Three Arabic Novels of Expatriation in the Arabian Gulf Region: Ibrāhīm Naṣrallāh's *Prairies of Fever*, Ibrāhīm ʿAbdalmagīd's *The Other Place*, and Saʿūd al-Sanʿūsī's *Bamboo Stalk*

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Abstract

Once oil revenues started pouring in the Gulf region by the 1950s, many Arab citizens from Egypt and the Levant moved there for work. A number of Arab novels have delineated the expatriation experience and highlighted the discrepancy between the expats' expectations of brotherhood, which emanated from their belief in the dominant pan-Arab ideology, and the reality of existence in societies that had social configurations that did not necessarily privilege Arab expats. This paper explores the perceived gap in the sociopolitical projects of the Gulf countries on the one hand, and the Levant and Egypt on the other. By comparing two novels by two Arab expat writers, Ibrāhīm Naṣrallāh's *Prairies of Fever* and Ibrāhīm ʿAbdalmagīd's *The Other Place* with a novel by a Gulf writer, Saʿūd al-Sanʿūsī's *Bamboo Stalk,* this article argues that despite the pre- and postcolonial forces that have shaped Gulf Societies into a different cultural region, the project that Gulf novels engage in is similar to the rest of the Arab World, namely, nation state building, with increasing awareness of hyphenated identities and subaltern people.

Key Words: Arabic Fiction, Arabian Gulf Writers, Realism, Nationalism, *The Bamboo Stalk*, *Prairies of Fever*, *The Other Place.*

Introduction: Arabic Literature of Migration

Arabic fiction abounds with migration stories. Epic encounters between Arab individuals and Western societies have led to some of the most thorough discussions of identity, modernity, and the other in modern Arabic fiction. For example, Yaḥya Ḥaqqī's *Qindīl Umm Hāshim* (Umm Hashem's Lamp; Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1940) was one of the first fictional works to record the influence of Western culture on a young Egyptian who went to England to study medicine, and who had to deal with culture shock in the West and upon going home. Dr. Ismāʿīl, the protagonist, loses his faith and his connection with his own people, only to realize later the importance of a balanced diet of Western science and Eastern spirituality. Al-Ṭayyib Ṣāliḥ captured a harsher encounter with more tragic consequences in *Mawsim al-hijra ilā 'l-shamāl* (*Season of Migration to the North*, Heinemann 1969). In the novel, Muṣṭafā Saʿīd, the young Sudanese who studied in England and used his charm to make English women fall in love with him, then broke their hearts and left them to commit suicide, was engaging in a counter-journey to the West, an invasion in retaliation for colonialism. Muḥammad Shāhīn (*Al-Thaqāfiyyah*, 2014/2015: 118) argues that Saʿīd was carrying the virus of violence that the colonialists infected his nation with. He wanted to write

back to the West and his journey was an act of revenge (ibid.). From the two examples above we can discern that the character of the Arab living outside of the Arab World gives Arab writers a chance to reflect on the troublesome history of colonialism and a forum to discuss the deep structural changes in Arab culture initiated by the colonial encounter, as well as the cultural contact through education and globalization in general.

Expatriation is also pertinent to the discussion of internal politics of the Arab World. For example, Stephan Guth argues that Gamāl al-Ghīṭānī in his novel *Risālat al-baṣāʾir fī 'l-maṣāʾir* (The Epistle of Insights into the Destinies, 1989) uses the situation of Egyptians in *al-ghurba* (outland) as a means to expose the failures of Sadat's policy of *Infitāḥ* (opening to the West) in the seventies of the past century. Egyptians who were hoping for a bright future in their post-independence nation state were forced to endure harsh conditions in other countries. Even those Egyptians who had not left Egypt were affected negatively by the money pouring in from abroad and transforming the values of Egyptian society, making people greedy slaves to money and profit (GUTH 2010: 150-151). The issue of migration has come to the fore again, with hundreds of thousands of Syrians fleeing their country to Europe, and highlighting yet again the North-South divide as well as Arab citizens' quest for freedom and liberation.

Among the different types of migration fiction, Arab migration to the oil-rich Gulf countries is a category of its own that merits more attention by critics and scholars. Many modern Arabic novels depict Egyptian, Lebanese, and Palestinian protagonists who moved to the Gulf as early as the 1950s, shortly after oil extracted in the Gulf became an international commodity. In 2013, a novel that tackled a similar journey to the Gulf won the Kuwaiti writer Saʿūd al-Sanʿūsī the Man 'Booker Prize' for Arabic novel. A Gulf writer's entry into the discussion of migration to the region merits study and raises questions about how the image of the region compares in the eyes of locals and expats.

