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A DISMEMBERED DREAM: A CRITICAL STUDY OF ALSANOUSI'S *THE BAMBOO STALK*

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ABSTRACT

The study tries to examine the novel as a quest for the protagonist' dream of living in his "father's paradise". It traces out the identity crisis portrayed in the novel, through the character of Jose/Isa, the Half-Kuwaiti Half-Philippines protagonist. He finds himself in the grey area of belonging and unbelonging torn between two cultures, religions and languages. The study tries to examine the three barriers of culture, religion and language and their role in dismembering Jose's dream. His final reaction to the dilemma is compared to some other postcolonial protagonists.

Keywords: Alienation, Al-Sanousi, Arabic novel, Gulf States, identity, *The Bamboo Stalk*

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INTRODUCTION

The perception of identity is connected with the society in which the individual lives, its value, traditions and ways of thinking. This identity is shaped by the individual's self- perceptions of the world surrounding him/her, perceptions that are often based on the religion, race, class, economic and social status of his/her family and the cultural and religious beliefs of the society in which the individual lives. The predicament of the individual's isolation and alienation is a pervasive theme in modern Arabic fiction. Alienation is "a sociological concept developed by several classical and contemporary theorists, is "a condition in social relationships reflected by a low degree of integration or common values and a high degree of distance or isolation between individuals, or between an individual and a group of people in a community or work environment. The concept has many discipline-specific uses, and can refer both to a personal psychological state (subjectively) and to a type of social relationship (objectively). (Wikipedia)

Meyer states that alienation in the Arab world is commonly felt to be forced on the individual against his or her will and the instinct is to combat it, to find a cure for it, rather than to escape by fleeing, dropping out, or turning inward"(Meyer, 6)This predicament is even more vivid in the Gulf States where the family's image is of paramount importance and where we find more stories of cultural differences between local people and foreign workers. Foreign workers undergo a physical change in environment but they also experience a significant change in their identities. Their identities as foreigners are reconstructed by the

political, social, and cultural norms of the society in which they live and work. *The Bamboo Stalk* is a daring work, which looks objectively at the phenomenon of foreign workers in Gulf countries and deals with the problem of identity through the life of a young man of mixed race Kuwaiti and Philippines. The novel explores the individual's anguished consciousness of being isolated from the society to which he should belong. It examines the protagonist's despair for not finding why he is rejected by his father's family.

Saud Alsanousi is an important emerging literary voice in the Arabian Gulf region, born in Kuwait in 1981. His first novel *The Prisoner of Mirrors* appeared in 2010 and won the Leila Othman Prize. His most famous novel *The Bamboo Stalk*(2012) received critical acclaim and won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2013. The novel is based on the story of a young man born of a secret marriage between a Philippines female servant and the son of her Kuwaiti employer. It is set in Kuwait and the Philippines, from 1985 to the near present. The novel explores questions of mixed identities rarely tackled in his homeland of Kuwait. The first novel by a Gulf Arab to have a foreigner as its narrator and hero, the novel focuses on Jose / Isa and how he is a product of double identity. He suffers from psychic division in his personality which is very serious problem. Understood, it can be controlled; failure to understand results in tragedy — usually suicide, death or madness for the individual concerned. Jose is racially mixed and thus contains within his personality the different ethnic strains Arabic, and Philippines, these two strains are in conflict and the challenge that he faces is to reconcile both.

Symbolism of the title

A title is a story's first impression and it can help us understand the theme of the story. A title creates anticipation, expectation and interest. The title of the novel " saq albamboo" in Arabic and *The Bamboo Stalk* in English , is very catchy. Bamboo is an easy care plant that can survive in any kind of light. It has long been the Chinese symbol for strength. It has many qualities such as fast-growth and resilience as it grows every year and stays green year round. In many East Asian cultures, bamboo is associated with many positive qualities. As the shoots are hollow and receptive, it usually reminds people to open their hearts and be receptive. It also shows that rigidity can cause a person to break and that internal strength is what matters most.

The protagonist is linked to the bamboo in many ways: in being cut off roots, and in the different names both have. People call Bamboo " kawayan " in the Philippines and "Khayzaran" in Kuwait. The narrator, too, has different names. " "My name is José. In the Philippines, it's pronounced the English way, with an *h* sound at the start. In Arabic, rather like in Spanish, it begins with a *kh* sound. In Portuguese, though it's written the same way, it opens with a *j*, as in Joseph. All these versions are completely different from my name here in Kuwait, where I'm known as Isa." When he's in Philippines, the narrator is called José, and sometimes "the Arab". In Kuwait, he's called Isa, and sometimes "the Filipino". In many passages the hero associates himself with the Bamboo stalk" why if the promise was fulfilled, I wondered. What if the man called Rashid did appear? Could I really be replanted, like a bamboo stalk?"(Bamboo Stalk, 83) Jose/ Isa has many things in common with the bamboo stalk; strength, resilience and ability to adapt to all circumstances. He states" if only I were like the bamboo tree, free of attachments. We cut off a part of its stalk and plant it , without roots, in any land. It does not take the stalk long to grow new roots." The question is still being asked: is bamboo a tree or a grass? This question can also be asked about Isa/ Jose is he Kuwaiti or Philippines?

