Representative Images of Saudi Arabia and Saudis: An Imagological Study of Some Selected Novels in English

Mohamed S. A. Aly[1], & Asma Sakit Alshammari[2]

[1] Associate Professor, English Department College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam bin Abdelaziz University, Saudi Arabia

[2] Assistant Professor, English Department College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam bin Abdelaziz University, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Mohamed S. A. Aly, Associate Professor, English Department, College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam bin Abdelaziz University, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: ms.ali@psau.edu.sa

Abstract

The image of the Orient has been a "construct" of the West, emerging from a dualistic dichotomy of East versus West, or the subject encountering the "Other"—the subservient other that needs the "civilizing mission" of the West (*mission civilisatrice* in the sarcastic words of Edward Said). In the contemporary scene, the images of Saudi Arabia and the Saudis in western novelistic discourse has not displayed much change, or it may have taken different forms under the effect of the demise of the old colonialism and the prevalence of globalization, especially in the cultural sphere. The Orient has woven itself into Western culture through translations and English-language writings, shaping its own image and sparking significant interest due to the substantial political and economic influence of contemporary Saudi Arabia. The current study investigates some representative images of Saudi Arabia and Saudis in Anglophone narratives of English-speaking novelists, native Saudis' novels in English, and translations of Native Saudis' novels. This adds a discussion of the image of the orient created by the orient itself. In analysing these images, the study explores numerous examples, comparing and contrasting them in the manner of imagology, with special reference to three representative narratives: Hilary Mantel's *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* (1988), Ghazi Al-Gosaibi's *Freedom Apartment* (1994/1996), and Eman Quotah's *Bride of the Sea* (2021).

Keywords: Representative Images, imagology, images of Saudi Arabia and Saudis, ne-orientalism, Anglophone fiction, self-image and hetero-image.

1. Introduction

Over the past three decades, the portrayal of Arabs, particularly Saudis, has garnered significant attention in English literary discourse, largely influenced by the Gulf Wars and the events of 9/11. Additionally, positive developments, driven by Saudi Arabia's remarkable progress in economic, political, and cultural domains, have further fueled this interest. However, these advancements have yet to bring about a notable shift in the entrenched stereotypical image shaped by centuries of rigid perceptions.

Native cultures construct categories of otherness and strangeness, depending mainly on impressions and false generalisations. This reduces different people's culture, language, and mentality into rigid static images. The image can partially correspond to reality or can fundamentally differ from it. This makes the image of Arabia, as reflected in the European literary discourse, tell more about the European mind than about Arabia.

The representation of Arabs in Western literary discourse generally tends to disseminate a stereotypical image that condescendingly homogenises their identities and cultures. Novelistic discourse leans towards employing neo-orientalist modes of identification which reiterate the old prejudices. The neo-orientalist view develops through various discursive techniques of binary differentiation between self and abject other. In *Transgressive Truths and Flattering Lies* (2020), Markus Schmitz refers to the popular American Tv Show *Homeland*, which "was not only known for being one of President Barack Obama's favourite TV shows but has also garnered the reputation of being among the most bigoted series for its undifferentiated and highly biased depiction of Arabs and Muslims," saying it "essentially affirms the dominant representational formula of Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism" (9-10). This reveals how old engrained myths are widely disseminated in consciousness, and how the old habits die hard. Even a highly influential person, such as Obama who used to put on a façade of belief in multiculturalism and intercultural cooperation, is no better than all the old bigots.

Recent events and unrelenting regional conflicts instigated by global terrorism ascribed to "apparent ethnic and religious incompatibilities have lent added urgency to the deconstruction of complex stereotypes" (Chew 180). Unfortunately, these events among others have damaged the possibilities of understanding *the Other*. The depiction of Arabs and Muslims in literary discourse has become deeply entangled with inaccuracies. These portrayals, rather than being limited to aesthetic appreciation, can also be critically examined to uncover the "myths about other peoples and nations" and understand how these myths are "formed and exist in an individual or collective consciousness" (Guyard 26). Such analysis is made possible through the lens of literary imagology.

The current study will explore the significance of the manner of representing Saudis and their country in some contemporary English novels focusing on one representative work, Hilary Mantel's *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* (1988). The study further explores the image of Saudis as created by Saudi writers, first in English translation, Ghazi Al-Gosaibi's *An Apartment Called Freedom* (شقة الحرية) (1996), then written directly in English, Eman Quotah's *A Bride of the Sea* (2021). The purpose is to investigate points such as the choice of certain works for translation and reception thereof. Moreover, there is a need to ponder ideas such as the auto-image and its effect on the hetero-image within the framework of the insights of literary imagology.

