

## Patterns of Binary Oppositions in Yousef Al-Mohaimeed's *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history

Received: June 11, 2017

Accepted: September 02, 2017

Published: October 31, 2017

Volume: 8 Issue: 5

Advance access: October 2017

Conflicts of interest: None

Funding: None

#### Key words:

Binary oppositions,  
Saudi Fiction,  
Self-expression,  
Modernity

### ABSTRACT

Yousef Al-Mohaimeed's *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* is a rich contemporary novel that deploys several effective narrative strategies and themes. Binary oppositions provide the novel's most unifying thread. This paper examines how binary opposition is used as a structural device in the novel to explore the interplay between modernity and culture in Saudi Arabia by challenging previously unquestioned aspects of life in the contemporary society. The paper focuses on the manner in which binary oppositions inform the novel's rhetoric of displacement, which becomes a driving force determining variation in values and notions within the privileged elite. Corresponding cultural changes emerge from this elite set, whose members pursue modernity in an exclusionary manner in their rapid assimilation into modernization. They appear incapable of understanding indigenous members of Saudi society who adjust less rapidly and who perceive changes in norms and traditions as evidence that the elite regard them as inferior 'Others'.

### INTRODUCTION

Ever since it was published in English, Yousef Al-Mohaimeed's *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* has been considered by many literary reviewers as a milestone in modern Saudi fiction. Written at a time when Saudi fiction writers had begun to formulate new parameters in terms of the conventions of modern Saudi fiction, Al-Mohaimeed's novel, as indicated in many reviews, has proven to be his most popular work thus far, largely due to its unique structure and daring themes. Freedenberg, for instance, commends the novel for breaking away from the 'mélange of clichés featuring white-robed sheikhs climbing into Rolls-Royces to survey vast oil fields' harbored by Westerners about Saudi Arabia by depicting characters 'on the fringe of Saudi society'. In another appraisal of the novel, Lytal comments that, with its depiction of the 'vicissitudes of modern Saudi life', the novel throbs with the complex issues of 'tribal ethnicities, sexual naïveté, superstitions, [and] international labor markets', thus reminding the reader of Camus' *The Stranger*, but with a stronger element of 'psychological distress' (Lytal). Esposito, in turn, expresses ambivalent admiration of Al-Mohaimeed's work, stating that much of the novel's weight comes from its allegorical manifestations.

The above reviews reveal Al-Mohaimeed's preoccupation with the socioeconomic changes caused by the process of urban modernization that has permeated life in his country.

Like many Saudi novels that struggle with the issues of modernity, *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* holds a mirror up to life in Saudi Arabia, which has undergone significant social and economic changes, manifested in extraordinary degrees of affluence, since the discovery of oil in the late 1930s, with these changes becoming especially pronounced after the oil boom of the 1970s. Since then, a range of modernization projects has been launched to build the country's transportation, education, and healthcare infrastructure, thereby 'catapulting the country into modernity' (Stanton et al. 201-202). During this time, tribal citizens living in the regions of the Arabian Peninsula began to migrate to large cities such as Riyadh, Jeddah, and Makkah. Slaves were also increasingly brought to the Peninsula, following the advent of oil wealth, to serve in various minor domestic, trading, and herding jobs (as porters, herdsmen, shopkeepers, and cooks). These migrations led to the rapid transformation of the Peninsula from a deep-rooted tribal system, in which clan and family loyalties were cemented by staunch blood relationships, into a nation-state that perceived its own project of modernization as being in opposition to 'tribal' living in a more 'natural' state. Unavoidably, this transformation has led to the emergence of an elite social class of proponents of modernity. Members of this class, generally holding white-collar jobs, tend to be impressed by material objects considered essential to modernization, and have sought to dissociate themselves

from the past, adopting values that conflict with those of the less privileged, marginalized individuals who have suffered in silence while having to deal with various forms of exclusion and lack of equal opportunity.