Taking my cue from Roger Allen's call to reconsider the meaning of the Arabic novel and to include diverse voices from the Middle East in the academic study of Arabic literature (ALLEN 2007: 249), I compare Saʿūd al-Sanʿūsī's *Bamboo Stalk (Sāq al-Bambū*, 2013) with Ibrāhīm Naṣrallāh's *Prairies of Fever (Barārī al-Ḥummā*, 1985) and Ibrāhīm ʿAbdalmagīd's *The Other Place (al-Balda al-Ukhrā*, 1991).[1] Naṣrallāh and ʿAbdalmagīd tell stories of the expatriation[2] of two Arab skilled workers who moved to Saudi Arabia for work, while Sanʿūsī's story follows the repatriation of a Filipino-Kuwaiti back to Kuwait in search for family and a better life. The three protagonists set out on their journeys to the Gulf region as a result of the same global economic forces that brought millions of people to the region following the discovery of oil. What do the three journeys reveal about the Arab attitude towards Gulf countries? What does Sanʿūsī's novel show about the relation-

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1   I have chosen these specific novels to include voices from three different Arab countries by writers who have been writing in different traditions. Because the two novels by Naṣrallāh and ʿAbdalmagīd have the same setting (Saudi Arabia), the readers can, to a certain degree, assume that the two writers are depicting a similar reality and so focus on the differences and similarities in the protagonists' reaction to similar geographical and demographic realities. – For synopses of the three novels, see Appendix below.

2   Sabry HAFEZ calls them Egyptian expatriation stories, but there are novels by other Arab nationals such as Ḥanān al-Shaykh's *Misk al-Ghazāl* and Ibrāhīm Naṣrallāh's *Barārī al-ḥummā*.

ship between literature and society in the Gulf region? Are the questions that Gulf societies ask about identity categorically different from the ones heard in the rest of the Arab world?

By comparing the journeys of the three protagonists, I argue that in spite of the differences in the way Gulf communities are portrayed in the three novels, and although Sanʿūsī's novel was published almost three decades after Naṣrallāh's and two decades after ʿAbdalmagīd's, the three novels reflect some of the major concerns of Arabic fiction. They engage in the project of nation state building, with increasing emphasis on complex identities, marginal, and subaltern characters.

Arab Writers on the Gulf Region

Naṣrallāh and ʿAbdalmagīd have delineated the expatriation experience and highlighted the discrepancy between the expats' expectations of brotherhood, which originated from their belief in the dominant pan-Arab ideology, and the reality of existence in societies that had social configurations that did not necessarily privilege Arab expats. The protagonists in both novels live on the margin of the host societies and feel out of place and subservient to the communities. The protagonists react to their marginalization within the host communities with damning portrayals of Saudi society as pre-modern and disconnected from Arab causes. The attack on Saudi culture is particularly evident in *The Other Place*, which vehemently criticizes the political and economic policies of the state in the form of political discussions, debates, and monologues. Ismāʿīl, the protagonist, discusses Camp David, Russian and American roles in the Arab region, and sees his marginal role in society as a result of the marginalization and ostracization of Egypt after signing the peace treaty with Israel.

Naṣrallāh's novel, on the other hand, contains veiled criticisms of society, dispersed over the modernist portrayals of the Saudi space as nightmarish and devoid of any human connections. The protagonist's feelings stem largely from the place he lives in. He is haunted by dreams of a better life and brotherhood, connection with people he shares a common language, religion, and culture with. In reality, however, he discovers the gap between the Levant and the Gulf. But he also discovers a rift within as well. One could argue that the schizophrenic Ustādh Muḥammad represents the Arab individual who was put asunder by the Arab official political discourse before the Six-Day War and the shock of defeat afterwards. This individual is subject to more oppression, sexual repression, and exploitation by living conditions in the village he moves to. He is not the only victim, though. All the weak and poor people are exploited by the petite bourgeoisie, such as Aḥmad Luṭfī, the local merchant, and his friend Jābir, the chief of police. The novel does not, however, offer a realistic study of social oppression or offer a way to deal with it. For example, the greedy merchant Aḥmad Luṭfī, disappears one night, and many people swear that he was transformed into a wolf. Aḥmad Luṭfī's metamorphosis highlights the transformations in the society that are causing some people to lose their humanity and to become predators.