1.1 Research Problem

The paper attempts to investigate the changing images of Saudi Arabia and Saudis as portrayed in English novelistic samples. It traces the static adamant stereotypes and the new dynamic images challenging the old typecasts.

1.2 Significance

The study acquires its significance from stirring the interest in understanding whether the West has widened its scope of vision in seeing the oriental Other in its true light, relinquishing its old tunnel vision. It also adds to understanding how the self-image of the orient both influences and is influenced by the image created by the West.

1.3 Objectives

1. The study aims at exploring the Western image of both Saudi Arabia and the Saudis to determine to what degree it has changed, persisted or worsened.

2. It further means to explore the Saudi self-image and whether it influences or gets influenced by the image constructed by the West.

1.4 Methodology

The study adopts the imagological approach in tracking the development of the image of Saudi Arabia and Saudis as constructed by the West. It traces the developing images within a wider context where English literary novelistic samples are studied, compared and contrasted. The images studied are varied and include self-images and hetero-images together with reciprocal influences.

The imagological approach examines the depiction of national characters to understand how and why these images are portrayed in literary works. It aims to explore the use of stereotypes, questioning whether they are challenged or reinforced. Furthermore, the research delves into various representations, including self-images and hetero-images, analyzing their construction and impact.

Imagology does not have a rigid methodology despite its recent development as a discipline in its own right. Leerssen (2007, 26) suggests a number of assumptions that work as a proposed methodological approach which sets imagology as a branch of literary studies first and foremost. The ultimate imagological perspective investigates cultural and national stereotypes not national identity, and the "imagologist's frame of reference is a textual and intertextual one" (27). This approach keeps in mind the dynamics between the images characterising the Other, *hetero-images*, and images characterising oneself, i.e., *self-images* or *auto-images*.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Representative images of the Arabs in Anglophone literary writings usually acquire autonomous existence once they enter the public sphere, hence the difficulty to determine their definitive meanings because of the inevitable "gap between intention and realization" (Mitchell 21). However, they are created within a culture which helps determine their pragmatic intention. Additionally, literary and cultural analysis can reveal the relevant political and ideological aspects and influences of such representations. Representations naturally emerge from the cultures and the societies that produce them. The contextual frame of representation can be responsible for whatever falsehoods, errors and misunderstandings that occur.

Western fantasies and myths about the Orient are still alive and kicking despite their crumbling ancient roots, entrenched in the ages of the crusades, and changing times. "The West had to reshape the Orient in order to comprehend it; there was a sustained effort to devise in order to rule" (Kabbani 1986, 138). It is not only the political intrigues of "divide" and rule, but also "devise" an image that justifies the colonial rule, hence "devise and rule" as Kabbani puts it. In Edward Said's words, it is "a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (*Orientalism* 3). Said critiqued numerous Western texts which represented the Orient as an exotic, inferior "Other." They "constructed" the Orient, i.e. built their imposed imagination of it through a set of stereotypical images.

Classical Orientalism, as a way of thinking and a mode of representation has undergone a shift after 9/11. Moreover, escalating waves of globalization have reshaped and introduced "some promising changes" (Samiei 1145) while many old self-versus-other dualistic tendencies remained the same of even got more entrenched. This created neo-Orientalism in this contemporary era of globalization despite the conflicts of identity politics. The concept of neo-Orientalism has mostly been "understood in literature across the humanities and the social sciences as an exacerbation of Orientalism" (Giolfo and Sinatora 81). It explores new conditions and opportunities offered by globalization and increased cross-cultural interaction.

However, orientalism is a dynamic construct; it develops and changes with time, simultaneously representing "continuity and change". Literary discourse as part of contemporary art draws upon old symbols to "reconstruct orientalist art, hence reproducing the constructed, stereotypical" imagery (Andrade 92). Neo-orientalism assumes those symbols while trying to destruct them in an act of resistance to depict social change, but does not achieve much success. "Even though the continuity of the construct is obvious, change is granular and not as pronounced" (92). Thus, no much change is perceived and the dynamism is only displayed in the nuanced indirect rigid images.

