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The Effects of Social Transformations on Family Ties in the Saudi Social Novel: Ibrahim Al-Nassir as a Case Study

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Keywords: *saudi women, saudi social novel, al_nassir's novels, arab women's liberation.*

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Keywords: saudi women, saudi social novel, al_nassir's novels, arab women's liberation.

Arabic Transliteration Table

ʾء	dhذ	Ẓ/ẓظ	nن
bب	rر	ʿع	Hه
tت	zز	ghغ	wو
thث	sس	fف	yي
jج	shش	qق	
Ḥ/ḥح	Ṣ/ṣص	kك	
khخ	Ḍ/ḍض	lل	
dد	Ṭ/ṭط	mم	

VOWELS:

-ي Ī/ī -وŪ/ū - آ LONG: Ā/ā

i- ِ u- ُ SHORT: a - َ

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I. Introduction

In Saudi society, social relationships are frequently governed by customs and traditions, some of which are based on Islamic Shari'a, while others are based on dominant social norms that have become deeply engrained in the community's mindset, forming a culture that is passed down from generation to generation. However, several turning points in Saudi society, including the unification of the Kingdom, the discovery of oil, globalization and economic revolutions, have resulted in vast social transformations. These transformations were depicted in the fictions of Saudi novelist Ibrahim al-Nassir, who was a keen observer of them.

Saudi society has witnessed several changes in social relations amongst its members. Whether it is between husbands and wives or between parents and children, this civil state is founded on a number of fundamental elements, including Islam's religious creed, the people's loyalty to their ruler, the land, and the language. However, tribalism remains widespread in Saudi society, and it continues to dominate certain aspects of Saudi social relationships, owing to the fact that "the hereditary leaders of important Bedouin tribes and several merchant families have wielded political influence in the Kingdom since its establishment" (Metz and Library of Congress. Federal Research Division., 1993, p.11). Additionally, Saudi tribes still represent the largest proportion of the community. This influence will be demonstrated by examining the stable and changing social relations in Saudi society.

II. Marriage

Like any other social relationship, marriage has been transformed by development and cultural change. Concepts that have changed include the characteristics of the groom and bride and the nature of the husband-wife relationship. Some former social customs concerning this relationship have become unacceptable, while others are still fixed in the mindset of society.

a) Traditional Marriage vs. Modern Marriage

Customs regarding engagement and marriage in Saudi Arabia have undergone many transformations.

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There have always been slight regional variations depending on the traditions of particular Saudi tribes and clans.[1] Despite the many changes in aspects of life in Saudi Arabia, as the study by al-Khatīb (al-Khatīb, 2010, p.11) shows, the traditional arranged marriage is still the one most commonly adopted in the Kingdom.[2] This type of marriage is often discussed in Saudi social novels to show how it can negatively impact family relationships. The story of Shikh 'Uthmān's daughter (al-Nassir, 1961. pp, 142-143), who escaped with her lover to an undisclosed location, depicts a protagonist who was initially critical of this girl's behaviour and then tried to understand the background of this situation to find the reason for this. The protagonist felt sympathy for her and blamed social attitudes which did not fit with "the new lifestyle", as he calls it.

Safinat al -Ḍayā' (al-Nassir, 1989, pp.42-44) also provides a negative image of an arranged marriage, involving an older husband and a beautiful young wife. The young woman had no choice but to accept this marriage since her family compelled her to do so. The couple's relationship was based on social obligation, with little indication of love. As he grieved over his first wife, the husband realized to himself that he had wronged the young woman. Nonetheless, al-Nassir's novel aims to portray this form of arranged marriage as wrong, asking for society to be freed from these long-established societal constraints that contradict modern life and human rights.

While the majority of Saudis continue to believe in arranged marriages, a significant percentage of weddings are preceded by courtship (al-Khatīb, 2010, p.11), indicating a shift in marital customs following years of reliance on traditional arranged marriages. The Saudi novel establishes a new type of marriage and alludes to the factors that contributed to its creation. The rapid social transformation currently taking place in Saudi society is attributed to the changing needs of the younger generation, which refuses to be constrained by long-established social traditions.

The growing openness within Saudi society and the younger generation's adoption of new technology, such as mobile phones and other communication platforms, are regarded as two of the most significant factors contributing to the birth of this new phenomenon in Arab society:

> The changing needs of youth in MENA are affected by what happens inside and outside the region. The global economy—with its power to reach across national boundaries and into the smallest communities—has brought a new dimension that profoundly affects the life of young people in the region. Today, satellite dishes on rooftops bringing worldwide broadcasts into people's homes are a common feature of MENA's urban landscapes and are rapidly expanding to rural areas. Internet use is also growing fast and quickly changing the lives of youth—further widening the generation gap between young people and their parents and decision-makers (Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi, 2007).