Like many Saudi novelists who have in the last two decades been accused of crossing social, and political boundaries by focusing boldly on momentous social and cultural issues, Al-Mohameed expresses deep-seated concern regarding the ever-increasing impact of modernity. He sees this impact as ill-conceived, as it gives rise to a privileged social class characterized by arrogance and apathy toward the less privileged working class and community of color, comprising native Bedouins and expatriates. In this context, Al-Mohameed seeks to investigate the parameters of the value system, which has undergone major transformation under modernization. At the center his novel is a morally critical voice that speaks on behalf of the deprived and less privileged class of people. However, coming from a country that has earned notoriety for its strict censorship of all forms of public expression in literature, media, and the Internet, Al-Mohameed hopes to circumvent intellectual gate-keeping, to 'expand the freedom of writing', and to avoid censorship by the authorities ("Wolves of the Crescent Moon"). Thus, he recognizes that a traditional literary discourse about the sensitive issues of poverty and marginalization in his country cannot protect the content of his novel from censorship. These issues must instead be addressed by a structurally sophisticated narrative approach to expose his society's hegemonic practices against the repressed, less educated lower-class members of society—people who, like his socially victimized characters, are trapped between the country's project of modern urbanization and the sense of tension and despair they suffer due to limited opportunities. Striving to find ways to challenge these dominant practices while avoiding what he recognizes as the unavoidable, less tolerant reactions of censorship authorities, Al-Mohameed carefully weaves a subtle thread of discordant images, motifs, and semantic elements combined in the form of structured binary oppositions, which are manifested in almost every narrative aspect of his novel, namely its structure, setting, characters, and imagery. The semiotic effect of such oppositions lies in their reference to the principles of contrast, antithesis, and contradiction between 'two mutually exclusive terms or concepts: on/off, up/down, left/right, etc.' (Baldick 36), which are 'so intimately interconnected' that, as Jakobson put it, 'the appearance of one of them inevitably elicits the other' (235). These binary oppositions reinforce the inherent tension generated by differences rather than similarities (de Saussure 120). In this way, they allow the emergence of an unstated nexus of meaning whose presence can be sensed but not fully grasped or conceptualized. Having the same function here as in many fictional works, the construction of binary oppositions in *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*, as Surdulescu suggests, are 'pertinent to larger thematic structures which encompass other antitheses presented in the text', and are therefore capable of generating thematic significance across the whole text (34).

## FOCUS AND ANALYSIS

While in *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*, Al-Mohameed uses several narrative conventions such as play, magic realism, and alternative history, essential to a most fruitful reading of the novel is his heavy employment of a complex system of binary oppositions, a narrative tool marked by subtlety and allusive ingenuity. Recognizing the power of binary oppositions, Al-Mohameed not only seeks to challenge the privileged elites' claim to power and authority, but because binary oppositions are linked to the inherently elusive language and imagery, and to the subtleties of abstract concepts, which are often difficult to grasp by the common reader, Al-Mohameed also aspires to obscure his social from the scrutiny of the censor. These binary oppositions begin as signs with literal meanings of their own. Nevertheless, they gradually accrete into recurrent motifs and images, which then develop into an abiding system that becomes increasingly subtle and pervasive, forming implicit, interrelated meanings that shape the novel's thematic assertions, inform its character delineation, and propel its discourse. Moving from the specific to the abstract, these binary oppositions constitute a mechanism whereby the reader can actively participate in creating an 'imaginative world' that binds the narrative together to create a holistic reading experience (Iser 56). In an interview with Alqabas newspaper, Al-Mohameed has confirmed his strategy of using symbolic clues as bait strewn throughout the novel to construct a trap for the reader:

I like to make a trap for my reader. I keep the key to the secret or treasure in my pocket until the last gasp in the life of the narrative. As I always tell my reader: do not rush to find the gold, just pursue the game with me to the end. This is exactly what I did in the 'Traps of Scent', keeping the reader engaged in the mysterious story of the hero's severed ear until the last chapter in the novel (Farzat).

In order to grasp the structure of the binary system from which Al-Mohameed's thematically charged concepts emerge, this largely unexplored aspect of the novel requires further investigation. To the best of this author's knowledge, no study has thus far focused specifically on the binary oppositions in the novel. The main objective of this paper is twofold. First, it will explore the dynamics of Al-Mohameed's social critique by tracing a plethora of binary oppositions developed in the novel. More specifically, this paper will evince how the specific binary oppositions of dream versus reality, nature versus and culture, past versus present, Self versus Other, freedom versus repression, and rich versus poor, dominance versus marginalization, are communicated by means of symbols and motifs and are integrated into antithetical pairs pertaining to the novel's narrative method, setting, and characters. Second, this paper intends to demonstrate an understanding of how Al-Mohameed's employment of the principle of binary oppositions allows for an understanding of his underlying thematic concern, namely his bafflement over his society's vision and experience of modernity, which, although it has fostered a promise of enlightenment, openness, and inclusion, has been unduly grounded in materialistic values of exploitation and exclusion. Aiming

to show his peers what is amiss in their culture, Al-Mohaimed provides a socially subversive critique of Saudi society by highlighting the inadequacies, agonies, and terrors faced by marginalized individuals in modern life. The dualism of Al-Mohaimed's binary thought not only challenges the seamless unity of monistic thinking threatening to dominate the world of his marginalized characters, but is also an effort to open a space for multiplicity and diversity to create moments of dialogic discourse with his country's dominant culture.

### SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

Written in the vein of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (Cheuse, "Review"), *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* is divided into three major narratives intricately mapping out the lives of its three main characters. The novel dramatizes their struggle for self-realization against the coercive marginalizing forces they encounter in the city. Subdivided into sixteen titled sections, the three narratives alternate among a variety of viewpoints, time frames, and events compiled through a series of flashbacks, official documents, and imagined stories. Al-Mohaimed crafts the convergence of the three narratives lives on the basis of the three characters' shared physical mutilation, poverty and alienation as they attempt to escape their harsh realities. The novel opens at a bus station with Turad, a disgraced one-eared Bedouin who has quit his job as a coffee man in a government ministry in order to escape merciless humiliation at the hands of his superiors, and has decided to abandon the capital, Riyadh, to an unknown destination. While at the bus station, Turad nostalgically meditates over his former life in the desert, imaginatively reconstructing the life of his old friend and co-worker, Tawfiq, a Sudanese ex-slave in his sixties. As a young child, Tawfiq was taken from his village, raped, and castrated by slave traders, who then sold him to a rich benefactor to work in involuntary servitude. After working for several years at the rich man's palace, Tawfiq began working at the ministry. The third character is Nasir, a young one-eyed man whose story is recollected on the basis of his orphanage case information that is kept in a green folder Turad finds at the bus station. Abandoned in a banana crate near a mosque, Nasir was brought to an orphanage where he suffered humiliation and sexual abuse. His misfortune was extended after leaving the orphanage when his dream of becoming a soldier was shattered due to his unknown parentage.

### STORYTELLING AS NARRATIVE: REALITY VERSUS DREAM

Before discussing the binary oppositions in *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*, it is helpful to consider the way in which the groundwork is laid for the co-existence of two narrative modes reflecting the novel's two distinct textual worlds. The 'real' mode refers to Turad's actual contemporaneous life as depicted by the omniscient narrator and by Turad himself as a first-person narrator. The 'embedded' mode depicts Turad's alternative imaginary and dream universe evoked by his subconscious mind. Whereas the novel's real

narrative is informed by Turad's single obsessive desire to flee the 'Hellish' city of Riyadh in search of a better opportunity, the embedded narrative is informed by a proliferation of his conjured memories and dreams. These, his own and those of Tawfiq and Nasir. Whereas realistic narration is used to establish the novel's setting in the first two chapters, the embedded narrative mode begins at the moment Turad falls asleep while at the bus station, and is retained in the remaining thirteen chapters of the novel. These two narrative modes reflect Turad's physical and psychological struggles.

While Al-Mohaimed employs the real narrative mode in the form of a prologue to present the factual details of Turad's life and the troubles he faces in work, namely those caused by his severed ear, his co-workers' bullying, and his poverty, the embedded narrative, the dream account, making up the bulk of the novel, is arranged in non-linear sub-narratives about the three main characters. This narrative mode is conducive to illustrating Turad's mental conflicts and psychological struggle as well as the two other characters' Tawfiq and Nasir, who appear only as absentee voices in contrast to Turad, the constant figure appearing as character-dreamer-narrator.

Only at the end of the novel's final chapter does the reader come to see how the real and embedded (or dream) narratives split again, when the omniscient narrator describes Turad's awakening from the dream: 'Turad had been dreaming for a long time in the bus station waiting room, when someone snatched the green file from his hand' (Al-Mohaimed 172). As opposed to the lack of demarcation of the beginning of the dream account, which manipulates the reader to continue reading while simultaneously casting into doubt the authenticity of the characters' narrative voices, this final description of the awakening confirms the novel's narrative closure and binary structure. This closure not only reminds the reader of Turad's identity as a dreamer-narrator, but also demonstrates how he was able to articulate in the embedded narrative what he failed to reveal in the real narrative reflected in the binary opposition between authority and freedom. Interestingly, in his visionary world, dreaming helps Turad to substitute his fixation on reality, attaining a temporary freedom to transgress authoritarian boundaries to implicitly negotiate the various identities and subjects he perceives through his dream world.

These two modes of narration, the realistic and the embedded, present a starting point for understanding the novel's binary structure, extending far enough to explain how the two narrative modes challenge the opposition between writing and speech, presence and absence, reality and dream, and past and present, allowing him to seek the 'truth' of his relationship with both the people in his society and the new era of modernity depicted in the novel. Giving primacy to the embedded over the real mode of narration by utilizing Turad's storytelling of his dream content, Al-Mohaimed places the opposition between the real and embedded narrative worlds in the same conceptual framework as that between speech and writing to demonstrate Turad's ability as a storyteller, a cultural figure often associated with spiritual healing, secret keeping, who can bespeak the voices of the

repressed, albeit only in a provisional way, and fight for their rights. By giving prominence to storytelling as a mode of narration, Al-Mohaimed seeks to grant the reader access to an innermost truth that can be revealed only by oral dialogical exchange, as writing is necessarily read in the absence of the author, who is not available to explain his intended meaning. Furthermore, storytelling and dream content found in the embedded narrative allow Al-Mohaimed to minimize authorial intrusion and justify ideas that are likely to be offensive or disturbing by the censorship authorities. This is confirmed by the novel's ending when the two imaginative characters, Tawfiq and Nasir simply vanish from the text and from real life at the end of the novel with the discovery that Turad had been dreaming in the bus station, indeed before their dilemma is settled (Al-Mohaimed 172).