Using the imagological approach to investigate representative images published in English literary works of Western and Arab writers makes it possible to reveal "representational inaccuracy, the performative invention of half-truth or risky truth, .. [and] strategic opacity" (Schmitz 18). Imagology describes the representation of a national stereotype as *ethnotype* focusing on "deconstructing ethnotypes and their characterological rationalization of cultural difference" (Doorslaer et al. 3). Deconstruction means demonstrating the manner of constructing the relevant stereotype, which is a discursive object as in literary works, through "textual analysis, usually employing narratological and discourse-analytical tools … [and] contextual analysis" (3). This stereotype is usually regarded as opposed to an *Other*, generating a dynamic opposition between auto-images and hetero-images. (Leerssen 2000, 271). These ethnotypes "are either explicitly or implicitly oppositional" (Leerssen 2016, 17). Exploring various auto-images and hetero-images (created by Western and Arab writers) enriches the research.

Evolving from comparative literature studies, *imagology* conducts critical analysis of national stereotypes as portrayed in literary discourse. This technical neologism applies to "research in the field of our mental images of the Other and of ourselves" (Beller and Leerssen xiii). It investigates the literary, narrative and rhetorical cross-cultural representations (and construction) of different nations and groups (xiii). Studying the 'mental images' is not verifying the authenticity of the constructed representations of national characters; it is rather "a theory of cultural or national stereotypes, not a theory of cultural or national identity" (27). While the study of the constructed national image has emerged from the study of comparative literature, the comparison here is not simply aesthetic; it has historical value with the rigorous methods of science as approached by the French comparativist school (Guyard 21) while the American school emphasises the "literariness" and the aesthetics of the comparativist study (Wellek 169). The images studied prove that

> Race, ethnicity, and nationality exist only in and through our perceptions, interpretations, representations, classifications, categorizations, and identifications. They are not things in the world, but perspectives on the world
> – not ontological but epistemological realities." (Brubaker 79).

The image of a foreign nation, or nationals, is a reflection of how the native nation imagines the other, or thinks it knows that other (epistemology), not how this other is in reality (ontology). It is also a reflection of political and historical circumstances. Therefore, this image may change, not because the other has changed, but because of changes in the political and historical events with no reference to changes undergone by the object of that image.

Therefore, these "images" are, in fact, *fictions* and "mirages" as described by Hugo Dyserinck. The subconsciously constructed images and imagotypical structures:

> were not a reflection or so, of real collective qualities of the communities in question ("nations," "people" and so on) but fictions, i.e. ideas that at some time in the course of history emerged in the countries or communities concerned. These ideas were partly handed down from generation to generation and they were in the long run even able to produce effects completely different from the original opinions and intentions of those who started them. (5)

Stereotyping often exposes the biases of those who hold them rather than accurately representing the subjects they aim to depict. In literary discourse, these constructed images frequently mirror the author's preconceived notions, shaping readers' perceptions and perpetuating static misunderstandings. This underscores the significance of studies like the present one. Imagology, therefore, advocates for critically addressing these entrenched images, aiming "to bring them to the surface, analyse them and make people rationally aware of them" (Beller and Leerssen 12).

Imagology, says Leerssen, can interpret texts in terms of xenophilia and xenophobia. Xenophilia (attraction to foreign peoples, cultures, or customs) presupposes sympathy for everything that is foreign whereas xenophobia is an aspect of social pathology denoting fear and hostility towards strangers. He interprets the stereotypical images represented in texts through the perspective of the "intertextual", "contextual" and "textual" approaches. This three-fold method can be summed as follows. First, intertext means to trace the trail of textual occurrences; that is historical vacillations of a given ethnotype. Second, the context "refers to the historical, political and social conditions within which a given ethnotype is brought forward." Third, the textual analysis should involve "the actual study of the text itself to see how the ethnotype functions in it … what position the ethnotype occupies in the text, how foregrounded it is" (Leerssen 2016, 20-21). Such thorough investigation of explicit and implicit, biased or objective image representations adds to better literary appreciation of fiction and non-fiction texts. In addition to raising consciousness, imagology contributes to better intercultural understanding.

3. Constructing the Image of the Other

Constructing the image of the other in literary discourse is liable to misrepresentation as in the case of the image of Arabs in English fiction. This has to do with a way of thinking and expression related to "orientalism". From one perspective, the imaginary representation arises from perceiving the Arabic culture as exotic, primitive and uncivilized. A famous writer of travel literature as fictional autobiography, Wilfred Thesiger, depicted the image of the Arabs, as he saw it in his journey crossing the Empty Quarter of the Arabian Peninsula, in his peculiar tone of fascination with the primitive and exotic savage—this "barbaric splendor" (Thesiger 1996, xv). Some critics referred to this writer's vision in an admiring tone, but it is a trivial fascination with a specimen of primitive people to be kept in a living museum for the rest of the world to visit and then hurry back to civilized Europe.