In addition, the lack of gender segregation in some workplaces within sectors such as health and media provides a suitable environment for men and women to connect socially, as in the case of 'Issā and 'Abīr in Safinat *al*-Ḍayā', working together in a hospital, or Zāhir and Buthaina in *'Adhra' al-Manfa,* working together at a newspaper. Saudi social novels often depict the impact of such working environments and how they have led to the formation of a new understanding of husband-wife relations in Saudi Arabia.

'Adhra' *a*l-Manf*a* illustrates in great detail how new technology and the working environment play a central role in creating the personal relationship between the characters Zāhir and Buthaina, working together in a newspaper office. After working together in the presence of Buthaina's father, the editor-in-chief, they begin to feel a sense of mutual admiration. The narrative depicts this affection when they meet by describing the language of their eyes, the secret feelings inside each character, and their way of talking and dressing as if they were attending a special occasion rather than working. The narrative context also succeeds in depicting the emotional feelings that begin to surface in every meeting. Originally, Zāhir and Buthaina felt a little nervous at their first professional meeting in Buthaina's family home.

كانت الفتاة تسير إلى جانب أبيها رشيقة خفيفة الحركة. وأنتصب زاهر و مد يده المرتعشة وابتسامة شاحبة تطل من وجهه المسحوق بالخجل ومع ذلك فقد ركز على وجه الفتاة.

- زاهر: فرصة سعيدة يا آنسة.

وصافح سمعه صوت ناعم ذا جرس موسيقي.

- بثينة: شكرا. (قالت ذلك وهي تسحب يدها بسرعة من يده).

وكانت الفتاة تضع على وجهها حجابا خفيفا يكشف عن تقاطيع وجه دقيقة وبشرة خمرية. بينما أرتدت فستانا بنفسجيا طويلا فوقه معطف زيتي فاخر, وصدرها الناهد يتقدمها بشموخ وثمة عقد ماسي ثمين يتدلى من جيدها العاجي وخاتم مرصع بالزمرد يلمع في بنصرها الأيمن. و فاح عبير ضواع من بين أعطافها المشدودة, وكانت عينان جريئتان تبرق من وراء النقاب الشفاف, وجلست إلى جانب أبيها على أريكة محاذية لمقعده.

The girl walked by her father's side with a light, dainty step. Zāhir stood up, stretching out his shaking hand, a pale smile flickering across his face, overwhelmed with shyness. Nevertheless, he focused his attention on the girl's face.

- Zāhir: It's a pleasure to meet you, miss.

[1] In Saudi Arabia, a tribe consists of large numbers of relatives who are related to the same lineage, functioning as "a loose association of people who recognise that they are related to each other by kinship". JORDAN, A. T. 2011. *The Making of a Modern Kingdom: Globalization and Change in Saudi Arabia* USA, Waveland Press, Inc. p. 65.

[2] An arranged marriage is the traditional style of marriage wherein the groom's family seeks a suitable bride for their son chosen from the same family or tribe.

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He heard a melodious voice with a musical ring in response.

- Buthaina: Thank you. (She quickly withdrew her hand from his as she spoke).

The girl wore a transparent veil through which her delicate features and dark-coloured complexion could be discerned. She wore a long violet dress underneath an extravagant olive-coloured coat. Her full bosom protruded proudly, an expensive diamond necklace hung around her ivory neck, and an emerald ring shone on her right ring finger. A fragrant scent emanated from her firm body, and her confident eyes shone behind her transparent veil. She sat down on a couch beside her father's seat (al-Nassir, 1978, p.38).

This love between Zāhir and Buthaina eventually leads them to marry, as they both refuse to follow the usual traditions regarding arranged marriage. Zāhir's family are opposed to his relationship with Buthaina, whom his mother despises (ibid., pp. 33-35, 93). The fact that they are both well-educated helps them to overcome these problems and break with tradition, as they believe that independence is necessary to make this choice. The story depicts the younger generation's desire to defy the tradition of arranged marriage by establishing a proper path for independence in their important decisions, which represents a clear change to Saudi customs.

Studies have analyzed Saudi youth's efforts to gain greater independence from their families in crucial decision-making areas, most notably marriage and education. A recent survey of 3,150 young men and women aged 15 to 29 from various areas of Saudi Arabia studied the concerns, problems, and aspirations of young Saudis seeking to break free from the traditional social custom of familial control. According to the study, changes in Saudi culture have contributed to this desire for independence, including individuals considering the traditional role of the family as an obstacle to pursuing their personal ambitions (al-'Arābi, 2005).