Unlike the postmodern *Prairies of Fever*, *The Bamboo Stalk* in its literary technique and social concern belongs to the early period of the Arabic novel, the early Maḥfūẓ'ian tradition of realism and the formation of the nation state. With its linear plot and verisimilar

depiction of life in the Gulf, Sanʿūsī's novel raises questions about the relationship between different social strata. I am aware that the classical periodization of Arabic literature has come under attack by some scholars such as Wail Hassan who considers it "reductive" (Hassan 2002: 59), but I am not discussing the emergence of the Arab novel vis-à-vis the corresponding stages of the European novel. Rather, the borrowing here is happening across Arab countries. The Gulf writers borrow from the Egyptian novelistic model because it serves their project of identity formation which is far from being completed.

Realism and Identity Politics

One reason that makes the issue of identity relevant and highly contested originates from sheer numbers. Gulf people are minorities in their own countries. Thanks to oil, the prosperity and opportunity have attracted millions of people to the region, with the promise of riches and quick money. Although Gulf citizens have the lion's share of the wealth, they have to live with the fact of multiculturalism in many contexts. Even in their homes, they are met with foreign faces, languages, and religions. I argue that the Gulf writers have found realism as a suitable literary technique to make sense of diversity. Faced with the potential danger of melting in the mix, many Gulf writers choose realism as a way of capturing the details of their daily lives, of controlling the narrative through the reliable voice of the narrator.[3] Realism is a choice, not the only possible narrative form. The Gulf has a rich oral tradition which contains many tales that echo the phantasmagorical world of the *Arabian Nights*. There are tales of metamorphoses, mythical creatures and supernatural incidents.[4] However, the Gulf writers reject this oral tradition in favour of the realistic tradition imported from early twentieth century Egyptian fiction. Egyptian writers were a strong influence on the Gulf region, especially when many Egyptian teachers, professors, and cultural consultants moved to the Gulf region after the discovery of oil and started introducing Egyptian writers and culture. For example, *Al-ʿArabī* cultural magazine, one of the most popular cultural magazines in the Arab World, which has been published by the Kuwait Ministry of Information since 1958, had two Egyptian editors-in-chief from 1958-1982 before Kuwaitis started assuming the position. The magazine very early on featured articles and excerpts from Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Nagīb Maḥfūẓ, Yūsuf Idrīs, Ṣalāḥ ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr, etc. and exposed Kuwaiti and Arab readers to the realistic tradition in Egyptian fiction. (Nahid SAMIR 2015: para 4). Fabio CAIANI (2007) summarizes the features of the realistic Arabic novel in the realistic phase in Arabic literature (early Maḥfūẓ) as boasting a reliable narrator, verisimilar details, clear setting, realistic details, linear plot, clearly defined time and place, and life-like characters (ch. 1). The *Bamboo Stalk* features all of the characteristics of realistic fiction, as Sanʿūsī' was very meticulous in giving exact dates and details about the protagonist's life. Another feature that the novel emulates is the long gratuitous preambles that the pioneers of Arabic fiction wrote to convince the readers of the authenticity of the tales they told (HAFEZ 1994: 99). *Bamboo Stalk* contains a translator's preface, in

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3   Some examples are Kuwaiti writer Laylā al-ʿUthmān and Emirati writer Muḥammad al-Murr.

4   See, for example, *The Donkey Lady*, PAINE (et al.) 2013.

which the fictional translator Ibrāhīm Salām gives a disclaimer that the novel exclusively represents the author's point of view, not the translator's. This preface is part of the novel's attempt to create complete make-belief.

Before discussing the three novels, and *Bamboo Stalk* in particular, let us look at the pre and postcolonial forces that brought people to the Gulf region. This discussion is important for understanding the background of the *Bamboo Stalk*'s protagonist, Jose ('Īsā).

Small communities of Arabs started migrating from the Arab Peninsula to the Arabian Gulf as early as 1650. They were escaping the drought that hit Arabia and made living conditions unbearably harsh. In their new milieu, the immigrants settled down and established fishing villages, engaged in pearling, and, later on, trade. The Kuwaiti mercantile class built ships and Kuwaiti entrepreneurs travelled to India starting from the late 19th century. India, not the Arab Levant, was the major influence on Gulf countries, especially economically. The Indian rupee was the official currency in Kuwait until it was replaced with the Kuwaiti Dinar in 1961, the year of independence from British protection.

With time, the fishing villages have been transformed and have grown into an urban community that became the target of attacks by new waves of people. As a result, the authorities built a wall around Kuwait city to weather the raids. Slowly, the new waves of immigrants in turn settled down and became part of the country, but for so many, the wall, even after it was physically removed, lived on as a psychological wall between the urban and nomadic life styles.

