

Unveiling Modern Saudi Society and Culture in Aziz Mohammed's *The Critical Case of a Man Called K*

Shahad Alfaqih

University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Since modern Saudi novel vividly captures the essence of cultural and social life in Saudi Arabia, this paper aims to unveil the manifestation of historical events that generated new issues and discourses shaping modern Saudi culture and society as depicted in Aziz Mohammed's *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* (2021). The examination of its cultural and social context, thus, serves as an evaluation of a historical record that depicts the episteme of modern Saudi society. However, as ample as previous works on Saudi literature may be, most of them disregard the use of New Historicism in examining modern Saudi novels. This paper, therefore, utilizes New Historicism to unveil the nature of modern Saudi episteme as depicted by the young author Aziz Mohammed in *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* (2021) and to gain insight into modern Saudi discourses and issues shaped by historical and economic events. The study finds that the novel depicts a dystopian reality due to the implications of both late capitalism and globalization in modern Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, the novel highlights how far the discourse of Saudi Vision 2030, with its various aims, penetrates both society and culture, shaping a great part of modern Saudi episteme. The paper concludes by affirming Mohammed's novel assertion of New Historicism's main assumption that the text cannot be divorced from its historical, cultural, and social context and that it serves as a record indicative of a specific and unique episteme.

Keywords: Aziz Mohammed, globalization, late capitalism, modern Saudi literature, New Historicism, Saudi Vision 2030, *The Critical Case of a Man Called K*

Introduction

There is a consensus among critics that Saudi literature is severely marginalized in the realm of Arabic literature studies. This negligence can be attributed to several factors, including the lack of translations of Saudi literature. To face this shortage, Saudi Arabia's Literature, Publishing, and Translation Commission launched multiple initiatives, such as Tarjim, to reinforce the translation movement in Saudi Arabia and enrich Arabic literature. These initiatives increase the urgent need for a distinct literary field of Saudi studies detached from the umbrella of Arabic literature. However, to contribute to the lack of scholarly research on modern Saudi literature, it is essential to identify the context of its emergence. According to Albalawi (2022), Arabic literature generally has to be read within "the paradigm of social or historical practices" (p. 3). As a result, the examination of its cultural and social context serves as an evaluation of a historical record that depicts the episteme of modern Saudi society. Saudi literature has been shaped by major events such as the attacks of 9/11, the economic boom, and

Shahad Alfaqih, Master's Degree in English Literature, Department of Languages and English, University of Jeddah, Jeddah, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

cultural globalization, which inform the Saudi novel and emphasize the importance of reading it within its historical context to gain a better understanding of the complexity and dynamics shaping modern Saudi society and culture.

Saudi novelists in the Renewal phase, which spanned from the 1980s until the present, began to revolt against social norms and cultural conventions in Saudi Arabia. In this period, modern Saudi novelists began challenging old narrative conventions by writing about untouched topics such as freedom and social issues that the old didactic Saudi novel shied away from. Novelists such as Ghazi Algusaibi and Turki al-Hamad are considered the cornerstone of the modern Saudi narrative as they revolted against the old social and cultural norms. Algusaibi's *An Apartment Called Freedom* (1994) and Al-Hamad's trilogy of *Phantoms of the Deserted Alley* consisting of *Adama* (1997), *Shumaisi* (1998), and *Al-karadib* (1998) are modern Saudi novels that paved the way for modern-day Saudi novelists to challenge traditions and navigate through cultural and social taboos.

Similarly, Aziz Mohammed, a modern Saudi writer, captures pressing social issues and challenges cultural norms in his debut novel *Al-hāla al-hārija li-l-mad'u K* (2017), which has been translated into English by Humphrey Davies to *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* (2021). Mohammed asserts in one of his interviews that although a lot of names and places were blurred in the novel, the work cannot be understood in a different context since the nature of the issues and descriptions depicted in the novel are unique and cannot be applied to other contexts (International Prize for Arabic Fiction, 2018). Therefore, the significance of Mohammed's text lies in its depiction of modern Saudi prominent social and cultural issues and discourses and its breaking of conventional narrative taboos by picturing modern-day Saudi reality as a dystopia.