### SETTING: NATURE VERSUS CULTURE

Al-Mohaimed uses his system of binary oppositions to construe relationships and values associated with the novel's setting by locating the city and the desert on axes of civilization and wilderness, nature and culture, present and past. By setting *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* in the capital city of Riyadh, Al-Mohaimed gives this binary opposition a central position. Although the city of Riyadh is presented during a period of economic affluence and prosperity, it compares unfavorably to the desert. Repeatedly referred to as 'Hell', the city is portrayed as an uncompromising and hostile place that imposes stringent restrictions on its residents. It is a site of displacement, transience, and dispossession; a space in which he had to bear the criticism of men and struggle with the hardships of earning a living: 'I ran away from the palace, and from the parking lot, and from the ministry, and now at last I am trying to run away from Hell' (Al-Mohaimed 42). As in many cultures, where the city represents a world of moral breaching, nepotism, and corruption, where individuals fall victim to merciless rules Riyadh is depicted in *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* as an inescapable prison, a world a world devoid of the positive values of equality, diversity, and inclusion. It is curious that both 'Saudi Arabia', the name of the nation-state, and 'Riyadh', the name of the city in which the novel is set, are absent from the text. Interestingly, however, Al-Mohaimed's selection of the novel's title and the cover image reflect the polarity between the city and the desert. Although the reference to wolves might be somewhat confusing, as it may refer to both the city and the desert, or to both Turad and the people he encounters in the city, it encompasses the larger opposing thematic purposes associated with good versus evil, construction versus destruction, and positive causes versus negative goals.

Whereas the façades of the city's ministry buildings, palaces, and bus station are emblematic of wealth and comfort, they are portrayed as bearing no resemblance in either form or spirit to the country's traditions and cultural heritage. Instead, they display an air of barrenness and dissonance. Soon after Turad is introduced, he is mentioned entering the ministry building as he encounters Badr, the director of financial affairs, 'whose arrogance and abuse rained down on him every day even in front of his guests and clients'

(Al-Mohaimed 7). Al-Mohaimed makes the point that the ministry building, despite its impressive façade of modernity, is a place of frenetic activity, run by the villainous identities lurking inside.

Recognizing that every Hell has a Heaven against which it is contrasted, Al-Mohaimed presents the desert as a countervailing trope to emphasize the dominant theme of nature as the locus of true wealth, generated by its eternal fortunes, its mountains, rivers, and skies, as opposed to the desolate and barren city of Riyadh. Whereas Riyadh corresponds to darkness, closure, confinement, and calculated capital gain, opposing images of the desert represent a desirable way of life. The desert provides a source of livelihood, openness, and ultimately access to infinite possibilities and resources that Turad sorely needs, in an environment in which both humans and animals can celebrate the pleasures of living. It is portrayed as an ideal site of freedom, renewal, atonement, and reconciliation. Lengthy passages describing its geographical features, such as wadis, mountains, and hills, figure prominently in the novel to show how the entire desert came under Turad's direction. The features of the desert are themselves treated like characters, acting on and influencing the human and animal characters' behavior with feeling and agency. Animals not only speak but also are brothers to Turad and his friend Nahar:

When Turad was alone in the desert, all the creatures were his friends. The sand served as his bed; the dune, the hill, and the plateau knew him well. The caves opened their hearts to him and offered him shelter ... Not even the wolves thought to attack him, for they shared his food ... He mocked the sand and insulted the wadis and chopped the awshza and acacias; he killed the hungry, panting wolves ... the sand avenging its dignity' (Al-Mohaimed 123).

Al-Mohaimed continues to explore the dichotomy between the city and the desert, between culture and nature, favoring the desert as a space that features the coexistence of past and present as it stands as a symbol of the indubitable values of memory, history, and the imagination of the Saudi individual. Unlike the city, the desert plays a central role in constructing Turad's subjectivity as a showcase of infinite opportunities and as a source of inspiration. His quest in the romantic desert is associated with the power of his imagination, recalled in his and Tawfiq's telling of tribal tales, as well as images of him in communion with all 'desert creatures ... the sand; the dune, the hill, the caves, and the riverbeds' (Al-Mohaimed 122).

### CHARACTERS: DOMINATION VERSUS MARGINALIZATION

Just as the contrast between the city and the desert plays upon the binary opposition between urban and rural life, nature and culture, so do the personalities of the novel's characters explore the binary opposition of dominance versus marginalization, Self versus Other, freedom versus repression, and rich versus poor. These binary notions are central to many of the activities governing the lives of the novel's characters. Distinct from members of the privileged society,

Al-Mohaimeed's three victims, Turad, Tawfiq, and Nasir, are presented as unskilled, transient, physically mutilated tribal individuals who become targets for public humiliation upon entering the unyielding world of urban development and employment. Suffering the effects of their physical losses severely, their conditions carrying enormous symbolic weight in the novel, these characters are endowed with identities anterior to and wholly separate from those of the dominant culture with which they appear to be in combat. They possess borderline identities, their physical mutilation preventing them from being physically or socially compatible with the norms of starting a family, earning enough money to secure a comfortable living, or even forming balanced relationships with other members of society. In addition, they burn with bitter memories and experiences of humiliation that prevent them from exploring alternative realms of possibility.