More people kept crossing over to Kuwait and, as a result, the border between Kuwait and the surrounding countries was the site of a few wars. One memorable instance is the battle of Jahra, when the Ikhwān warriors from Saudi Arabia invaded Kuwait in October 1920, only to be defeated, thanks to the fierce resistance the Kuwaiti forces put out and the assistance of the British (CASEY 2007: 55). While no more invasion attempts were made after that, the border, however, remained porous, as more people continued to cross back and forth from Saudi Arabia into Kuwait. In addition, more people crossed from Iraq into Kuwait.[5]

Part of the reasons for the continued disputes over boundaries is that political boundaries in the Arab World do not customarily follow geography and, in many cases, were drawn by colonial powers. Those political lines of demarcation have left some people in and others outside the boundaries of the Gulf nation states that emerged after the end of World War II. The once fluid boundaries turned into rigid borders that limited the movement of people. When the nation states developed they, like other political entities in the world, created systems of opening and closing to guarantee that only those who "belong" to the new "imagined community", to use Benedict ANDERSON's term, were allowed entry. This border stopped most people from coming in to claim the benefits of citizenship, but it allowed and regulated the flow of other people who would come for temporary work, tourism, and family visits.

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5 For example, the tragic tale of the four Palestinian men in *Rijāl fī 'l-shams* (Men in the Sun, Kanafānī 1998) who use the services of a smuggler to cross from Iraq to Kuwait looking for job, only to suffocate to death inside the water tanker they hid in to cross the border. The four men were drawn to Kuwait by the promise of jobs and opportunities in the early 1950s and as a way of starting a new life after the loss of Palestine in 1948.

In Kuwait's case, the need for expat workers increased after the discovery of oil in the 1930s. More workers were needed to operate hospitals, schools, and facilities that emerged as a result of the improvements in infrastructure and the rise in consumerism. In addition, an army of domestic workers from the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and other areas was enlisted to serve the population as maids, drivers, cooks, and gardeners.

The Socio-political Background of the *Bamboo Stalk*

The novel's plot is a corollary of Kuwait's opening to the world. Because the boundary opens and shuts to allow the needed work force into the country, the society will be bound to become multi-ethnic and multicultural. The structural transformations that Kuwait and other Gulf countries have witnessed from closed societies with limited diversity to open societies have resulted in a spectrum of people of all colours and backgrounds. The heart does not always follow geographical boundaries, tribal backgrounds, or family preferences, and as a result there will be love stories, affairs, and all kinds of relationships that would challenge the status quo. Faced with diversity, societies have two options: Either embrace diversity as an ultimate result of globalization, and accept the bonds of love/loyalty over family bonds as the building block of society, or establish even stricter boundaries that go beyond what the official policies allow, to sanction unity and coherence among the group members and to punish certain promiscuous acts that challenge the status quo. The power of policing sexuality and promiscuity comes in different shapes such as economic sanctions (inheritance laws), shaming, and the loss of benefits for those who dare to challenge the social boundaries. Al-Sanʿūsī fictionalizes the conflict between individual choice and social normative behaviour by bringing together two disparate worlds: Kuwait and the Philippines.

In the novel, Rāshid al-Ṭarūf, an aspiring writer, is the only male left of a line of an established, well-known family. The burden of preserving the name of the family lies with him and he has to find a wife who meets the expectations of his mother, the matriarchal figure, Ghanīma. The power of the mother is great because she still controls the inheritance from the father, and she is the head of the household. She is interested in finding a match for her son and husbands for her four daughters, provided that the spouses come from a compatible tribal or familial background. The name of the family refers to a type of fishing net, which reveals a heritage and a connection to the old families in Kuwait; people who are thought to be the founders, born within the old walls of Kuwait City. Being born within the walls is the ultimate sign of authenticity. This is why the mother refuses her son's marriage to a girl whom he dated while a student at the university because she came from an inferior background.

The mother is ever aware of the vulnerability of the family's social status. It is one that is based on acceptance among similar circles. So when she discovers her son's rendezvous with the Filipino maid, the mother declares that the relationship should never be allowed to continue or be accepted, even though the couple was legally married. There are no guarantees that society will continue to accept her and her family if a "shameful" act, such as her son marrying a maid, is exposed. She is constantly afraid of Umm Jābir, the neighborhood's gossip. Gossip is a power to reckon with. It is one other weapon in society's arsenal

of social controls. A story that circulates about a family is enough to destroy the daughters' prospect of marriage. This is why when the mother hears about Rāshid's marriage to his maid she yells, "you selfish low life—your sisters, who is going to marry your sisters?" She is relentless and even when Rāshid brings her baby ʿĪsā, she refuses to see him. When Rāshid moves out of the house, she sends him a message that if he apologizes and leaves the girl and "her son," she is willing to take him back and even allow him to marry a girl of his choice. Finally, Rāshid caves into the pressure and sends his wife and baby to the Philippines. Thus, transgression is punished, the son goes back to the fold, and Josephine's journey back home concludes the first part of the novel, up to the birth of ʿĪsā. The novel then continues in a linear fashion to tell the story of ʿĪsā's childhood, leaving his village at the age of sixteen to work in Manila, and his journey to Kuwait.