Thus, this paper aims to unveil the manifestation of historical events that produced new issues and discourses, shaping modern Saudi culture and society as depicted in Mohammed's *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* (2021). By exploring the implications of late capitalism and globalization and the pervasive discourse of Saudi Vision 2030 as depicted in the novel, the study's significance lies in offering insights into the nature of the modern episteme of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, this research seeks to contribute to the scarce literary research about modern Saudi novels' in the literary field and help gain a better understanding of Saudi Arabia's modern culture and society. The following sections explore the previous studies on the nature of the modern Saudi novel, New Historicism, as a methodology used to unravel the aforementioned issues and discourses, an analysis of the scenes in which the author portrays them, and a conclusion.

Literature Review

In order to shed light on the marginalized modern Saudi novel, an exploration of its landscape becomes a necessity in order to foster an understanding of its intricate characteristics that inform it and shape it. The following review, thus, discusses several studies on the historical and cultural events that shaped the modern Saudi novel, its main characteristics, and a case in point of a contemporary Saudi novel that reflects the dominant cultural and social discourses in modern Saudi Arabia.

Since literature reflects culture and society, understanding the context of the literary work is indispensable to understanding the text. Consequently, the Saudi novel cannot be understood in isolation from its historical and cultural context. Alharthi (2015) states that the rapid development in Saudi Arabia, which is attributed to the country's petroleum activities, heavily contributed to the development of the Saudi novel. Alharthi further affirms the role of the 9/11 tragedy in the evolution of the Saudi novel, which urged many Saudi novelists to daringly cross social, religious, and cultural boundaries. Similarly, Alshammari (2017) maintains that after joining the

World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2005 and the Group of Twenty in 2008, it was clear that Saudi Arabia had entered the realm of late capitalism, triggering Saudi novelists to grapple with its implications, such as routinization and psychic fragmentation. According to Alshammari, in this stage, as a result of late capitalism, the Saudi novel began to depict a mild form of dystopian imagination.

The modern Saudi narrative, which emerged roughly in the 1980s and continues to the present, is characterized by its treatment of untouched topics that the old conventional and didactic Saudi narrative has avoided touching upon. Algahtani (2017) affirms that in this period, a new generation of Saudi novelists emerged, publishing novels to challenge the customs and traditions of Saudi society. In the same vein, Albalawi (2022) argues that the most essential attribute of the modern Saudi narrative is challenging the dominant social, religious, political, and cultural paradigms in Saudi Arabia. Albalawi notices that most modern Saudi novelists are influenced by global writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Virginia Woolf more than Arabic writers. Likewise, Sultana (2023) posits that intertextuality is one prominent feature in modern Saudi novels, which involves alluding to other literary works, mostly written by western writers, to add and thicken the layers of meaning.

Similarly, one of the modern Saudi novels that encompasses all these characteristics is *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* (2021) by Aziz Mohammed, which, given that it is Mohammed's debut novel, previous studies on it are limited. However, one study by Alahmadi (2020) uncovers, through cultural criticism, the implicit cultural patterns depicted in the novel, asserting that the Saudi literary text is not a mere aesthetic object but a reflection of the cultural, social, and psychological nature from which it emerges. Alahmadi asserts that Aziz Mohammed attempted to highlight in his novel the implicit cultural patterns of Saudi society and criticize the preexisting cultural paradigms, which are molded by the social convictions that are inherent in the collective consciousness of Arab society (p. 1921). However, Alahmadi's study is preoccupied with the traditional and conventional cultural patterns depicted in the novel, disregarding the novel's historical context and the ample depictions of modern Saudi culture and society.

Previous studies have indicated the inseparability of the Saudi novel from its cultural and historical context. However, as ample as previous works on Saudi literature may be, most of them disregard the use of New Historicism in examining modern Saudi novels. With the exception of Alahmadi's study, no research has been done on Aziz Mohammed's *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* (2021). Although Alahmadi draws on Cultural Criticism, which shares a lot of premises with New Historicism, Alahmadi seems to undermine the historical context of the novel and focuses mainly on uncovering the conventional cultural patterns that shape Arab and Saudi society. This paper, thus, draws on New Historicism to unveil the historical events that led to cultural and social developments in modern Saudi Arabia and how these changes are depicted in Aziz Mohammed's *The Critical Case of a Man Called K*.