The symbolism of the protagonist's name, Turad, is obvious to readers of the Arabic language. Turad is a name that could be understood as indicating a character's subordinate social and cultural position. Derived from the Arabic verb 'tarada', meaning to expel, repel, or drive away, the name Turad may be understood to refer to the shameful history that continues to haunt him after leaving his tribe, and the oppressive conditions to which he is exposed in the city. The etymological significance of this name, with its overtone of misery and exile, invites the reader to draw a contrast between Turad and every member of the elite society who treads the road toward alleged heaven of modernization. The despairing journey Turad makes from the desert to the city of Riyadh, and from Riyadh to an undetermined destination, symbolizes the fate of other marginalized individuals who seek the benefits of modernization, but find that this destination offers only an arbitrary, elusive identity: 'Can you imagine having a completely made-up name? That chance alone had wished your name to be Turad and Mutrud or Mas'ud because that's where they stopped on the official list of names and gave you an arbitrary name' (Al-Mohaimeed 45).

Thus, the etymology of Turad's name is central to his identity. He is an enigmatic, middle-aged tribesman, a restless wanderer, who is rejected by and excluded from his community due to his poverty, lack of education, and physical mutilation. Emerging from the wilderness, he has few social connections or relationships. His life in the city revolves around his several attempts to make a living. He worked 'first as a day laborer, then as a tea boy; as a security guard at the gate of the palace; and finally as a messenger in the ministry' (Al-Mohaimeed 4). Unable to fully articulate what he believes to be the reason for his fate—his severed ear in addition to his lack of knowledge and skills appropriate to civil life—Turad suffers not only severe poverty but also disillusionment in the face of merciless humiliation at the hands of his superiors whose bullying and abusive treatment 'hit [him] in the head like bullets' in many occasions (Al-Mohaimeed 10). Turad's conflict with Badr engenders an extreme form of tension between the dominant culture of power and the marginalized, dominated groups in his society. Like many uneducated, less fortunate individuals in his society, the abusive treatment Turad receives from his superiors 'strip[s]' him 'of every ounce of dignity and de-

gency' (Al-Mohaimeed 4), thus turning him into a notorious rebel. Cut off from his original tribal life in the desert, he now resists the status quo by questioning the value system governing this newly modernized society:

He had been a bit hasty not showing up for work for three consecutive days without offering any excuse or submitting his resignation, so he could receive his due rights. But what rights are they, Turad? Do you have any rights in this city? Who would look out for your rights? Weren't you just a monkey for those bastards to amuse themselves with when they had nothing better to do? (Al-Mohaimeed 9).

Despite explicit efforts to use his tribal wisdom and knowledge to survive in his challenging environment, he fails twice: once at the ministry, where he worked as a coffee man, and a second time when he lost his job as a gate guard at a rich woman's palace:

I had been very honest in my work; not a thing got past me. Then I stopped the gentleman that the lady of the palace wanted to let in, I'd stopped him because the master had warned me not to let in anyone I didn't know when he wasn't there. But then, the damn master fired me without any explanation (Al-Mohaimeed 5-6).

Turad's physical mutilation and alterity compare directly to the case of Tawfiq, an equally important figure in the novel who is presented as evidence of the values governing the binary relation between Self and Other, mastery and subservience, slavery and freedom, inclusion and exclusion. Tawfiq's life story describes the period of slavery in Saudi Arabia, a system considered legal until the 1960s. Tawfiq is an elderly Sudanese immigrant, an ex-slave who represents the indigenous minority. Having been lured into slavery with 'a piece of grilled fat' (Al-Mohaimeed 89), he was owned, ravished, and emasculated by slave traders across the Red Sea region in his early childhood. He was then taken to Saudi Arabia and resold to a Hijazi merchant, before working in the women's harem of a rich family (Al-Mohaimeed 130-134, 154). Living during a period in which people could be bought and sold on the slave market, Tawfiq, like many expatriates of African origin, was among the 'women, children, and men in their white ihram, driven into a line on the deck of the African Moon', who traveled through the Red Sea in 'little boats'. Upon reaching the seaport of Jeddah, Tawfiq and his fellow slaves were crammed into 'trucks with wooden sides' like a herd of savage animals (Al-Mohaimeed 81).

