

# Alienation vs. Societal Suppression: Exploring Gothic Romance Elements in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*

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**Abstract**—Gothic romance is a genre of literature that adds a sense of unpredictability and highlights profound internal disruptions. This paper examines the use of Gothic elements in Ahmed Saadawi's novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Furthermore, it analyzes key excerpts of the two novels to explain that both novels are Gothic romances in which the two authors, Saadawi and Hawthorne, examine themes such as guilt, alienation, and social repression. The paper also argues that both novelists challenge the social norms and traditions to expose the darker dimensions of human beings. Hawthorne employs the characters of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale to integrate pervasive Gothic elements within the narrative as a means to explore themes of societal alienation and hypocrisy. On the other hand, Saadawi utilizes the characters of Hadi and Whatsitsname to create an ominous atmosphere, reflecting themes of existential dread and moral ambiguity as the protagonist grapples with the consequences of his grotesque creation.

**Index Terms**—Frankenstein, Gothic romance, Hadi, Hester, Whatsitsname

## I. INTRODUCTION

Gothic romance stands out from other genres due to several unique elements. It emerged during the Romantic Period as a reaction to Enlightenment ideals, incorporating supernatural, mysterious, and gloomy settings with elements like witches, ghosts, and curses (Khan, 2023). The Gothic genre originated in the 18th century, with pioneers including Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and Matthew Lewis. Gothic literature thrived amid periods of social and political turmoil, reflecting the anxieties of its era. Gothic romance is distinguished by its focus on mystery, suspense, and the paranormal, as well as its exploration of the weird, grotesque, and sublime.

This genre combines popular romance with Gothic themes, diverging from traditional Gothic plots, such as those found in *Jane Eyre*, to explore working-class and social traditions by employing specific images of the suffering of people at that time (Üstün Kaya, 2022). Additionally, Gothic literature often delves into the unexplainable and uncontrollable, blending horror and romanticism with elements of mystery, suspense, and the uncanny (Stankovic, 2022). Furthermore, Gothic elements can be seen in various forms, such as in the representation of pandemics, where Gothic science fiction traits like madness, monstrosity, and apocalyptic visions are utilized to create a moral drama of good versus evil (Stankovic, 2022).

Since its emergence during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Gothic romance has been characterized by its emphasis on emotional intensity, psychological turmoil, and melodramatic plots. Moreover, during the twentieth century, Gothic romance evolved beyond the traditional Gothics of the 1960s and 1970s by focusing on specific issues that affect modern life (Hirst, 2020). Since no prior study has examined Western and Eastern works within this framework, this study investigates the use of Gothic elements in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. This study aims to fill the gap and address contemporary themes of social injustice, loneliness, sin,

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hypocrisy, and guilt by using Gothic tropes to evoke dread and anxiety in readers. Although both writers belong to different eras, the paper attempts to bridge their works through Gothic romance. This study also demonstrates how Gothic romance functions as a lens through which both authors explore humanity's darker dimensions of existence and question prevailing social norms through comparative analysis.

Before analyzing the primary texts, this study reviews key scholarship to contextualize its approach and avoid redundancy.

### *Questions of the Study*

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How did Hawthorne handle Gothic romance elements in his novel *The Scarlet Letter*?
2. How did Saadawi address cultural diversity in Iraq through Gothic romance?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Gothic serves as a lens for authors to expose and address social issues with a legitimacy unattainable through conventional means. Since its emergence, it has become a favorite topic for many writers. To contextualize this study, some important previous studies are reviewed to avoid redundancy and build upon existing findings. Firstly, in *Gothic Elements in Selected Fictional Works by Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Francis (1985) analyzed Hawthorne's use of Gothic tropes. He explained that Hawthorne used Gothicism and ambiguity as a narrative tool.

Similarly, Sabeeh and Kiaee (2019) examined the monster motif in Gothic fiction, concluding that the monster character symbolizes Iraq's existential absurdity and reflects the societal distortions caused by war. Galhem (2022) further analyzed the monster's vengefulness through a Freudian lens, arguing that it embodies the psychological trauma experienced by Iraqis in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion.

In *A Critical Exploration of Fear and Loathing in Selected Romantic Fiction*, Khan (2023) argued that Romantic writers harnessed Gothic fear and loathing to critique social injustices. In a comparable vein, Teggart (2019) investigated in his study "*Frankenstein in Baghdad: A Novel Way of Understanding the Iraq War and Its Aftermath*" and examined Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* as a Gothic allegory for war trauma. Teggart claimed that the use of gothic elements in this novel allowed Saadawi to depict "subjective justice, mutual complicity, and the cyclical nature of violence and gratuitous death" (Teggart, 2019, p. 27). However, in her study "Gothic Politics in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*," Alkhayat (2022) linked Gothic imagery directly to Iraq's wartime horrors. She argued that this intertwining of Gothic motifs and the realities of war-torn Iraq deliberately exposes the unfathomable horrors of post-invasion Baghdad (Alkhayat, 2022).