Methodology

To uncover the married depictions of modern Saudi society in Mohammed's *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* (2021), New Historicism is utilized to shed light on the historical events that led to changes in Saudi culture and social attitudes as depicted in Mohammed's novel. New Historicism's main premise resides in the fact that a literary text is a product of its time. The text cannot be analyzed in isolation from its cultural context. This meaning is attained through meticulous consideration of the historical time and cultural elements evident in the literary work (Bressler, 2011, p. 188). In addition, New Historicism is concerned with investigating the societal concerns, attitudes, and beliefs of both the author and his/her society as depicted by the text. Bressler

posits that it is essential to uncover the behavioral social codes because they shape and are shaped by the text. Thus, New Historicists investigate what the author's depiction of society and culture says about his/her opinion and attitudes toward it.

Furthermore, discourses play a major role in New Historicism. Tyson (2023) defines the term discourse as the "social language created by particular cultural conditions at a particular time and place", and the different discourses overlap and compete with each other dynamically (p. 285). Tyson maintains that New Historians believe that "literary texts are cultural artifacts" that demonstrate the "interplay of discourses, the web of social meanings, operating in the time and place in which the text was written" (p. 291). The literary text becomes, in New Historicism, a historical discourse that interacts with other historical discourses circulating at the time and place in which the text emerged. Therefore, the literary work is treated as a subjective interpretation of historical events and discourses shaped by the culture in which they are produced.

In the same vein, Mohammed's *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* (2021) could be read as a historical interpretation and documentation of modern Saudi society and culture. The literary text voices the author's rejection and concerns about the society and culture of modern Saudi Arabia. Besides, it implicitly refers to the prevailing discourses and sociocultural changes in Saudi society, mostly due to late capitalism and globalization. New Historicism is, therefore, applied in this paper to unveil the nature of modern Saudi episteme as depicted by the young author Mohammed in *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* and to gain insight into modern Saudi discourses and issues shaped by historical and economic events.

Analysis

In *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* (2021), the first-person narrator portrays vivid images of the monotonous life he lives, which is mostly consumed by his work as a programmer at a petrochemical company and exhaustion. The unnamed narrator portrays the tiresome life he leads, saying, "[a]nother bad day to make do with just two hours of sleep, I wake in a panic, drive like a drunk, and make it to my desk in time" (Mohammed, 2021, p. 12). Elements of late capitalism are depicted in this scene. Alshammari (2017) states that after Saudi Arabia joined the Group of Twenty and the WTO, it became clear that the country became a participant in late capitalism operations. The increased production that followed inflicted issues such as routinization, which, in return, caused high rates of stress and instability of personality. The narrator's ominous tone about work and his sleep deprivation, panic, and constant exhaustion reflect the gruesome implications of late capitalism on modern Saudi corporate workers.

Another implication of late capitalism is the depiction of a dystopian imagination or reality. Alshammari (2017) asserts that as a consequence of the emergence of late capitalism after 2001, Saudi novels began to have a "weak utopian imagination" (p. 11). This is evident when the narrator admits:

I now realize that work means spending the best half of the day working relentlessly to swell the pockets of the company's stockholders and strengthen your director's chances of promotion while submitting to systems and laws stranger than you'd find in the silliest dystopian novel. (Mohammed, 2021, p. 59)

The reality of the workforce within the system of late capitalism becomes more dystopian day by day. It can be detected here the author's own beliefs and opinions about this economic system, which is one of New Historicism's chief interests, reflect his contempt for late capitalism's constraints of one's freedom, which reduces the human to a mere relentless machine. Workers are expected to achieve the employer or company's

goals and give up on their aspirations and hopes as individuals, turning the employee into a means to their ends. The narrator does not only lament his dystopian reality but also his fellow employees. The narrator ponders about his co-worker who sits next to him, saying, "I still have no idea what role he [the co-worker] plays in this particular department...he looks, in fact, like a rusty nail stuck in this vast machine in which he has spent some thirty years" (p. 13). The narrator, again, expresses his resentment and disillusionment toward such a capitalist economy, juxtaposing this system with an inexorable machine that consumes one's life until it becomes like the "rusty nail", useless and futile.