Banished to the margins as a savage Other, his name was changed by the slave trader from Hasan to Tawfiq to indicate 'good fortune', which paradoxically turns into misfortune follow[ing] him like his shadow for the rest of his life. When he walked it would move after him as if it were whipping him, and when he stopped to take his breath, misfortune would stop with him, clinging to him like his preordained fate. (Al-Mohaimeed 81).

Tawfiq's life becomes doubly problematic after receiving the royal decree proclaiming his emancipation. As a marginalized Other, he has existed outside society's cultural system and found himself in the age of the advent of wealth, education, and technology, which differed vastly from his early life. Thus, Tawfiq rejects his freedom, which after years of

enslavement no longer holds any value. For freedom, making Tawfiq his own master, bears no meaning to someone who has been a slave all his life, who 'walks out of the palace gate carrying the deed of [his] freedom and wanders about the streets and alleyways without owning [his] daily bread to make [his] living' (Al-Mohaimed 155). Tawfiq's newly found freedom is thus potentially stifling. Despite being considered a step toward liberation, this freedom is in fact a step toward a wider gap between the privileged and the marginalized, a feeling bitterly expressed in Tawfiq's own words: 'This alien country was to be my country, her people my people. I would wear their clothes and eat their food, and I was to be at their service until the day I died, or so I understood' (Al-Mohaimed 111). Nasir's identity, too, speaks of Otherness and marginalization, through which Al-Mohaimed exposes the various forms of exploitation of children in his society committed by certain individuals and institutions. Born and raised out of wedlock, Nasir is portrayed as a living wreck, a tiny insular patch who owns nothing in life but a photograph, a lock of hair, and a small decaying tooth, all stuffed into a plastic bag attached to his green folder (Al-Mohaimed 106). Found in a banana crate in the street near a mosque, Nasir is taken to an orphanage where he is assigned an arbitrary identity 'without a definite article, unacknowledged nonentity' (Al-Mohaimed 48), that leaves him 'unacknowledged and indefinite' (Al-Mohaimed 143). He unjustly pays the price of his parents' misconception of modernity as sexual freedom, which they expressed in their forbidden sexuality. Physically and emotionally destroyed by an unsympathetic society, Nasir lacks the power and assertiveness to combat the violence and domination inflicted upon him in the orphanage, where he suffers sexual abuse at the hands of a Filipina woman who worked there (Al-Mohaimed 105). He was later brought into a palace as an adopted 'son' to satisfy the maternal instincts of a princess who had gone many years without bearing children. Perceived by the princess as a mere object, Nasir was sent back to the orphanage as soon as she felt the first signs of pregnancy: 'You go back now, little Nasir. The real son's arrived. You can go, pseudoson, offspring of cats and stray dogs, you can go to Hell' (Al-Mohaimed 154). Faced with this dehumanization, it is no surprise that Nasir ends up leading a lonely life with 'no father, only a tooth that fell out, and no mother, only a lock of soft hair ... no brothers or sisters, only people like [himself] abandoned and deprived' (Al-Mohaimed 106), taking his chances in the streets of Riyadh, trying hopelessly to make a living. Ironically, Nasir, even when wandering in the streets of Riyadh, is effectively as imprisoned as when he was caged in the orphanage.

In this novel that operates under the tension arising between hegemony and marginalization, between the inward-looking aspects of natural life and the outward-looking aspects of culture and modernization, another set of characters, namely Badr, Amma Madawi, Nasir's adoptive 'mother', and Tawfiq's slave traders, represent the dominant in modernized Saudi Arabia. Badr, Turad's antagonist, is the embodiment of the dark side of modernization in all its cruelty, ruthlessness, and ambition. Representing the elites' lust for power, he enacts the pride and vanity commonly ascribed

to people belonging to a dominant group or class. Despite appearing as a civilized man with social power and status (Al-Mohaimed 10), his actions utterly lack ethical substance and speak of ultimate brutality and corruption:

In fact, no one in the ministry could turn down a request from him, because his father was the owner of the biggest supplier of office materials in the city. He secured all the ministry's needs in terms of office furniture and photocopying equipment in exchange for paying a considerable percentage of the purchase price to the director of financial affairs (Al-Mohaimed 10).