The Saudi social novel and this study both represent this shift away from traditional arranged marriages and a transformation in the thinking of Saudi youth, as indicated by their efforts to be more independent in their decision-making and to overcome the pressures traditionally imposed by their parents.

b) Factors that Influenced the Institution of Marriage

i. *Ancestry*

The Saudi novel suggests that family background continues to play a significant role in marriage. Traditionally, Saudi society confined social relationships to the members of the tribe, making it custom to marry a man or woman with a known ancestry, although marriage was sometimes extended to members of other well-known tribes or families. Despite the Kingdom's unification and the Bedouin settlement project in urban, rural, and Hijar areas, which have facilitated the transformation from a tribal society to one that is more open to other cultures and civilisations, parental involvement is still required when entering into a marriage contract in Saudi society.

Thuqbun fi Rida' al-Layl (al-Nassir, 1961, p.16) sheds light on this social necessity. It describes the hard life of al-Mawlā Maḫfuẓ, a secondary character, who was not allowed to marry:

تلك نقطة المنهاج الذي لا يستطيع تغييره أو تبديله, إذ كيف يستطيع الاستدلال خاصا ليس مكشوفا وعاما كالمسجد. الضعف في منهاج المولى محفوظ اليومي. على شجرته المقطوعة, فيكون أسرة تجعله يسكن ثم لايضطر فيما بعد أن يتبول كالكلاب الضالة في مبنى مهجوربيتا.

That is the weak point in the daily routine of al-Mawlā Maḫfūẓ, the Sheikh's teaching assistant at the Quran memorisation school. It is a routine he can neither alter nor replace, for how can he locate his severed family tree, start his own family, and dwell in a home that is private and not open to everyone, like a mosque, so that he would not have to urinate in a deserted building like a stray dog?

This quotation reveals the miserable existence of al-Mawla Maḫfūẓ, who is forced by social custom to remain single, has been robbed of his right to start a family, and cannot change his social status due to his unknown parentage. So, the only option for him is to marry a woman from a similar background.

Saudi society follows Islamic teachings, a religion which does not differentiate between Arab and non-Arab, or black and white, as many of the Quranic verses and Ḫadith explain. For example:

O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has *At-Taqwā* [i.e. he is one of the Muttaqīn (the pious, see V.2: 2)]. Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware (Fakhry, 1997, Verse 49:13).

Comparing Islamic teaching, which stresses equality between all levels of society, with the reality of Saudi society in dealing with the issue of marriage, it becomes clear that Saudi Arabia is sometimes torn between two directions: one influenced by *Sharī'a*[3] and the other by social customs. Although the Islamic view preaches against discrimination, Saudi society follows social customs which are clearly at odds with this religious view. Many scholars and writers have observed the apparent contradiction in Saudi social behaviour in cases such as this one.

Al-Khshibān (2010) comments on the conflict that arises between social and religious customs in the Kingdom, arguing that society wrongly believes that many values, customs, and traditions form part of their religion, and that it is necessary to correct these misunderstandings and differentiate between social customs and religion. Another Arab researcher, Khalid al-Jabur (2007), stated:

[3] The system of religious laws that Muslims follow.

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We see in our society that there are some customs and traditions that are totally inconsistent with the provisions of religion, which means religious rule is easier and lighter than that of the customs and traditions. The religious rule is also more open, while customs and tradition are more closed.

Focusing on the subject of marriage and social customs, the Saudi novel reveals the disparities between the members of society even though they may respectfully and peacefully coexist in many other ways, sharing each other's joys and sorrows and dealing commercially with each other. However, Saudis, especially those who come from the most well-known tribes and families, seldom neglect the requirement of knowing someone's ancestry. Highlighting these issues in Saudi narrative discourse not only reveals this social problem but also demonstrates that society is still pulled in two opposing directions.

ii. *Economic Factors*

The Saudi social novel explores how economic factors have become an obstacle to marriage for working-class citizens. *'Adhra' al-Manfā* (al-Nassir, 1978, p.50) describes the life of Jarraḥ, one of the main characters, who wishes to marry. However, the rising cost of living and his responsibilities to his large family, which includes his disabled father, his father's three wives, and his brother and two sisters, make achieving his aim more difficult, as he has to save a large amount of money to hope to marry in the next fifty years.