The author spent some time in the Philippines in order to understand the culture and enrich his novel with realistic details. He describes the challenges facing the Philippines and hints at the economic and political reasons that forced Filipino women into working overseas or, as in the case of Josephine's sister Ida, become prostitutes, but the focus becomes more social than political once ʿĪsā moves to Kuwait. The narrative focuses on the divisions among the stratified social classes and the straitjackets of tradition that restrict men's and women's options. And like in Gulf women's fiction, as Muhsin al-Musawi argues in a different context, the novel's "ideological dimension is minimized to allow more space for domestic details and economies" (AL-MUSAWI 2007: 319). The story looks inward and attempts to analyze the private space of the Kuwaiti family. Even the fountainhead of the country's fortune, oil, is absent from the novel completely; only the fruits of the oil wealth are shown. The power of patriarchy and oil mesh in a way that makes it impossible to pinpoint which forces dominate society, social or economic.

Gulf Societies through the Eyes of Arab Writers

Oil, on the other hand, casts a long shadow over the other two novels. The expat Arab writers focus on the impact of oil on Gulf societies. For them, a lucky accident of history has created the conditions for the local communities to be able to hire the expats. Ismāʿīl, the first person narrator in *The Other Place* and Muḥammad in *Prairies of Fever* left their countries for Saudi Arabia as a result of the push factors of political instability in their countries, and the pull factor of economic opportunity. The two protagonists, however, point out that oil did not achieve the promise of development and urbanization in the areas they moved to. When Ismāʿīl discovers that there is no phone line to call ʿĀʾida, his love interest in another village in Saudi Arabia, he protests, "Damn the oil, the riyal, the dinar, and the dollars that kept the distances so long!" (ʿABDALMAJĪD 1997: 230). In Naṣrallāh, while the oil is not clearly mentioned, the episode of the three people who fell in a well and then died in a fire that started because of a gallon of gas inside the well, points indirectly to this symbolic well that is changing the lives of people.

The Other Place is the most political of the three novels. The characters constantly discuss transnational politics: Pakistan, Egypt, Camp David, and American power in the region. The impact of politics on lives of individuals is clear. In *Bamboo Stalk*, the impact of Spanish colonization, World War II, and poverty on the Philippines is mentioned in pass-

ing, but the novel does not attempt an analysis of how these forces came to bear on the people. *Prairies of Fever* is the least political of the three novels. Its postmodern format and the fragmented life of the protagonist leave no room for a realistic plot. The politics is implied, and dispersed throughout the novel. We see oil, alienation and expatriation that came as a result of the political conditions in the Middle East, but the causes are never discussed. So when the protagonist finds a newspaper that reports the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon, he had no way of ascertaining whether the war was still raging on or not, since the newspaper was three weeks old. The time lag symbolizes the insular existence in that remote Saudi village and the total isolation from the world.

Ibrāhīm Naṣrallāh's main character is a teacher who comes to work at a school in al-Qunfuda, near the Red Sea. The teacher breaks down under the pressure of alienation and loses his sense of self. He wakes up one day to knocks on the door. When he opens, a group of locals ask him to donate money for his own funeral. He assures them that he is alive and that the dead person is his (imaginary) roommate, but to no avail. After that he starts his search for his other, and under the influence of the heat he is totally disoriented and completely delirious. The dream-like or, rather, nightmarish state of mind reflects his rejection and incapability to accept life in the desert which becomes tantamount to deprivation, alienation, and lack of belonging. The narrator comments that al-Qunfuda is "capable of splitting a man in half, so how can there be a hope of unity in this divided place?" (NAṢRALLĀH 1993: 63). The unity here could be a reference to unity among local people, or even among Arab populations.

Ismāʿīl, the narrator in *The Other Place*, is a more normal first person, but even he experiences a few incidents of loss and disorientation when he aimlessly roams the roads of the town. Dream and reality are mixed so much so that the lines between the two are blurred. Those states of dreaming reflect the desire to escape, and the inability to process, the experience. His mental grasp on reality starts to slip towards the end of the book, especially when all his housemates move out and he is left alone to chase the mice and, at times, converse with them.