Finally, Soo-Ping (1986) analyzed Gothic elements in *The Scarlet Letter*, demonstrating how Hawthorne's ambiguity conveys moral and existential themes. He explained that Hawthorne used Gothic elements to deliver a moral lesson to society at large and also to define human existence from his philosophical perspectives. Soo-Ping claimed that "Hawthorne audaciously proclaims a moral standard that not only settles the issue of conflict and division but also defines his conception of the meaning and purpose of human existence" (Soo-Ping, 1986, p. 240).

While these studies explore Gothic fiction, none offer a comparative analysis of Saadawi and Hawthorne's works. Thus, this study examines how both authors employ Gothic elements to critique societal immorality. To place this inquiry, the following section provides an overview of the historical evolution of Gothic literature, thereby contextualizing its application within these contemporary and classic texts.

## III. GOTHIC ROMANCE: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Gothic romance was a dominant literary genre in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and flourished during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This literary form originated with Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). In this novel, Walpole incorporated elements of horror and the supernatural, establishing a template for future works by Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Gregory Lewis, and Charles R. Maturin, as well as Mary Shelley's classic, *Frankenstein* (Harris, 2017). Walpole's story features a diverse cast symbolising the complexities of human nature. From the tyrant Manfred to the noble Isabella and the tragic Matilda, the characters in *The Castle of Otranto* embody virtues and vices, creating moral and psychological depth. Furthermore, the work is steeped in symbolism: the giant helmet, Alfonso's image, and the bleeding statue symbolize both internal and external character conflicts. The use of setting in Gothic romance reflects the genre's emphasis on ambiance and mood. By setting the action in isolated or decaying environments, authors create a sense of estrangement and eeriness, intensifying the tension and mystery of the story. These locations generate a sense of foreboding and unease, setting the stage for ensuing drama and romance (Knopf, 2020).

Gothic romance peaked during the Romantic era (c. 1790–1820) when Romanticism stressed emotion, individualism, and the supernatural, providing fertile ground for the genre's growth. During this time, texts such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* were instrumental in defining the genre (Ilott, 2019). Gothic romance remained popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with authors such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* incorporating Gothic elements into their works (Mighall, 2003), and though Gothic themes extended into poetry and drama, the novel remained the primary medium for its expression.

Despite a decline in the late 19th century, Gothic romance's influence persists in modern literature, film, and popular culture (Mighall, 2003). Gothic romance frequently delves into themes of love, passion, and the occult set in eerie locales—castles, abbeys, and desolate landscapes. Damsels in distress, tyrannical villains, haunted or cursed places, and hereditary secrets are all staple tropes. These aspects generate a sense of suspense and excitement that captivates readers (Ilott, 2019). Though its peak passed, Gothic romance has seen revivals in the 20th and 21st centuries. Contemporary authors have continued to explore Gothic themes in several ways by blending romance, horror, and suspense for modern audiences (Riquelme, 2000). By placing female characters in danger, Gothic romance emphasizes women's vulnerable place in society while simultaneously exploring themes of agency and empowerment as heroines confront and overcome adversity.

Another key feature is the appearance of malevolent antagonists who threaten protagonists through deceit, manipulation, or cruelty. These adversaries frequently represent themes of corruption, obsession, and the supernatural. The use of supernatural elements in Gothic romance reflects humanity's long-standing fascination with the unknown and unexplainable. By blurring the lines between the natural and supernatural, Gothic romance authors create a sense of uncertainty and wonder, enhancing narrative complexity and reader engagement (Riquelme, 2000).

Lastly, despite its heyday throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19th centuries, Gothic romance has periodically resurged. Contemporary authors have used Gothic themes in new ways, blending romance, horror, and suspense to create compelling narratives for modern readers (Tibbets, 2011). Thus, Gothic romance remains a vital literary tradition, merging romance, mystery, and the supernatural to enduring effect. Nathaniel Hawthorne and Ahmed Saadawi employ Gothic elements to examine societal issues such as sin, guilt, crime, and corruption, offering critiques of these themes. The next section thoroughly analyzes the use of Gothic elements in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.