Such distorted representation is even disseminated by great writers of the American literary canon such as Mark Twain who is

widely considered one of the greatest American writers of all time, and described by William Faulkner as "the father of American literature though he is not the first one" (Jelliffe 88). In *The Innocents Abroad*, Twain describes Arab lands as messy, wild, and just barren deserts, ignoring all the attractive cities and landmarks in these lands. Furthermore, he depicts the peoples he met in his eastward journey—Portuguese, Greek, Turks and Arabs both Muslim and Christian—as liars and cheats. They "lie, and cheat the stranger, and are desperately ignorant" (Twain 56). If Bedouins were portrayed by another writer, William C. Grimes, as brave and dangerous, Twain retorts that he discovered "the Bedouins to be a fraud" (Twain 484).

Going too far with such stereotyping, as has been revealed by Edward Said and postcolonial critics, have been diluted somehow in more recent writings. However, many recent writers may not be even aware of the stereotypical images that infiltrate their work. Popular literary discourse, as well as highly acclaimed novels, are more subtly prejudiced and racist. Image makers still proliferate these stereotypes.

3.1 The Case of Hilary Mantel

Hilary Mantel (1952-2022) was a British writer whose most outstanding work was a trilogy based on the life of Thomas Cromwell. Mantel was the first woman to win the prestigious Man Booker Prize twice. She wrote twelve novels, two collections of short stories, and a memoir. Her third novel, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* (1988), while fictitious, drew its inspiration and details from her experiences and life in Saudi Arabia. It displays a menacing clash of values, exploring the clash between the liberal West and Saudi Islamic culture in the Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations' sense.

Her overarching narrative reinforces outdated colonial constructs, emphasizing notions of moral superiority while attributing primitive and negative traits to the other. The West is portrayed as superior, standing tall, while the Orient is depicted as collapsing under the weight of corruption, regressive values, misogynistic practices, and authoritarian rule.

One basic self-contradictory, intellectual attitude exists in the fact that Mantel portrays Thomas Cromwell (in the *Wolf Hall* Trilogy) in "an overly positive light" (Alghamdi 117) while Cromwell's strict morality and authoritarian leaning convey some similarity to the restrictive atmosphere she laments in Saudi Arabia. She transposed "the sixteenth-century character into a fascinating hero, who believes in education and justice" (Arias 19). Even the anti-liberal leaning in the West is highly glorified (as one aspect of self-image), which reveals a deeply instilled disposition to reject the Orient wholesale.

Mantel's novel subscribes to the conventional, taken-for-granted "threatening cultural "clash" between East and West," further entrenching "frictions between the two cultures" (Sayyid 90). Hers is an "overarching narrative of Western moral superiority vis-à-vis an allegedly backward, corrupt, authoritarian, and misogynistic Islamic culture" (90). Her *Eight Months on Gazzah Street* is meant to be an entertaining thriller, but ends up as an immensely prejudiced political tract.

3.1.1 Linguistic Style and Authorial Tone

Constructing an image takes place as the end result of various literary devices which the authors use, purposefully or even unwittingly, to create their artistic work. The form of the work of art conveys the theme just like the semantic components of the words and sentence. The reader is initially confronted by the flow of words, their particular choices, rhythm and both denotations and connotations. The writer's tone of voice is perceived through the adjectives and the choice of lexical items, length of sentences, etc. The tone of the writer reveals the writer's purpose and attitude.

Mantel's basic attitude towards her subject matter (country, people, their character and attitudes) is one of haughtily distancing herself from the characters and the place. The tone is monotonously homogeneous. It does not change or undergo any development. There is no change of tone to reflect the change of fortune, no development towards a denouement, or moment of illumination where the protagonist matures and learns something new to rectify initial ignorance. Thus, compared to well-formed novels, this one lacks the style and development of a literary work of art. This again classifies the novel as a controversial, aggressive political tract.

The initial paragraph of the novel, after a company memo to employees and their families, sets a simplistic style and detached tone of boredom and the expected malaise to come:

> This was the beginning; an hour or so out from Heathrow. Already it felt further; watches moved on, a day in a life condensed to a scramble at a check-in desk, a walk to a departure gate; a day cut short and eclipsed, hurtling on into advancing night. And now the steward leaned over her, putting this question (5).