Two cultures

The theme of identity is one of the most controversial issues in postcolonial literature because it exists in all postcolonial communities. The alienated protagonist or the protagonist who is in quest for his own identity is a recurrent figure in much of the twentieth century fiction. Many newly free nations underwent a kind of identity crisis due to the circumstances of postcolonial era and the problematic conditions that faced them. Associated with this theme of identity is the image of the other. Many Arabic novels were written about the image of the other but most of them focus on western characters and their image of the Arab World. *The Bamboo Stalk* combines the two issues of identity crisis and the image of the other. It looked eastward, to people whom many in the Middle East and especially in the gulf think are their inferiors because they are serving them in shops, restaurants and hospitals. The confrontation is not between East and West. It is an East-

East cultural confrontation. "*The Bamboo Stalk* is a retelling of the east-to-west immigrant narrative, but this time it's east-to-east: a half-Filipino, half-Kuwaiti teen moves from an impoverished life in the Philippines to the "paradise" of his father's Kuwait. The book is a page-turner, following its narrator through harrowing setbacks, but its depth comes from the way it holds a mirror up to Kuwaiti society, and to Gulf Arabs' relationship to migrant labour." (Qualey, 2015) This confrontation is symbolized in the character of Jose/Isa a half-Filipino, half-Kuwaiti young man who could not find peace of mind because of his double identity. It is the first time that a novel lays bare social attitudes in the Gulf through the eyes of an outsider.

Erikson thinks that each individual has an identity, which is very exclusive to him, and he should have an understanding of his own or her own identity. The individual is conscious of his/her innate qualities and uniqueness. Any ambiguity about one's capabilities, relations, future objectives, strength and power to control one's own destiny and future, results in identity confusion which Erikson considered as an identity crisis. Identity crisis is one of the difficult problems that everyone faces at some stage of life. It varies from individual to individual depending on the social context and circumstances in which one is placed. One of the consequences of identity confusion is feeling isolated, helpless and unable to make important decisions. During the state of identity confusion or identity crisis, the individual may feel that he or she is moving backward rather than forward. Jose suffers from identity crisis. He is torn between two cultures, unable to understand his own identity. Individuals usually connect their identity with other but Jose/Isa is unable to connect himself with the Kuwaitis or the Philippines. His attempts to win his Kuwaiti family's favor are futile, even though he is their only possible male heir. The family rejected him cruelly to keep the family's image from being distorted by acknowledging a member of it with an East Asian appearance. Thus Jose/Isa finds himself in the grey area of belonging and unbelonging torn between two cultures, religions and, languages. His dilemma is trying to understand his own identity.

The protagonist treats his life as a journey of self-discovery and though shocked by his Kuwaiti family's rejection, he regains his strength and makes his own decisions. The inherent diversity in his identity enables him to progress. "As it develops the self embraces different identities and becomes therefore an on-going process of differentiation. Identity is not stable because the self is constantly shifting from one identity to another, and this is mainly because of the inherent diversity within identity. Identity cannot be restricted to only one particular thing; instead of being enclosed within the boundaries of particularism, identity opens out to embrace pluralism." (Karkaba, 2014, 93)

Many characters in post-colonial fiction suffer from identity crisis: Okwonkoin *Things Fall Apart*, Mustapha Saeed in *Season of Migration to the North* and Raka in Anita Desai's novel *Fire on the Mountain*. The difference between these characters and the protagonist in *The Bamboo Stalk* is that while they fail to come to terms with their identities, Jose is able to ultimately understand his identity. Talking about Jose, Al-Mutairi observes that "José's bitter disappointment nevertheless motivates him to act. Separated from the family, he gains financial independence and begins to make his own observations of Kuwaiti society." (Al-Mutairi, 2016, 363) Unlike Okonkwo who resorted to violent means to resolve his dilemma ending up committing suicide, and Raka who sets fire on the mountain, and Mustapha who drowns himself, Jose cultivates the habit of comparing and contrasting the two cultures. This process is integral to his gradual maturation. This stage, the conflict between two cultures, proves to be foremost in José's educational journey as it widens his vision to assess himself. He is able to identify and reconcile his own values and beliefs within a cross-cultural context. (Al-Mutairi, 2016, 363). By the end of the novel, Jose is in full control of his own life and not dependent on others as he is used to be. He even rejected money offered by his Kuwaiti family to buy his silence. As rightly Jarrar observes "The return of the hero to the land of his mother, loaded with symbolism, makes us aware that this return does not mean estrangement from the homeland of the father and the separation from his identity, but it also carries the meanings of loyalty to the roots, the faith in the possibility of merging identities, the desire to achieve psychological harmony and the cultural compatibility." (Jarrar, 2015, 14) Jose carried with him from Kuwait a bottle of dirt, the flag of Kuwait, a copy of the Quran in English, and a prayer mat. All these things