#### IV. UNVEILING THE GOTHIC UNDERCURRENTS IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *THE SCARLET LETTER*

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts, on July 4, 1804. Some of his ancestors played central roles in the Salem witch trials. He died on May 19, 1864, in Plymouth, New Hampshire, likely due to stomach cancer, which had weakened him for a prolonged period. His friend, former President Franklin Pierce, was with him when he passed away during a trip to the White Mountains (MacAndrew, 1979, p. 20). Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* is a cornerstone of American literature, renowned for its exploration of sin, redemption, and human nature within the rigid confines of 17th-century Puritan Boston. While widely recognized for its moral and philosophical themes, the novel also employs Gothic elements to construct a sombre, enigmatic atmosphere (Adams, 1958). Drawing on the heritage of European Gothic fiction, Hawthorne infuses the narrative with motifs of mystery, ambiguity, and psychological unrest, which, as Soo-Ping (1986) notes, "immerse readers in darkness, mystery, and psychological turmoil" (Soo-Ping, 1986, p. 222).

This section examines Hawthorne's strategic use of Gothic devices, such as bleak settings, symbolic imagery, and morally ambiguous characters, to enrich the narrative's emotional depth and thematic resonance. Hawthorne's Gothic vision does not simply serve aesthetic ends; rather, it articulates the moral ambiguities and dualities in human nature. As Adams (1958) observes, the novel is "full of images that assert the complexity of moral experience" (Adams, 1958, p. 120). Hawthorne's depiction of the Puritan worldview underscores a stark moral dualism, contrasting innocence and purity with evil and sin. This worldview is reflected in the novel's oppressive setting, described by Martin (1957) as "severe religious observance" that casts a perpetual gloom over the narrative (Martin, 1957, p. 22). The bleak architecture and dark, decaying wooden buildings of Puritan Boston mirror the rigidity and joylessness of its moral code. The Gothic setting of the dark alleys and isolated areas serves as a backdrop for "clandestine acts," intensifying the novel's sense of repression and secrets (MacAndrew, 1979, p. 22).

Moreover, the novel's opening scene featuring Hester Prynne's public shaming on the scaffold encapsulates the Gothic tone. The prison and scaffold symbolize institutional judgment and societal condemnation. According to Kaftan (1969), these symbols exacerbate the town's authoritarian culture and put a pall over it (Kaftan, 1969, p. 66). In contrast, the forest, another Gothic space, functions as a liminal realm of moral ambiguity and personal freedom, far removed from the town's rigid codes. It becomes the ideal setting for Hester and Dimmesdale's secret meetings, embodying both danger and liberation. The scene describing the forest's darkness, combined with a vision of lightness and delicacy, evokes classic Gothic imagery:

In the dark shadow of the grove, on the margin of the brook, he beheld something glimmering brightly, and, bending his face towards the stream, he saw a little figure, with a white bosom, that seemed to image forth the shapes of human maidenhood, with wonderful lightness and delicacy. (Hawthorne, 1850, p. 47)

Even the scarlet letter "A" becomes a Gothic emblem, symbolizing both shame and defiance. Kaftan (1969) asserts that "it represents the cruelty and hypocrisy of the Puritan society where Hester lived" (Kaftan, 1969, p. 67). Its intricate design, described below, underscores its paradoxical nature:

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It was...with so much fertility and gorgeous luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration to the apparel which she wore, and which was of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age. (Hawthorne, 1850, p. 37)

This juxtaposition of punitive intent and aesthetic elegance highlights the hypocrisy of a society that punishes immorality while indulging in spectacle. As MacAndrew (1979) observes, the letter simultaneously embodies Hester's

ostracism and her strength. It becomes a symbol of her complex identity, both condemned and dignified (MacAndrew, 1979). Hester's refusal to flee Boston further demonstrates her agency and resilience. Instead, she chooses self-imposed exile in a secluded cottage at the town's edge. The location becomes a Gothic space of isolation, as described by Hawthorne:

On the outskirts of the town...there was a small thatched cottage...a mystic shadow of suspicion immediately attached itself to the spot...discerning the scarlet letter on her breast, [the children] would scamper off, with a strange, contagious fear. (Hawthorne, 1850, p. 65)

This scene encapsulates Hester's transformation of the Gothic setting into a space of survival and reflection. Despite societal cruelty, she carves out a space for moral redefinition and personal growth. As Davidson (1949) notes, this setting represents both exile and empowerment. Hawthorne's depiction of Hester's psychological torment is equally Gothic. The scarlet letter becomes a visible marker of sin, magnified in the public imagination. The author writes:

Thus, the young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast...at her, the mother of a babe that would hereafter be a woman...at her, who had once been innocent...as the figure, the body, the reality of sin. And over her grave, the infamy that she must carry thither would be her only monument. (Hawthorne, 1850, p. 67)

This passage illustrates the emotional and existential burden placed upon Hester, reducing her to a societal construct of shame. Charney (1961) observes that the scarlet letter's glow at night, rumored to burn with "infernal fire," deepens the Gothic aura of the text. The author said, "They averred that the symbol was not mere scarlet cloth [...] but was red-hot with infernal fire and could be seen glowing all alight whenever Hester Prynne walked abroad in the night-time" (Hawthorne, 1850, p. 67).