Here is one long sentence of short staccato phrases, strung together with commas and semicolons, followed by a short sentence. The initial tone is one of detached boredom—a style and tone that will change just a little throughout the novel, adding other negative tones. Generally in the narrative, the simple syntax of vapid short bursts of chunks of few words, in a monotonous rhythm, numb the reflective faculties in order to create a feeling of exhaustive boredom punctuated by a feeling of malaise.

The detached simplistic style and negative tones will prevail in describing people and even places and nature. Referring to Jeddah seashore the narrator says,

> you can hear the sea wind howl and sigh through the sewers beneath the pavements. It is an unceasing wail, modulated like the human voice, but trapped and faraway, like the mutinous cries of the damned. (24)

The two short descriptive sentences are studded with a high frequency of negative denotations and connotations: *howl*, *sigh*, *sewers* (while

the interest is in the sea wind not the sanitary system), *unceasing wail, trapped*, *mutinous cries*, *the damned*. Such mood is created as the overture of the first encounter with the city.

The simplistic, structurally naïve style spreads out throughout the novel with slight variations. Narrating about the main character, Mantel starts a flow of short simple sentence with "She … . The baby … . She is … . She knows … . She wants … . (59). Later on, talking about expatriate Brits, again the short sentences go:

> The Brits here are …. . They stash away …. . They intend to ... . They want to ... . They've put their children ... . They've put Mother … . They always say, … . (89)

This could be a stylistic device used for a technical purpose if utilized very sparingly to create a particular effect, but not the dominant literary style of the narrator/novelist.

A literary justification could be that the writer is deliberately (and boringly) tries to borrow some aspect of the impressionistic painting style of small, discrete brushstrokes which give the bare impression of form. This expresses the impressions of the world on the consciousness of the artist. In Mantel's narrative, it could be a reflection of her psychological malaise and rejection of the totality of the experiences at hand. She creates an image of the other (country and people) as the *abject Other*.

3.1.2 Thematic Manipulation of Auto- and Hetero- Images

While meant as a thriller, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* is obviously a political work disguised as entertaining page-turner. Nick Rennison describes this novel as "most overtly political novel, filled with a sense of outrage at the Saudi social system .." (89).

The controlling theme of the novel is revealed through the myriad details narrated and the total effect created by these details. While this dominant theme is one of fear and hate of the other (Saudi Arabia and Saudis), another subtheme is also felt in the representation of the in-group self, the image of other British expatriates in Saudi Arabia. Whereas the moral superiority and sophisticated advancement of the Westerners are foregrounded, there is also a self-condemnation in referring to the hypocritical self-serving behaviour of some (or all) of these Brits and other Western expats. The above-mentioned outrage also includes the "Western willingness, for financial reasons, to turn a blind eye to its human rights abuses" (Rennison 89), which includes implied focussing on the "Saudi" *abuses*. However, this negative depiction of the self-image is relegated to the back of interest and treated as an attempt at objectivity. It is also rarely mentioned and does not figure prominently in the narrative.

Frances, the narrator serving as Mantel's near-autobiographical voice, reflects on her earlier suggestion that Yasmin, her Muslim neighbor, could escape the confines of her culture. Frances realizes, *"Of course, she can't break out of her culture. No more can I break out of mine. No more would I want to; no more does she"* (105). For Mantel, the clash of cultures is inevitable, as cultural identities are not only externally imposed on these two groups but are also fully and willingly embraced, leaving little room for multiculturalism or intercultural understanding.

Intertextually, to use Leerssen's term, *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* follows on the footsteps of Western constructed negative images of the Orient that go back to the time of the Crusades, then the fall of Constantinople in the hands of the Ottomans. The image of the Orient, especially the Muslim World, including Saudi Arabia, has been further tarnished after the events of 9/11, which creates the contextual place of Mantel's novel among numerous similar fictional works, such as Jean Sasson's *Princess*. Textually, the text is one stretch of negative depiction of Saudi Arabia and Saudi people in the different aspects of the narration: linguistic style, authorial tone, thematic components with its various negative connotations.

4. Self-image, Hetero-Image and Stereotyping the Other

Humans start constructing their self-image when they see oneself as another. Jacques Lacan used the concept of the image stage where the "mirror image" (*imago*) becomes the beginning of the child's seeing itself as another, becoming an "autonomous ego" independent of the mother. But for the existence of the other, oneself would not exist and have an authentic identity. The objects in reality surround the subject (his own self). This identification with the object and dissociation from it creates a tension, an "imaginary oscillation which gives to all human perception the dramatic subjacency experienced by a subject" (Lacan 166), which means that the subject's sense of self is always changing and reshaped through interactions with others and the culture in which the subject exists.

