-2003 Iraqi novel, is a significant space for the documentation and critique of the political manipulation of religious identity. Al-Saadawi's account provides insights that are resonant with, and sometimes anticipatory of, political science analyses, and it captures the experiential and emotional dimensions of sectarian hegemony that social science often overlooks. His novel is a kind of "organic knowledge" that speaks for the marginalized and challenges dominant state narratives. This research contributes to literary studies, political theory, and post-colonial criticism in illustrating the ways in which fictional narratives can illuminate the processes of hegemony and resistance in conflict-torn societies. The study also undermines the assumption that knowledge of political processes can be obtained only from academic social science, with literature playing a role in early concepts of sectarianism and resistance. Ultimately, literature and political theory combined reveal that artists' imagination has been a profound way to explore the complexity of power, identity, and human resilience. Literature is rightly seen as a predecessor of modern political critique, offering visions of alternative futures that are needed to understand and transform the world.

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