show that he does not reject the culture that was the reason for his rejection. He is able to reconcile the Middle Eastern and East Asian cultures finding his identity in embracing a mixture of the two.

The dilemma, in which Jose finds himself in, torn between Kuwait and Philippines, is not limited to him. His father's family is also facing a difficult choice. They wanted him and they did not want him. Some of them were happy because he has come back while others were undecided. Some of them wanted to pay him off and ask him to go back to Philippines. Some other characters faced the same dilemma by having to choose between two options. For example his aunt Hind al-Tarouf who is a human rights activist, faces the choice of sacrificing either her credibility as an activist or her name. "if she upholds my rights as a human being when people found out that her war hero brother, Rashid al-Tarouf, had married a Filipina, she would have to sacrifice the way people saw her illustrious name. Sacrificing her principles and taking a stand against my human rights would preserve the prestige of her name and society's respect for her." (197). Elayyan rightly states that, "The narrative focuses on the divisions among the stratified social classes and the straitjackets of tradition that restrict men's and women's options" (*Three Arabic Novels*, 91) one can even go further and say that the family members are, too, victims of the social norms that restrict their choice. They do not reject Jose because they do not want him but because they cannot bear the social consequences of that acceptance. The novel shows that Kuwaiti society is a dynamic one, with forces of traditions and modernization in constant conflict. When Jose arrived at Kuwait airport, he met with two attitudes from two Kuwaiti officers, the first is angry with him for standing in the lines for Kuwaitis and other Gulf citizens" He turned me away when he saw my face, even he had a chance to see my (Kuwaiti passport" The other officer, however, told Jose "welcome to your country, but not through the gate for foreigners". Even within a-Tarouf family, there are those who are ready to defy social norms and accept Jose and those who will do anything to get rid of him.

The question of "the other" is dealt with in the novel from different angles. First Jose/ Isa is viewed as the other in the eyes of Kuwaiti society. He is judged not by his Kuwaiti citizenship, name and father but by his East Asian appearance. For them he is the "other" that they cannot accept as one of them. In the Gulf countries the other has often been seen negatively especially Asians who come to the region and work in humble jobs. In an interview to *The National*, Saud Alsanousi states "we Kuwaitis had social problems, we were closed in upon ourselves, we didn't know any culture except our own. We always think we're right and the other is wrong, socially, religiously. Through reading and travel I discovered that the world was much bigger than us, that we weren't the axis of the whole universe." (*The National*, 2016) On the other hand, Kuwaiti society is viewed as "the other" by Jose and other foreign workers. Through writing the novel, Alsanousi clearly intends to confront and challenge his own society on racism toward foreign laborers and the treatment of them. He is holding a mirror to his society to see the ugliness of some social customs and norms. It is to the credit of the writer that although he is critical of his society's view of "the other", he is able to depict the cultural diversity of that small society and portray Kuwaitis themselves as victims of the social norms they inherited. The novelist is trying to set his fellow citizens free from the clutches of these social norms to embrace a more humanistic view of the other.

Two Religions

Jose/Isa, who bears one name given by his Muslim father and another by his Christian mother, grows up in the Philippines and returns to Kuwait as an adolescent. He is torn between the religion of his father and that of his mother. This inquiry into religion is one of the novel's main themes. His cultural heritage places him between two opposed beliefs: the Christian influence coming from his mother and the Islamic influence deriving from his father's official religion. While Isa's mother believes everything happens for a reason, Isa is more skeptical. He is

without a previous devotion worthy of return; however, he still experiences a genuine spiritual crisis. Since childhood, José has questioned faith and pursued truth. Certain that he would one day return to Kuwait and become Muslim like his father, his mother ignores his questions. While exploring the religious diversity true to the Philippines, José attends services with Christians and Buddhists, but

Islam remains foremost in José's mind. José believes that his Kuwaiti homeland will eventually resolve his religious questioning." "(Al-Mutairi, 2016, 364).