Al-Muṭiri's study (2009, p.70) on the delayed age of marriage in Saudi society attributes the delay to economic factors. These include the increasing cost of dowry; the high expense of wedding celebrations; the rising cost of living; the complexity of life; and the inability of the married couple to afford an independent house. Al-Muṭiri regards this delay in marriage as a social problem, but al-Gharīb views it as a natural tendency (al-Gharīb, 2009).

'Adhra' al-Manfā, illustrates another shift from arranged marriages, originally founded on family background. The standard of living has recently become a criterion for the acceptance or rejection of a marriage proposal. In this novel, the protagonist, Zāhir decides to marry Buthaina, whom he loves, but knows that she will find it difficult to accept his marriage proposal due to his standard of living.

لقد غاية كل حب عفيف و منتهاه, فلماذا لايختتم قصة حبه بالزواج قبل فوات الفارق الاجتماعي. إنه شاب فقير معدم, أحب بثينة مافي ذلك شك. فالزواج إذن الأوان؟. وفطن إلى ناحية شائكة,فكف تفاؤله. لقد رأسماله قلم هزيل وتشجيع مشكوك في اخلاصة. لقد ذاق حياة الكدح البائسةنسي.

He was in love with Buthaina and there was no doubt about that. Since marriage is the purpose and ultimate outcome of every pure love, why should he not conclude his love story by getting married before it is too late? However, he recalled a thorny issue, and his optimism disappeared. He had forgotten about the social gap between them. He was a poor, penniless young man whose only asset was his writing skills, for which he received encouragement that might not have been sincere. He had experienced the misery of a life of drudgery (al-Nassir, 1978, p. 84).

The narrative context reflects the impact of economic factors on marriage decisions in Saudi society since they can be an obstacle to getting married. The protagonist realises that community traditions have changed; wealth has now become the new norm for proposing marriage. The novel examines the protagonist's belief that the standard of living has become an important marriage concern in Saudi society. It also records the reaction of the girl's relatives, who come to her father to dissuade him, as narrated by Buthaina:

فمنذ أسبوعين مضيا كانوا ثلة في غرفة الاستقبال يتكلمون بصوت مرتفع, إنهم أعمامي و أخوالي جاؤا إلى أبي ليزجون أنفسهم في مسألة لاتعني أحدا سواي. كان الاختطاف من دأبهم, فهرعوا لاختطاف مصيري. وأتفق أنني كنت أناول الخادم أدوات الشاي حين أرهنت السمع لأعلم مايدور في الحجرة المغلقة. فلم يكن من دأب أبي أن يخفي علينا شيئا بيد أن الفضول دفعني لإستبق الزمن. وبلغني صوته هادرا بلهجة غاضبة:

- هذا موضوع يخصني وحدي ولا أسمح لأي كان بالتدخل فيه. ثم أن الشاب لايعيبه شي. الرجال لايحط من قدرهم أو يرفعه مايملكونه من نقد و عقار .

- وسمعت الرد المتوسل: ولكنك أصبحت من الأعيان يا أستاذ, وعليك أن تصاهر من هو في مستواك وإلا فجحا أولى بلحم ثوره.

- رد الأستاذ عليهم: لا أملك أبقارا في هذا المنزل, وبثينة وحيدتي في الدنيا.

وندت عني شهقة قوية وارتعش جسمي برمته وكدت أصرخ: أخرجوا أيها الوحوش الآدمية .

A couple of weeks ago, a group of people were in the living room talking loudly. It consisted of my paternal and maternal uncles, who had visited my father to get involved in an issue that was my concern and no one else's. They were used to seizing what didn't belong to them, and they had rushed to seize my fate. It so happened that I was handing the servant the teacups when I began eavesdropping to find out what was going on behind closed doors. My father was not in the habit of keeping things from us, but I was prompted by my curiosity to find out right away.

– I heard him shouting angrily: "That is my business alone, and I will not allow anyone to interfere. Also, there is nothing wrong with the young man. A man's worth is not enhanced or diminished by how much money and property he owns".

– I heard the pleading response: "But sir, you have become a prominent individual, and you must choose a son-in-law whose social standing matches your own. Besides, Juḥa is more deserving of his own bull's flesh" (an Arabic idiom, meaning relatives have priority).

– He responded, "I own no cows in this house, and Buthaina is my only child".

– I gasped loudly, and my whole body shook. I almost screamed, Get out of here, you human monsters! (ibid., p.87).