The expat protagonists feel lonely because they have limited access to the local community. They are always looking from outside, and the native is either a boss at work, a landlord, or a neighbour. We never see the scene from inside the locals' houses. The few houses, offices, and ramshackle buildings seem as mere punctuation marks on the vast page of the desert which is almost a character in the novels. It is the enemy, the antagonist, a place of loss. Sand storms, the heat, and the sun sneak into many passages in the two expat novels to add to the gloomy atmosphere.

Because of their inability to understand the inner workings of the Arabian society, the expat protagonists of Naṣrallāh and ʿAbdalmagīd's novel start questioning Pan-Arabism, and the idea of a shared culture between the Levant and the Gulf. They start seeing the Gulf as the other to their own national self, as "wealth versus culture and history" (HAFEZ 1994: 95). In *The Other Place*, the image of the Saudi citizen is generally negative. A special target of attack is ʿAmm ʿAbdallāh, the director of the company who comes across as a cold, calculating figure who has no qualms about abusing the system for his own benefit. Another figure is Manṣūr, the company's representative who always comes to work with a monkey around his neck. Obsessed with the Egyptian teacher Widād, he courts her incessantly and tries to convince her to leave her fiancé to marry him. Finally, when she acqui-

esces, he celebrates the engagement with a big feast that he invites everybody in town to. However, instead of the traditional lamb with rice dish, he cooks lizards and monkeys for them. It turns out that the girl was deceiving him and had already married a relative. He came back very angry, "cursing the oil and the day it began to flow. Before, people used to eat the local animals. Lizards were a delicacy in the desert" (ʿABDALMAJĪD 1997: 315). Manṣūr represents the failed modernization of the people. When Widād rejected him, Manṣūr decided to teach the community a lesson through reminding them of the past they sought to forget.

Not all Gulf people are painted with the same brush, though. Waḍḥa and her brother Khālid are open minded, western- educated and exotically attractive. However, we learn later on that they had an Egyptian grandfather, which explains their cosmopolitan orientation. Like them, the protagonist Ismāʿīl is well-informed about world culture. He has discussions with the American couple about classical music. He empathetically discusses Pakistani politics with Arshad, and discusses Hamlet and Naguib Mahfouz, classical Arabic literature, poetry, pop culture, Western movies with others. His worldly knowledge is in sharp contrast with the superficial natives, but he is still subservient to them due to his socio-economic background.

The Saudi community in *Prairies of Fever* is even more basic and backward. The narrator describes the primordial scene of the arrival of paved roads to the villages. "The people of Sabt Shimrān, Thuraibān, Naqma, and al-Sawād rushed out, each holding the edges of his gown between his teeth. Women, children, old people and slim-waisted young girls, all ravaged by tuberculosis, assembled" (NAṢRALLĀH 1993: 111). This and other passages have triggered angry responses from the people of that Saudi city, even many years after the publication of the novel. Naṣrallāh and ʿAbdalmagīd's narrators find no affinity with the locals. Contrary to their expectations, the locals see the Arab expats as faceless characters in a torrent of foreigners, the common faith and language notwithstanding. The Europeans and the Americans, on the other hand, are seen with awe and are given more leeway than all others. For example, Larry, the American, embezzles three hundred thousand dollars from the company and sends a letter to ʿAmm ʿAbdallāh simply saying, "Sorry, Mr. ʿAbdallāh. I am not coming back to the Kingdom. Bye, Larry" (ʿABDALMAJĪD 1997: 278).When the Egyptian office boy steals some money and tries to leave the country, the police stop the plane, arrest him, and give him a brutal beating.

In *Bamboo Stalk*, the view of the Kuwaiti society is complex. The novel does not dismiss the people as one group, but seeks to examine the society's dynamics and the reasons why there are forces with and others against reform and modernization. ʿĪsā's journey home then becomes, as Elias Khoury argues about the journey in Mahfouz, "voyage toward a national image through the mirror of the other" (KHOURY 1990: 5). This journey started before ʿĪsā was born when his father fell in love with his maid. Rāshid enjoyed the company of Josephine and talked to her about politics in both Kuwait and the Philippines. He found something of value and a lesson to learn from her people, especially the role of women in society. When it is ʿĪsā's turn to venture into a new world, he does not take anything for granted, but always asks questions to understand his home country's culture, and tries to make sense of the contradictions he sees all around him. For example, he ponders how Kuwaiti people greet strangers and are very generous, but his family is still capable of

being cruel to their own son. He reflects on the domestic life of the Kuwaiti household, and shows how Kuwaitis interact among themselves.