Furthermore, the novel portrays aspects of modern Saudi society that are highly influenced by cultural globalization. Although globalization has affected the entire world, developing countries have been the most influenced by it (Alharthi, 2015). Embracing the use of the English language in the workplace, specifically, is evident in the novel. While the protagonist sits in the conference hall, waiting for the meeting to commence, one of his co-workers sits beside him, announcing in perfect English, "[i]sn't refreshing to find oneself surrounded by young people?" (Mohammed, 2021, p. 35) This quotation alludes to how speaking English is not enough; one has to finesse the American accent, too. Furthermore, the author describes how, in order to be charming to women, one has to utter "words with a perfect American accent" (p. 29). This reflects the Saudi modern society's preoccupation with the English language and American accent as a result of globalization and new technology, such as the internet, which uses English mainly.

Another form of cultural globalization can be detected in the way the narrator's manager embraces western or Americanized work values. The manager keeps roaming around the employee's offices, reminding them that caution is necessary by repeating the American expression "[y]ou can never be too careful" (Mohammed, 2021, p. 14). Alshammari (2017) confirms that it is a major consequence of globalization to create conditions in which eastern cultures endorse western values. The manager here seems to use an Americanized expression due to the western nature of the petrochemical company that relies on a capitalist corporate structure imported from the West, which the manager seems to be fond of. The narrator expresses his disillusionment with the manager's obsession with these American phrases, saying, "he [the manager] stays to watch me...with his wide pants ...and the latest catchphrases he's picked up from the Americans" (p. 15). He mocks the manager's preoccupation and embracement of the American expressions of work ethics and values, which is a direct result of cultural globalization.

Besides the use of the English language, Saudi modern society seems to embrace western styles of dress and habits due to cultural globalization. The narrator describes the clothes and attitudes in his workplace as being contemporary or new and "whose heads [the people wearing these clothes] speak English as they deal with minute technical details" (Mohammed, 2021, p. 13). Although Saudis are known for wearing their traditional garment, the Thawb mostly in official places, most of the employees are portrayed wearing suits and suit pants, which reflects the extent to which cultural globalization has penetrated modern Saudi society. Also, their use of the English language highlights how a lot of English terminology made its way into the Arabic language since it is the dominant language of the modern world and due to the lack of an Arabic equivalence to these specialized terminologies. Thus, exchanging these terminologies in English became a habitual practice among Saudis in the workplace.

New Historicism places great attention on the discourses that circulate in a specific time of history. According to Tyson (2023), New Historicism deals with literary texts as "cultural artifacts that can tell us something about the interplay of discourses...operating in the time and place in which those texts were written"

(p. 286). One of the most prominent discourses depicted in the novel is Saudi Vision 2030. One of the Vision's goals is women's empowerment and involving them in the labor force. One example of this aim is when the narrator, upon walking into the meeting room, notices how his female co-workers "were distributed among the men in such a way as to give the impression that they were no fewer in number than their male counterparts" (Mohammed, 2021, p. 39). The narrator implicitly alludes to the efforts of Saudi Arabia in integrating women into the labor force and investing in their capabilities.

Saudi Vision of 2023 also emphasizes the significance of youth. This is mostly because more than half of the Saudi population is below 25, the Vision, thus, intends to deploy and utilize these assets to contribute to the economy and society. This is evident when one of the narrator's co-workers exclaims, upon sitting down in the meeting room surrounded by youthful talents: "[i]sn't refreshing to find oneself surrounded by young people?" (Mohammed, 2021, p. 35). This scene reflects the pervasive discourse of Saudi Vision 2023 that aims to empower and embrace the youth in modern Saudi, which is implemented successfully, as the novel portrays.