Evidently, the strong connections of Badr's wealthy family earned him popularity and promotions, indicating the lack of fair measures of professional competency and the effects of a weak value system governing the country. Referred to by Turad as 'arrogant' more than once, Badr becomes the personification of the power-hungry mindset, whose narcissism and ambition cause him to wreak havoc on Turad, and perhaps on other people as well. Badr's attraction to Western culture has drawn his attention away from valuing his own traditions and from showing respect to Turad. This idea is illustrated by the incident in which Badr compares Turad's missing ear to that of Vincent Van Gogh, the Dutch painter 'who cut off his ear and gave his ear to his girlfriend' (Al-Mohaimed 11). In an environment marked by a fierce blurring of the boundaries of good and evil, the novel shows that women can be as harmful as men to the fate of the poor and as needy. Among the most formidable females in Nasir's world is Lumbai, the fat Filipina maid in the orphanage who introduces Nasir to the world of sex even before his manly organ asserts itself: 'It wasn't only the animals roaming through damp warm alleyways that abused your body. The nannies and the maids didn't spare you their mischief or lechery either; your body wasn't safe in their charge, even as a tender child' (Al-Mohaimed 107). Gamalat, the Egyptian nanny, is another example of a female abuser in Nasir's life at the orphanage. She stole his 'fish dinner in the evenings and gave him cheese sandwiches instead because she fancied it herself' (Al-Mohaimed 107), but she also destroyed his self-image: 'by giving [him] the nickname Colonel Nasser, Gamalat was showing that she hated [him]. She was saying that ... [he] was obsessed with military dress because [he] loved to boss people around and was a little tyrant (Al-Mohaimed 142). Gamalat's psychological abuse goes beyond criticizing Nasir's character by describing him as a dictator to make fun of his physical appearance. Comparing him to the murderer 'Moshe Dayan' (Al-Mohaimed 142). Gamalat comments on Nasser's missing eye to her co-workers: 'Why, just look at his eyes! They roared with laughter until tears ran down their cheeks' (Al-Mohaimed 143). Nasir continues to grapple with pain and misery when he meets Amma Madawi, a wealthy woman who offers him hope for a better life. He soon discovers that she is merely the latest addition to the list of female exploiters with whom he is living in the orphanage. Conversely, she embodies the various modernizing forces that govern elite society, of those who wish to change their destiny by manipulating that of other, less powerful individuals, ridding themselves of what they believe

to be worn-out values. When she first visits the orphanage, Amma Madawi appears innocent and straightforward, but contrary to her elegant appearance, she becomes dark and sinister when viewed more closely. As a typical example of a life-giving and life-denying matriarch, Amma Madawi, deprived of children for many years, decides to fulfill her maternal instincts by adopting Nasir. She does so with no consideration of the consequences for him of being suddenly uprooted from the place he considers home: 'One day, a wealthy lady came to the home.... Two days later, I was surprised to find them arranging my clothes and papers, and holding a simple farewell party for me with my brothers in the family' (Al-Mohaimed 144). A few days after teaching Nasir the rules of living in the palace, Amma Madawi, having claimed that she would treat him like she would her own mother, orders her servants to send him back to the orphanage. Utterly lacking in motherly emotions, she is unable to tolerate Nasir's act of relieving himself under the tree in her garden (Al-Mohaimed 148). For punishment, she 'kill[s] [him] with her silent stare which was tantamount to a real flogging with a whip', after which he was sent back to the orphanage, 'dragged' inside from the car 'like [one] would a piece of dead game or a victim to the altar' (Al-Mohaimed 149). The true reason for the limited role Nasir played as Amma's surrogate son is only revealed a few pages later, when Turad narrates that, as soon as she 'felt the first cravings of her pregnancy' (Al-Mohaimed 154), Nasir was no longer considered fit to remain at the palace.

## IMAGES

The deconstructive oppositions in *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* are manifested not only by the workings of its characters, but also by a series of contrasts that are easily traced at the level of imagery. Images of wolves permeate the novel, expressing the conflict between two types of consciousness, which by extension plays on the same binary opposition between nature and culture, man and animal, good and evil, authority and liberty. Although Al-Mohaimed's precise control over the wolves' image in explaining this binary opposition is not at all times clear, it can be easily traced through Turad's relationship with the wolves before and after his encounter with his fellow human, Nahar. While in the desert, before shifting his allegiance to Nahar, Turad is often described as having a harmonious relationship with the animals there, particularly with wolves: 'he loved the desert night and befriended the wolves. [He] would walk the crest of the dune while the wolf trotted along some distance away, keeping a wolfish eye on [him] but not thinking to attack' (Al-Mohaimed 53). Assuming shared qualities with wild animals' sense of smell, Turad 'could sniff [his] prey from far away, and would pounce on it brilliantly' (Al-Mohaimed 93). Turad's state of harmony with nature and its inhabitants is later contrasted with his state after he betrays nature by deciding to ally with his fellow human being, becoming friends with Nahar, 'each protecting the other and defending him' (Al-Mohaimed 123). From that time forth, Turad's relationship with nature shifts from one of fascination and reverence to one of hatred and exploitation: 'He mocked the sand and

insulted the wadis and chopped the awshaz and acacias; he killed the hungry panting wolves' (Al-Mohaimed 123).

As a result of shifting his allegiance from the wolves to Nahar, Turad becomes aware of the wild wind raging violently inside of his head that sprouted through the sand, the sand that was avenging its dignity, pressing down with all its weight on his body, surrounding him on all sides so that he could not move. Even the Shafallah bushes stretched their branches arrogantly and yawned in disdain at Turad, betrayer of the trees, the desert shrubs, and the pasture and the wolves. (Al-Mohaimed 123).