The self-image of Saudis, like any self-image, is formed within a certain culture which includes cultural concepts and a language. It is also partially constructed through the experiences with foreign cultures and people, while being influenced unconsciously through comparison, empathy, sympathy, or rejection. Thus, both what is considered self-image and what is not self-image, may develop together.

In narratives written by Saudis in Arabic, and later chosen for English translation, writers construct their own national image as they see it whether with the intention to defend it or simply while the image is assembled naturally through the narration. In both cases, the image cannot escape internal and external factors that contribute to the construction of the representative image.

4.1 The Case of Ghazi Algosaibi

Ghazi Algosaibi (1940-2010) was a Saudi politician, diplomat and widely admired poet and novelist. A highly acclaimed intellectual and literary figure, he played a significant role in the popularity of the novel genre in his country. Of all his publications, *An Apartment Called Freedom* (published in 1994 by Al-Saqi Publishing in London, and translated into English in 1996) created quite a furore and was banned for more than a decade in his native country where he was often described as being too liberal. However, he is now praised as one of the

most influential Saudi writers.

Algosaibi has a special status in the Saudi context; he is a part of the traditionally influential social class, enjoying as well a prominent status as a major politician, diplomat and writer. Thus, his pioneering liberal sensibility scandalised the Saudi traditional nature and found a welcoming reception with the younger and aspiring generations. His shattering of many political, social and cultural taboos started an avalanche of a generation of writers who went even farther in practising literary writing styles free of many restrictions without abiding by the local cultural context or even the intrinsic literary values.

Algosaibi's novel, *An Apartment Called Freedom*, mainly relates the experiences of four young men who left their country in the Arab Gulf, together with the protection of family and community for the first time. Free from the restraints of strict religious and conservatism norms, they find themselves immersed into the tolerant ways of Cairo, Egypt. They also readily flirt with new political ideas—Arab nationalism, Baathist ideology, socialism, secularism and the Nasserism of revolutionary Egypt.

Algosaibi's novel presents a self-image through the image of others in two ways. First, there are the protagonist's three friends, each of whom is an embodiment of a part of his own developing personality. Second, there is the image of non-Saudi's in Egypt and the foreign community of diplomats and expatriates in fictitious Bahrain (standing for the Arab Gulf in general and Saudi Arabia in particular). The three main characters (his close friends), though quite different, are simply a refraction of aspects of his own image-identity-personality. The narrator-protagonist, Fuad, describes these characters saying that each one in the group complemented the others. Yacoub's revolutionary fervour complements Qasim's reactionary spirit while Qasim's readiness to rush headlong was a counter to the relaxed spirit of Abdul-Karim. Then,

> Fuad pictured himself as an amazing mixture of the personalities of his friends, concocted by a wicked pharmacist.
> He had taken from Yacoub a little of his revolutionary fervour and from Qasim he had snatched something of a
> staider spirit of conservatism, and Abdul-Karim had lent him some of his apprehension and hesitation. (20)

The qualities of the three friends depict different aspects of the protagonist character (and a hint at the emerging new image of some modern generations of the Arabs). Abdul-Karim is religious, good-natured, naïve and temperamental with changing moods from one extreme to the other—an outcome of the conflicting cultures of his home land and the liberal world at large. Yacoub represents the conflicts of the socially uprising individual who revolts against his society to the point of wishing to blow it up, changing his ideology as he goes along. Qasim is the typical *nouveaux riche* aristocrat who leans harshly towards the political right. These ingredients make up the developing image of the novel's protagonist, and no resolution is accomplished.