When he arrives in Kuwait, Jose meets Ibrahim Salam, a young Filipino religious scholar, who gives him a DVD of the movie *The Message* to watch the early days of Islam and the life of Prophet Mohammed. The more he learns about Islam the more he observes the gap between the teachings of Islam and the mistreatment he experiences by Muslims. He is considered a secret that must not be revealed lest it brings shame to the family. He is put in the family house extension in an area between the family members and the servants. He should not be seen by neighbors and if seen, he is instructed to say that he is the new cook. From his place, he is able to view the social peculiarities of Kuwaiti society from Sunni-Shia differences, the use of English in Arabic conversation and the way foreign workers are treated.

The novel, like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Hayy Ibn Yaqdhan*, is a religious quest in which the protagonist passes through stages of questioning and observing to reach religious maturity and truth. The hero, Jose, is a child who grows up in a confusing environment, where cultural and religious influences pour on him from various sources. His quest for identity involves cultural and religious dilemmas. His fate places him between two opposed beliefs: the Christian influence coming from his mother and the Islamic influence deriving from the fact that his father whom he did not meet, is a Muslim. He has to choose between these two beliefs but he appears unsatisfied with either. Perhaps the choice would have been easier had he been treated well by his father's family. Jose was baptized in a parish church in Philippines and later at the age of 12, he was taken by Aida to Manila Cathedral for the confirmation ceremony. By the end of the novel, Jose has formed his own view of religion based on critical thinking rather than blind adoption of religious doctrines. Al-Mutairi rightly argues, "Undergoing a spiritual crisis, José has refined a concept of spirituality based on his own understanding and not someone else's doctrine."(Al-Mutairi, 2016, 365). He concludes that Islam does not need tangible miracles to be credible and one does not need to tie his relationship to God to concrete objects. His religious creed has more of the Sufi inclination to depend on the heart.

Two Languages

The power and limits of language is one of the important themes in the novel *Bamboo Stalk*. Three languages are used by the novel's characters; Arabic, Philippines and English. Arabic is Jose's father mother tongue, which he himself cannot speak. This inability to speak Arabic works as an additional barrier between him and the society to which he belongs. Many passages in the novel show Jose's helplessness in being unable to understand what is said to him. At the airport when the officer shouted at him, he cannot understand what he said or why he was angry. Later in the first confrontation with his grandmother and Aunts, Jose describes to us their facial expressions, the way they talk, the gestures they make, but not what did they say. "They were talking, each in her own way,They talked loudly and interrupted each other. Sometimes they looked at me and sometimes they pointed at me."(*Bamboo Stalk*, 194) He is unable to understand their arguments and had to ask Ghassan later about what had happened in the meeting. Therefore, his inability to use Arabic renders him unable to defend himself or explain his position. It makes him dependent on other characters like Ghassan and Khawla. Not using the language that is used by his family makes the communication ineffective and prevents his message from being conveyed.

According to Imberti " language is key in a person's presentation of self. It enables the person to express emotions, share feelings, tell stories, convey complex messages, show knowledge, and more." He even goes to argue that "lack of familiarity with the official language is a silent source of stress, immobility, depression, and feelings of inadequacy as well as low self-esteem. (Imberti, 67, 2007). Jose is facing a language barrier making him unable to express his emotions, share his feelings, and present his personality.

Even when he is encouraged by his sister Khawla to write his story in a novel and complete the unfinished novel of his father, Isa is reluctant because of the choice of language. His only option is writing it in Tagalog because he has no competence in English and Arabic. The novel, then, will be translated into Arabic by a non-native speaker of Arabic, his Muslim Friend Ibraheem Salam. Thus even when he writes to get his

message through to the society that rejected him, it was not done directly but rather indirectly through the medium of translation.

Conclusion

The Bamboo Stalk is a novel about the quest for identity and the image of the other. The protagonist is a half-Kuwaiti half-Pilipino young man who has a dream of being part of his father's family. He is the victim of social norms that force his relatives to reject him to preserve the name of the family. He undergoes a quest for identity and religion forming in the end his own identity and his own faith. Language forms an important barrier in front of him. The novel traces the development of Jose from someone whose fate is in the hands of others to a mature person who is able to make his own decisions. This ability to reach a reconciliation of two different cultures sets him apart from some other postcolonial protagonists who fail to do. *The Bamboo Stalk* deserves the critical acclaim it received because it is written by an ambitious, cultivated and brave writer who loves his country and desires to see real social change in it. The novel is in a sense the fulfillment of Rashid al-Tarouf's dream of writing a novel. It is also the way through which his Jose writes back to the society that refuses to accept him. Alsanousi and his protagonist want to change reality with a novel that is candid and harsh, seeking to change Jose's mother justification of his father's decision to leave him "The decision wasn't your father's. A whole society stood behind him." It is that society that both the writer and his protagonist want to change.

About the Author

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