As such, Al-Mohaimed's metaphor of nature's punishment of Turad, culminating in the wolves' snatching his ear and devouring Nahar's head, emblemizes the price they paid for their betrayal of nature. Clearly, this story, which precedes Turad's transition to urban life, after breaching his pact with nature, allegorically refers to the history of modern Saudi Arabia, and to Turad's entrapment in its process of modernization, as well as his conscious understanding of his insignificance in this new era.

This idea of Nature's vengeance against Turad's entrapment in the process of modernization, which fills his weary mind, is illustrated from the first page of the novel through the image of wolves howling in the darkness of the city of Riyadh. Immediately influencing the reader's perception, this image is further illustrated by Turad's reaction; still waiting at the bus station, he encounters a huge portrait in the middle of a wall showing abstract figures of wolves with 'their muzzles raised toward the horizon' (Al-Mohaimed 22). As a desperate individual who is disillusioned by the city's hostility and the menacing actions of its people, Turad cannot overcome the problems caused by his abandonment of nature and wolves in favor of modernization, culture, and fellow humans:

All I want is a place where people will respect me, not abuse me or treat me like a dog. I ran away from my own folk because of the tribe. I ran away from the palace and from the parking lot, and from the ministry, and now at last I'm trying to run away from Hell. (Al-Mohaimed 42).

Turad is conscious of the growing dilemma of living in a modern city in which an individual's worth is measured by the standards of such characters as Badr, the slave traders, Amma Madawi, and the Filipina maid. These all represent wolf-men, far more dangerously animalistic and dark on the inside than are real wolves, ready to pounce on him and on any less powerful being who oversteps their prescribed limits. Exhibiting the characteristics of greed, manipulation, and betrayal, those like Badr, the slave traders, and Amma Madawi lurk in city streets, palaces, and ministry offices, acting as predators akin to wolves, posing greater danger to Turad and his fellow victims, Tawfiq and Nasir, than would the real desert wolves whom Turad was not afraid to befriend (Al-Mohaimed 53). The theme of human-animal dualism is also invoked by the image of the scent Al-Mohaimed uses to present his marginalized characters as savage, beast-like, instinctual beings lured by items of seduction and deception—the human body scent, the grilled fat, the female

perfume—to fulfill their basic needs for shelter, food, and sex. Relying on its elusive, difficult-to-define nature, Al-Mohaimed utilizes this motif as a cultural signifier reflecting how Turad, Tawfiq, and Nasir were destined to lose their body parts, causing them to suffer alienation. This idea is confirmed by Tawfiq's words: 'The first time I sold my humanity for the smell of gristle and became a slave and the second I sold my manhood for the smell of cotton wool and became a eunuch. May God destroy all smells' (Al-Mohaimed 89). In this way, the scent motif appears in the text to represent the various ways in which the Otherness of these three characters is displayed.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has explored *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* as a pivotal contemporary literary text that uses structural discourse to re-evaluate the criteria for inclusion in Saudi Arabian society and to negotiate the terms through which aspects of modernity are identified. The discussion has sought to reveal how much of the power in *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* lies in its foregrounding of a set of dualities that bring apparently disparate phenomena and concepts—such as the city, the desert, the tribe, the institution, the marginalized, and the wealthy—into imaginative coherence, reflecting the way in which aspects of modernity have permeated the traditional Saudi lifestyle. In its attempt to classify the world within dualistic a framework, the novel presents a complex system of oppositions with highly representative qualities, all utilized to show how modernity, adopted as a new paradigm in the last few decades, has overwhelmingly transformed the framework of traditional Saudi culture. Integrating real and dream universes and a narrative structure comprising multiple smaller narratives combined by a range of intricately woven tropes, metaphors, and images, this structuring of semantically binary elements, existing within and across the novel's plot and themes, provide the reader with clues that are crucial to understanding Al-Mohaimed's underlying judgment of the way modernity has been perceived and interpreted in his society. His view is clear that, despite good intentions of delivering the country from scarcity and toil, modernity has pushed its indigenous people into economic marginalization and ethnic discrimination.

As a contemporary novelist, Al-Mohaimed believes in the author's role in shaping his cultural milieu. His prose relies upon the utilization of binary oppositions that serve as the underlying grammar of his novel, enabling him to expand *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* into larger unspoken thoughts with the aim of revealing a range of cultural reactions of Saudis to aspects of modernity. Through the interconnected narratives of the three main characters, Al-Mohaimed constructs an intricate web of dualities in such a way as to call attention to the reality of the socially and economically marginalized identities coexisting with a societal group that tends to value people for their power, economic status, and authority. He thus manages subtly to express subversive layers of meaning that expose, disrupt, and resist cultural prejudices against the marginalized, and that invite his society to revise long-standing but mistaken forms of cultural domination.

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