The constructed self-image is further retouched with the influence of a hetero-image, constructed by the narrator, of British expatriates living in the Gulf region. The novel creates an imagotype of the West to which it responds, but unfortunately it creates, in so doing, another imagotype of the self that is not much different, partially participating in the same decadence. As if the Orient is striking back in a naïve way, one facet of the protagonist's character, represented by Qasim, Yacoub and a third friend (Nashat), sees the West in a stereotypical way as immoral and promiscuous. In weekly parties held in Qasim's luxurious villa, the British community is represented as immoral and vulnerable for being colonized through the immoral activities with European women. Promiscuous activities were abundant as it was easy for Qasim and his friends to move nonchalantly from one British girl to the next as if they "were raping the colonial empire." (154)

Al-Gosaibi's novel follows in the footsteps of Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) where the main character goes on a mission to "liberate Africa" in a similar manner. The West is stereotyped as promiscuous and immoral. Both novels attempted to create a self-image in a vengeful way by naively stereotyping the other in a facile way that earned them popularity (best sellers) and diminished their literary value and tarnished their self-image. They unwittingly reinforced the stereotypes they tried to shatter. This also explains why certain Arabic literary works get translated while others of greater value remain abandoned. When Ferial Ghazoul asked Denys Johnson-Davies, translator of Salih's novel, whether it is true that "erotic themes dominate modern Arabic narratives which you have translated", he answered referring to *Season* saying, "Yes, the erotic has always interested me. … While the humorous, the dramatic, the tragic only too often fail when transported across linguistic frontiers, the erotic... remains effectively erotic" (87). This may explain one of the factors which determine which works are to be chosen for translation.

This factor of picking certain literary works to be translated contributes to constructing the image of a certain people or a culture. If publishers persist to choose particular types of works and ignore others which could be more honest in presenting a self-image of a culture and a people, they certainly reinforce stereotypes and keep them alive even if unwittingly.

5. Self-image without Mediation

Some Saudi writers write directly in English creating texts and self-images, together with implicated hetero images, also adding authenticity and freedom from translation manipulation. Such writers draw on richer experiences of both cultures, Eastern and Western, and enjoy the possibility of escaping the traditional stereotyping of their Arabic culture, Arab society and people. However, they are also liable to misrepresent either their own culture or the culture of the Other, where misrepresenting can tilt the balance to glorify one culture and vilify the other as in some political tracts or numerous literary narratives. A well-balanced objective representation depends on practical experiences and thorough knowledge of the cultures represented, which is rare but possible.

5.1 Case of Eman Quotah

With Saudi-American novelist Eman Quotah's novel, *Bride of the Sea* (2021), the American, and other English speaking readers, are given a first-hand account of the Saudi society in three dimensions, instead of the lack of dimensionality persisting in the stereotypical image constructed in many Western writings, especially in the media. These media which have become "the chief portraitist of a largely hidden society, painting Saudi Arabia with broad, journalistic brushstrokes" (Parssinen), creating a pseudo identity of veils, deserts, camels and oil, engulfed in intolerance and a stagnating society. Arab-American novelist, Quotah, won the 2022 Arab American Book Award. She grew up in Jeddah and Cleveland Heights, Ohio. Her father is from Saudi Arabia, and her mother is from the United States. With such background, and with creative talent and education in the two cultures, Quotah is well situated in an intellectual, cultural and social milieu that provided her with a rich real life and cultural source to draw upon in her literary creations.

She succeeded in depicting an image of Saudi Arabia "in three dimensions to reveal a society in its complexity" (Parssinen). The more nuanced depiction attempts to delineate aspects of the Saudi society through the eyes of the objective narrator whose literary art is the driving motive of storytelling not the prejudiced superficial look of the outsider.

The image of the Saudis, created by Quotah, is more complex and diverse. They are, like people around the world, humans with different degrees of sophistication and various dispositions and characters while still a nation with a largely prevalent tendency towards adherence to traditions. These traditions are not a monolithic dogma, but a vivid variety of values and norms which a large part of humanity subscribes to as well. For instance the American society at large subscribes to many conservative and religious values, shared as well by many Europeans. Scottish American philosopher and ethicist, Alasdair MacIntyre, revives Aristotle's ethics in the American context to renew moral agency within rationality (that used to be the enamoured dogma of the West). Facing the deteriorating moral sphere in the West, he argues that "A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined" (12). Quotah who belongs to the two cultures at the same time, Western and Oriental, can touch the heart of the problem of stereotyping both Oriental and Western images. Just like Naguib Mahfouz and Charles Dickens, her depiction of characters creates a chunk of life comprising real people. Some characters (and whole regional communities) in Saudi Arabia listen to music, treat women as free human beings, etc., while other characters (and whole regional communities) behave differently. Juxtaposing Saeeda's family in Jeddah with another branch of the family in Medina (two families of two sisters, Munner's mother-in-law, Faizah, and his mother Haleemah), an internal clash arises. This is a covert conflict of strictly traditional and more open-minded but still traditional tendencies. Muneer's mother

> is certain Faizah would not make the trip to al-Madinah, where their relatives refuse to allow musical instruments at weddings—no lute, no dancing, no "Ya Layla Dana," no stereo, no songs by Amr Diab or Ragheb Alama. Only drumming and human voices, songs about God and the Prophet. Nothing about love, about eyes like a gazelle's, about longing for the stars. (57)

The narrator's tone of voice reveals mere objective storytelling. When compared to that of Mantel while describing similar situations, Mantel's outright rejection and condescending manipulation of the text becomes quite obvious.