In sum, Hawthorne's deployment of Gothic elements—the gloomy setting, supernatural overtones, and intense psychological conflicts—amplifies the novel's exploration of sin, identity, and social repression. Through these devices, he constructs a powerful critique of Puritanical rigidity and exposes the complexities of moral judgment. As Inbaraj and Jinnah (2022) affirm, Hawthorne's Gothic enriches the narrative, compelling readers to confront the inner lives of his tormented characters. The next section will examine how Gothic elements are employed in Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad* to probe themes of violence, justice, and national trauma.

#### V. GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN *FRANKENSTEIN IN BAGHDAD* AS A VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL COMMENTARY

Ahmed Saadawi is an Iraqi writer who chronicles the grim realities of wartime Iraq. Born in Baghdad in 1973, Saadawi focuses on the aftermath of war in a nation plagued by continual conflict. His novel *Frankenstein in Baghdad* deploys Gothic elements against the backdrop of a war-torn Baghdad, crafting a haunting, resonant narrative that became the first Iraqi novel to win the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2014 (Jani, 2023, p. 45). It follows Hadi, a junk dealer who assembles a corpse from dismembered body parts of bombing victims (Elayyan, 2017). Intending to honor the dead, he stitches these parts into a single body. The corpse reanimates when possessed by the soul of Hasib, a policeman vaporized in a car bombing. This body "was named 'Whatsitsname' or 'Shisma,' as the Iraqi people used to call it" (Bahoora, 2015, p. 186). The creature vows revenge on those responsible for Baghdad's carnage. Hadi's creation blurs the boundaries between life and death, morality and immorality, echoing themes of hubris and existential torment found in classic Gothic romance. Saadawi uses Gothic elements to "investigate themes of deformity, identity, and the consequences of human foolishness in a war-torn society" (Khan, 2023, p. 74). While the novel is sometimes seen as an imitation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, it diverges sharply by addressing sectarian violence in Iraq. In both novels, the monster views himself as a divine messenger. His first speech reveals a self-proclaimed mission of justice:

I don't have much time. I might come to an end, and my body might turn into liquid as I'm walking down the street one night, even before I accomplish the mission I've been assigned...They are all poor, and I'm the answer to the call of the poor. I'm a savior, the one they were waiting for and hoped for in some sense...I am the answer to their call for an end to injustice and for revenge on the guilty. (Saadawi, 2018, pp. 142-143)

Whatsitsname becomes a symbol of collective Iraqi trauma, embodying the dehumanizing effects of war. His endeavor to define his identity mirrors "the existential themes frequently found in Gothic literature" (Al-Leithy, 2023, pp. 12-13). Characters like Elishva, who mistakes the creature for her dead son, further highlight themes of loss and fragmentation. The novel offers surreal episodes, such as the disoriented soul of Hasib wandering through a graveyard:

"How did it disappear? You have to find it, or some other body, or else things will end badly for you...Why are you here? This is my grave. My body's lying underneath. In a few days I won't be able to get out like this."

"Maybe you haven't really died and you're dreaming. Or your soul has left your body to go for a stroll and will come back later," the boy said.

"I hope to God you're right...I'm still young, and I have a daughter, and . . ."

"Young! You're not as young as me!" (Saadawi, 2018, p. 31)

This motif of displacement and confusion is not a product of fantasy but reflects the actual chaos experienced daily in Iraq. Saadawi, much like T.S. Eliot and W. Auden, exhibits pessimism about the future of humanity, shaped here by "the devastating effect of modern imperialism" (Sabeeh & Kiaee, 2019, p. 87). The Iraqi societal fabric was ravaged by the American invasion, resulting in sectarian conflict characterized by frequent acts of violence that disrupted the fundamental principles of life and death. As Hamed (2020) notes, the streets became "covered with dismembered body

parts and blood” (Hamed, 2020, p. 24). Saadawi described this bleakness with a chilling image: “The city had become a haunted house full of ghosts, and every day it seemed to grow darker and darker as the shadows lengthened across its streets” (Saadawi, 2018, p. 33).