On the contrary to the narrator, some employees are portrayed as being work enthusiasts whose lives seem to revolve around their work and their professional growth. Saudi Vision 2030 promotes Prophet Mohammed's Peace Be Upon Him, Hadith, that "Allah loves us to master our work", emphasizing that employees in the workplace have to be committed, disciplined, and ambitious to achieve this Hadith (Saudi Vision 2023, 2016, p 72). While the narrator is contemplating in the conference hall, he notices how everyone is brightly and smartly dressed, which makes him think that even "their underpants too must be smart and of colors that went with the rest of the look" (Mohammed, 2021, p. 36). This reflects the enthusiasm of these employees to attend to their jobs in their finest attire. Furthermore, enthusiasm in the workplace is highlighted in the way meetings are always centered around the successful stories of senior employees and how everyone is ambitious to be like them. The narrator, for instance, describes how the "would-be-successful" were "excitedly taking their seats a quarter of an hour before the meeting" (p. 25). It reflects the Saudi vision's blueprint of creating ambitious, disciplined, and committed workers who can ensure the growth and development of Saudi Arabia's economy.

Conclusion

Mohammed's *The Critical Case of a Man Called K* (2021) is a work that offers an alternative narrative of modern Saudi society. While modernity has been celebrated in some contemporary Saudi novels, Mohammed fixates on the destructive and highly forgotten aspect of modern times. His work is a cultural artifact that, through New Historicism, one can detect the nature of the social, cultural, and economic life in modern Saudi Arabia. The depiction of a dystopian reality due to both late capitalism and globalization in Saudi Arabia is a courageous attempt made by the Saudi author to touch upon a rather sensitive topic that a lot would shy away from, encouraging a dialogue on these important modern-day issues. The novel also highlights how far the discourse of Saudi Vision 2030, with its various aims, penetrates both society and culture, shaping a great part of modern Saudi episteme. Mohammed's novel asserts New Historicism's main assumption that a text cannot be divorced from its historical, cultural, and social ambient and that it serves as a record indicative of a specific episteme.

Moreover, Mohammed's novel is an exemplarily of a work that must be read in its context, not to understand it only but to identify with the author's dystopian depictions of modern times, the predicament of his kafkaesque protagonist, and his splattered cynicism throughout the novel as a Saudi reader specifically and none-Arab reader generally.

Finally, the paper calls for wider scholarly attention to modern Saudi novels in the hope of securing a specialized field within literary studies for Saudi literature. However, although the paper attempts to capture the pervasive issues and discourses in modern Saudi Arabia, it overlooks some prominent issues depicted in the novel, such as religious skepticism, which arose after 9/11 due to its sensitivity. Another limitation is regarding the rapid development of Saudi society, which makes it nearly impossible to capture a complete picture of the modern issues and discourses depicted by Mohammed.

References

- Alahmadi, A. (2020). Implicit cultural patterns in the Saudi novel: Life of Mr. K & critical condition of Mr. K as two cases in point. *Arabic Studies Journal*, 41(4), 1797-1838. Retrieved from <https://search.emarefa.net/detail/BIM-1177802>
- Albalawi, M. (2022). The hidden treasure: (Re)branding Saudi fiction. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 9(1), Article 2041276. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2022.2041276>
- Algahtani, N. S. H. (2017). The dynamics of interpretive communities and the contemporary Saudi novel: A study in the reception of Abdo Khal, Raja Alem, Rajaa Alsanea and Yousef al-Mohaimed (Doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds, 2017). White Rose eTheses Online.
- Alharthi, M. (2015). Social transformations in the Saudi novel: Ibrahim Al-Nassir as a case study (Doctoral dissertation, University of Leeds, 2015). White Rose eTheses Online.
- Alshammari, M. L. (2017). The postmodern novel in Saudi Arabia and America (Graduate theses and dissertations, University of Arkansas, 2017). Scholar Works UARK. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.uark.edu/etd/2570>
- Bressler, C. (2011). *Literary criticism: An introduction to theory and practice* (5th ed.). Marion: Indiana Wesleyan University.
- International Prize for Arabic Fiction. (2018, January 29). Interview with longlisted author Aziz Mohammed. Retrieved from https://www.arabicfiction.org/en/AzizMohammed_longlistinterview2018
- Mohammed, A. (2021). *The critical case of a man called K*. (H. Davies, Trans.). Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Sultana, R. (2023). An insight of emergent contemporary English fiction in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture*, 38, 169-181. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.59670/jns.v38i.5344>
- Tyson, L. (2023). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide* (4th ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Vision 2030. (2016). Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Vision 2030. Retrieved from <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/en>