ʿĪsā dwells an urban space. The desert is the space where the family goes for camping and other fun activities. The space has been domesticated and is not to be feared. ʿĪsā has a place within the Kuwait urban space, albeit relegated to a small room in the servants' quarter. Even when ʿĪsā roams the streets of Kuwait, the narrative is realistic. He is mapping the area and claiming it as his own, but he does not achieve that fully.

ʿĪsā's identity as an outsider is affirmed daily. Every new encounter, whether with the police who throw him in prison for not having the residency card, or the man who tries to pick him up, contributes to the sense of not belonging. The illusion of being a Kuwaiti and living in a Kuwaiti house, albeit a small room in the servants' quarter, breaks down whenever he goes out in public. Practicing place, in Michel de Certeau's term, turns it into space, but this space is alien (DE CERTEAU 1984: 117). The categories of 'alien' versus 'one of us' are so fixed that he is not accepted to be one of the locals. His appearance immediately triggers a view of him as a foreigner who is to be suspected and subjected to the authorities' official investigation. Even back in the Philippines, ʿĪsā did not have a secure sense of belonging.

As a child, ʿĪsā tended to spend time sitting in the garden to reflect on his situation, but his mother did not like that. The adult narrator comments: "Why was my mother bothered by my sitting under the tree? Was she afraid that I would take roots and never go back to my father's homeland? May be, but even roots are sometimes meaningless" (94). In retrospect, he realizes that having the biological connection to the Ṭarūf family was not enough to give his existence any meaning in their eyes. He then expresses his wish to be a bamboo plant, "you cut off a piece of stalk, plant it anywhere, and it grows without a root, without a memory" (94). His wish for a rootless existence can be seen as a post-modernist recognition of exile as a new life style for millions of people, and a wish for a more open society, but it can also be a wish for an easy solution, a desire to blend in with the rest of this alien society.

Gulf Society through the Eyes of a Gulf Writer

ʿĪsā shares this alienation from society with the stateless Ghassān. He is shown as a tragic character, and as ʿĪsā remarks, his face defines the meaning of sadness. Ghanīma rejects him when he proposes to Hind who was in love with him. Furthermore, the grandmother believes that he brought ʿĪsā from the Philippines to spite the family and humiliate them for rejecting him. Even ʿĪsā subscribes to that idea and stops talking to him, Ghassān, but they make amends at the end and he realizes that Ghassān cared about him like a father. The portrayal of the individual crushed by social forces is all too common in Arabic literature, and as M. M. Badawi argues, one of the "perennial themes" in modern Arabic literature (BADAWI 1993: 9). The novel makes it clear that the victimization of Ghassān had no rational justification; it is a political mistake that generations of politicians failed to rectify and passed on to others.

The older generation are seen as rigid and inflexible. Symbolically, the grandmother suffers from stiffness in her joints and is always in pain. When ʿĪsā massages her legs and

relieves her of pain temporarily, she also softens towards him, but for a short time. Both the Kuwaiti grandmother and the Filipino grandfather reject him. Young people, on the other hand, are sympathetic and open-minded. Khawla, ʿĪsā's half-sister, and the five crazy Kuwaiti youth whom he met in the Philippines are the exception to society's negative attitude towards him and the hope for the future.

Khawla is a very serious girl who loves reading. A favourite of her grandmother, she convinces her to allow ʿĪsā to live with them in the house. She also encourages him to write his story, in order to finish their father's novel. ʿĪsā resists first because the choice of language was a problem: without mastery of English or Arabic, the only option would be Tagalog. He decides to ask his friend Ibrāhīm Salam, the translator at the Philippines embassy in Kuwait, to translate it into Arabic. The novel turns out to be an act of writing back to the family, mediated through the effort of a Filipino Muslim who studied in Kuwait on a scholarship. All these postcolonial connections make it possible for ʿĪsā to write back. However, one question stays on his and Khawla's mind: what is the use of writing when nobody reads? The intellectual's inability to effect social change looms large in the novel. However, ʿĪsā at least managed to get his book out, unlike his father who never completed his novel. The writer in either case is an outsider who is analysing society and holding up the mirror to the population but not, contrary to Samah Selim's argument about Arab writers at the turn of the century, from a position of power or hegemony (SELIM 2003).