Through a Gothic setting, characters, and a monster, Saadawi ethically and emotionally conveys societal horror (Nasr, 2019). He challenges readers to confront the darker aspects of human nature and the enduring need for justice and meaning amid chaos. Thus, *Frankenstein in Baghdad* becomes a poignant study of human endurance, loss, and moral collapse. Whatitsname, as Alhashmi (2020) asserts, represents “the modern hero in terms of vengeance and vendetta” (Alhashmi, 2020, p. 99). As the creature evolves, its mission becomes corrupted. Once claiming to serve justice, he [it] begins killing indiscriminately:

With the help of God and of heaven, I will take revenge on all the criminals...and there will no longer be a need to wait in agony for justice to come, in heaven or after death...My list of people to seek revenge on grew longer as my old body parts fell off and my assistants added parts from my new victims, until one night I realized that under these circumstances, I would face an open-ended list of targets that would never end. (Saadawi, 2018, p. 153)

His pursuit of justice devolves into a desperate grasp for self-preservation. Hannah Arendt supports this concept, arguing that “violence causes violence, not more, no less” (Alhashmi, 2020, p. 100). She writes, “The practice of violence, like all action, changes the world, but the most probable change is a more violent world” (Arendt, 1970, p. 80). By the end, the monster embodies the very evil he once fought. Saadawi describes it [this] as such:

Because he was an exceptional killer who wouldn’t die by traditional means, he thought he should exploit this distinctive talent in the service of the innocent—in the service of truth and justice. Until he was sure of his next steps, he would concentrate on ensuring his own survival. (Saadawi, 2018, p. 201)

Ultimately, Saadawi suggests that imperialism and war have stripped Iraqi society of its humanity. Whatitsname succumbs to his [its] animal instincts, surviving by feeding on others’ suffering. While *Frankenstein in Baghdad* employs many Gothic elements—such as grotesque bodies, moral ambiguity, psychological horror, and a ruined setting—it also reimagines Gothic storytelling for a modern, war-torn context. The corpses littering Baghdad serve as a literal and symbolic device of Gothic horror: “Dead bodies littered the street like rubbish” (Saadawi, 2018, p. 153). In the end, Saadawi’s novel, through its Gothic and surreal lens, captures the tragedy and complexity of post-invasion Iraq, blending horror with social critique to expose the existential cost of violence.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Ahmed Saadawi and Nathaniel Hawthorne use Gothic romance as a powerful lens to discuss and treat societal issues and themes like loneliness, sin, guilt, and crime. These themes are deeply related to the complicated human experience. Both authors construct haunting fictional worlds through atmospheric settings, complex characters, and compelling storytelling approaches. They encourage readers to confront personal and collective anxieties by delving into the shadowy recesses of the human psyche, thereby demonstrating the Gothic genre’s enduring power to illuminate the darkest corners of human nature.

The setting of the novel *The Scarlet Letter* is a strict Puritanical society governed by rigid religious rules that control its citizens. Hester Prynne is a woman who suffers both psychologically and physically because of bearing the scarlet letter as a symbol of her transgression. Hawthorne employs Gothic elements to expose and criticize the tyrannical and hypocritical nature of Puritan society and its oppressive moral code.

Similarly, the setting of *Frankenstein in Baghdad* is central to the use of Gothic elements in this novel. Saadawi portrays Baghdad realistically and unflinchingly, enabling readers to witness a city haunted by constant violence and destruction. An eerie dissonance typical of classic Gothic settings is produced by combining the turmoil of contemporary combat and the historical richness of the ancient city. In Saadawi’s narrative, the protagonist, Hadi, is tormented by remorse after accidentally creating a monster out of the collected body parts of bombing victims. As the “Whatitsname” embarks on a vengeful and morally ambiguous killing spree, Hadi faces the consequences of his creation, resulting in a profound existential crisis. Saadawi’s fragmented narrative structure enhances the disorientation and moral complexity of the story. Despite differences in time and place, both authors use Gothic techniques in different times and places to confuse readers about what is real and what is imaginary. These similar methods cause the reader to feel uncomfortable about existence and contemplate the boundaries of ethical responsibility. Many adaptations and retellings have appeared due to the cultural and literary influence of both novels.

Since the world is still marked by war, inequality, and strong ideological differences, the Gothic themes in these novels are still extremely relevant. They give readers a way to deal with emotions and ideas about fear, traumatic events, and social injustice. By telling dark stories, Hawthorne and Saadawi reveal that it is hard to fix problems in society unless you understand human contradictions and that such understanding often begins in the shadows.

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