Some values are universal while going through regional and temporal slight variations. The traditions which glorify family bonds are more entrenched in traditional societies than in more modern ones. When Hannah (Hanadi), a second generation Saudi-American young lady who was brought up in the USA as a totally American citizen who does not even speak Arabic, visits her parents' families in Saudi Arabia, the narrator relates:

> The way she talks about family—the way everyone here does—is more foreign to Hannah than anything else. She has always had only Mama. To have dozens of people feels like a gift, a gift of love that she never expected. Because she is family, they love her. (125-126)

The daughter of a child of two cultures regrets the loss of an element of the human experience, the strong family bond, which is an essential part of the Saudi, and Arab, culture.

Her depiction of the Saudi scene is balanced as she infiltrates her narrative with criticism of many negative aspects that naturally exist in her ancestors' country. Her criticism, however, is balanced and not aggressive. When the family had a problem, they resorted to connection to find a way out:

> This is what you do to protect your family. You act and pray to God for forgiveness. You use vitamin Waw—for *wastah*, connections. Hannah will not understand, but *wastah* works in America, too. (158)

Quotah's novel managed to reflect the image of Saudis and Saudi Arabia that is nuanced and objective. She did not condemn people and country; neither did she glorify them. This nuanced literary work, well-formed with polyphony and artistic talent, was inspired as a response to the highly lopsided and stereotypes-perpetuating American literary scene as exemplified in the Jean Sasson's novel *Princess* and its many equally-prejudiced sequels. Writing to the internet website, *Literary Hub*, before the launching date of her novel, Quotah explained, "… I had to show people a different side of Saudi culture—a nuanced portrait rather than a caricature". She does this through relating empirical, actual life experiences and observations rather than reiterating overused and superficially constructed and defaced stereotypes.

6. Conclusion

Imagology focuses on analyzing literary representations and demonstrates that "national stereotypes are first and foremost effectively

formulated, perpetuated, and disseminated" in literary narratives (Leerssen 2007, 26). These depictions are often fictional constructs or illusions lacking real-world referents. To deconstruct and demystify such constructed images, this study employs a literary imagological perspective, focusing on textual elements and their contextual underpinnings.

The analysis explores three primary narratives:

1. A Western monolithic portrayal of Saudi Arabia and Saudis as the abject "Other."

2. A Saudi self-image crafted by a younger generation of Arabs striving to define their identity while influenced by Western liberal ideologies and foreign cultural elements.

3. A more mature Saudi self-image, navigating the tension between two conflicting cultures without confusion, presenting a balanced perspective of both self (auto-image) and other (hetero-image).

Using "intertextual," "contextual," and "textual" approaches, the study highlights the influences of prior narratives, the historical, political, and social conditions shaping stereotypes, and the textual elements within the works analyzed. The intertextual approach reveals how earlier Western literary narratives shape contemporary ones. The contextual analysis underscores the socio-political backdrop of these representations, while textual scrutiny examines the literary details of the studied texts.

The imagological approach aims to reveal how literary narratives construct images of the "Other" that infiltrate public consciousness, entrenching stereotypes and hindering mutual understanding. These narratives, passed through generations of writers, transform fictional portrayals into accepted truths, shaping perceptions and potentially fostering conflict and cultural divides.

Despite this, there are promising signs of change. The interconnectedness of global cultures, multiculturalism, and advancements in telecommunications offer new opportunities for understanding and redefining self-images and images of the "Other." A new generation of highly educated Saudi authors, fluent in both Arabic and Western traditions (e.g., Eman Quotah), is already challenging outdated stereotypes. Through nuanced storytelling grounded in empirical experience, they contribute to more balanced and authentic representations of national identities.

Authors' contributions

All authors made substantial contributions to the conception and design of the work. The interviews and the analysis were conducted by the first author. All authors participated in the interpretation of data. All authors drafted the work and revised it critically for important intellectual content. All authors gave final approval of the version to be published and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

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The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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No additional data are available.

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