If writing gives some hope for improving social relations in Kuwait, the novel makes it clear that the real catalyst for social change would be the young people. They are admired for their inclination to transverse all boundaries. For example, the five crazy men campaign and vote for ʿĪsā's aunt Hind in the parliamentary elections, they accept ʿĪsā as one of them, and cry when he leaves. They are both pious and transgressive; some drink alcohol, some do not. Despite coming from different social backgrounds, they transcend the differences and choose to live as brothers and soul mates. They are always together in Kuwait and abroad, whether travelling to watch a football game in the Philippines or to have a vacation somewhere else. Those crazy young men are promiscuous and are sure to challenge the rules of society. They are the ones who would probably have affairs, illegitimate children, and will continue to challenge the restrictions imposed on them by society. Hailing from different sects of Islam, they still pray together, laugh together, and travel together. ʿĪsā addresses them in the dedication to the novel and says, "To you alone."

The novel's treatment of the crazy friends is too sentimental, for it does not explain what kind of cement holds their friendship. Similarly, the novel does not analyze the reasons that young Ghassān, Rāshid, and Walīd became close friends. What are the forces that prevent such personal connections from developing into an all-encompassing ideology for empathy with all people, locals and expats alike? The novel sympathizes with ʿĪsā not because he is a foreign worker in Kuwait, but because he is a Kuwaiti who is ostracized by society. The writer does not push for a hybrid Kuwaiti identity or a radical definition of the meaning of Kuwaiti identity. The nation is loosely defined as an entity of like-minded people with deep roots in the country or blood ties to other citizens. They share the love for the country, the regime, and one another. How love can hold in the face of group interests and competing projects, however, is never explored. Maybe the only possible means is to wait for the old generation to pass away and hope for a more cohesive community of young people. However, there are no guarantees that the younger generation would continue to be

open-minded or committed to social justice. The uncritical faith in the youth usually over-looks temporality and the trend for people to grow more conservative with time.

Bamboo Stalk is an interesting exploration of Gulf identity formation as the site of in-tersecting global economic, political, and social forces. It goes beyond identity as a mono-lithic construct, but stops short of an open, more inclusive view of the nation. After all, Gulf citizenships are some of the hardest to get in the world, especially with the rights and privileges attached to them. The novel concerns itself with the intra-societal conflicts. Gulf writers continue to produce critiques of their societies and seek to identify how they relate to the rest of the world. While the Gulf might not soon take over Egypt and the Levant as the centre of Arabic culture, it is a force to reckon with and will demand a place in the canon of Arabic literature.

Appendix – Synopses of the three novels

Barārī al-ḥummā (Prairies of Fever)

The novel opens with Ustādh Muḥammad, an expat teacher from Jordan who works in a Saudi village, waking up to knocks on his door. It turns out that some local officials were there to ask him for donation for his own funeral. He tries to convince them that he was alive and that the person they were seeking was actually his roommate, but to no avail. He starts to look for his roommate, but then gradually discover that nobody else knew that that person existed and maybe he, Ustādh Muḥammad, was really dead. Slowly, he his grasp on reality starts to slip, especially that he was roaming he village in the stifling heat. While on his quest for answers, he meets many other locals and hears about the problems facing other expats.

al-Balda al-ukhrā (The Other Place)

Ismāʿīl comes from a poor family in Egypt. A distant relative offers to get him a job in Saudi Arabia. When he arrives in the town, that relative leaves the company and Ismāʿīl is left to seek companionship with the other workers from Egypt, Pakistan, the Philippines and Jordan, among other countries. Suffering from exploitation by an American lady and her husband, he gets to see the special treatment that the Americans get. All of his house-mates leave through the holidays, and he is left to roam the bleak town looking for distrac-tions. After many disappointing encounters with locals and some expats, he loses faith in human solidarity and starts to see his existence as ephemeral, rootless, and pointless. See-ing most of his colleagues get deported for a variety of infractions, he ultimately decides to leave as well.

Sāq al-bambū (The Bamboo Stalk)

In the novel, ʿĪsā tells us the story of his life as a son of a Kuwaiti father and a Pilipino mother. In a flashback, he recites how his father met his mother who worked as a maid at the family house. He married her, but when ʿĪsā grandmother found out, she mad e him send her back with their son to the Philippines. The father complied, but he promised to bring them back to Kuwait in the future. ʿĪsā spend his early years in the Philippines and

suffered the life of poverty with his mom, aunt, and the drunk grandfather. The mother kept trying to contact the father, only to learn that he had died during the Gulf War. However, her husband's best friend sent her the necessary papers for ʿĪsā to join his Kuwaiti family. In Kuwait, ʿĪsā's hopes for a happy family reunion were shattered when he was faced with rejection by his Kuwaiti family. The grandmother finally accepted his as an inferior member of the household, but kept his presence a secret for fear of society. Isa however decides to leave the family house and finds a little apartment to be an independent person and get to know the country of his father. He keeps reflecting on Kuwaiti society and keeps searching for his "true" identity.

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