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This passage reveals a tense conflict between Buthaina's relatives, who emphasize social standing as a prerequisite for marriage, and the father, who believes in the right of his daughter to choose her own husband. The debate also demonstrates the benefits of education, as seen by the father's refusal to regard his daughter as a livestock asset. He does not see a difference in social standing as a reason to prevent her from marrying a young man who has impressed him with his educated and ambitious personality.

iii. *Education*

The Saudi social novel also refers to another social transformation that has caused many young Saudis to postpone marriage owing to the influence of factors such as education and finances. Prior to the economic boom, the age of marriage in Saudi society was linked to puberty, with girls marrying between the ages of twelve and sixteen and boys marrying between the ages of sixteen and twenty. Females, on the other hand, are now more likely to marry between the ages of 19 and 25, while males marry between the ages of 23 and 28 (al-Gharīb, 2009):

> Delaying the age of marriage is an Arab social phenomenon that is emerging as a result of various social, economic, cultural and psychological factors. These factors differ in their impacts on the family system as a whole, as well as its related systems, such as the system of marriage, the method of choosing a partner, and the age of marriage. In fact, delaying the age of marriage is considered to be a problematic phenomenon in Saudi society (al-Muṯiri, 2009, p.15).

Aware of these social changes, Zāhir (al-Nassir, 1978, p. 84) believed that gaining a higher level of education would ensure a better and more secure future for him; thus, he did not think about marriage until he had finished his studies:

> لقد كانت أمنيته أن يحصل على شهادة عالية في الصحافة, ومثل هذا المؤهل سيمهد أمامه أفاق المستقبل, انه الان في ربيع العمر, وبوسعه أن يحقق أحلامه قبل أن يرتبط بمسؤليات تثقل كاهله. إنه بعد عام أو أكثر بقليل – فيما لوتزوج- سينجب, وهذا وحده يكفي لأن يزرع في طريقه عقبات لاحصر لها. وحين فكر بالأبناء أرتبك فتثاقل في خطواته.
>
> His cherished wish was to earn a university degree in journalism. Such a qualification would pave the way towards better future prospects. He was young and could achieve his dreams before becoming weighed down by responsibilities. However, in one year or perhaps a little longer, if he were to get married, he would become a father. That alone would be enough to plant innumerable obstacles in his path. Thoughts of having children overwhelmed him, and his footsteps grew heavy.

The novel refers to Saudis' growing awareness of the value of education, which has evolved into a societal necessity for ensuring a better future; hence, Zāhir views marriage as a probable barrier to achieving a high degree of education, since it entails multiple responsibilities. The desire of many young Saudi men and women to continue their education contributed to the increase in the marriage age. According to al-Gharīb's study (2009), 54.7 percent of Saudi university students would rather continue their studies than marry, and 58.7 percent say that marriage's responsibilities are an impediment. Saudi Arabia's economic success has influenced several aspects of life, including marriage, by increasing the expense of dowries and weddings, which have become a source of social prestige.

III. The Relationship between Husband and Wife

The relationship between husband and wife in contemporary Saudi society is in a state of turmoil, due in part to the rapid social transformations that have altered the traditional roles that Saudi women used to play before the economic boom, as well as the declining position of men within the family. The fact that divorce rates in Saudi society continue to rise is a clear evidence of this instability. According to the Saudi Ministry of Justice's annual statistics, there were 34,722 divorce cases in 2011, or one every 27 minutes, compared to 145,079 weddings in the same year (Wzārat al-'Adil fi al-Mamlaka al-'Arabia al-Su'ūdiya, 2011).

Saudi novelists have paid considerable attention to divorce situations. Some of al-Nassir's novels explore various facets of the nature of the husband-wife relationship in light of current social changes. His novels analyze many social changes and shifts in women's status, which are linked to increasing divorce rates in Saudi Arabia.

Different social backgrounds and social changes, particularly in women's positions played a significant role in the breakdown of marriages in *Hiṯān al-Rīḥ*. In this novel, the protagonist's marriage to his young wife is based on "love and fear" (al-Nassir, 2008g, p.20), an older man's love for a young woman and his fear of people's negative opinions and stifling social restrictions. The protagonist (ibid., p. 22) thinks that love transcends social class and age distinctions. The novel depicts a marriage that has been impacted by society's shift to a capitalist lifestyle and the protagonist's failure to understand the basis of a marital relationship.

Al-Nassir's novels focus on the shifting dynamics of the husband-wife relationship, which takes on a new shape in each of his novels. In his first novel, *Thuqbun fi Rida' al-Layl* (1961, pp. 11-14, 24, 61), al-Ḥāj 'Ammār and his wife have a normal, traditional relationship. Her role as a wife is to look after her husband and children, feed them, and do the housework. Her husband, who is usually busy with his job, tries to help his wife raise their children by bringing home his salary. Their relationship is centered on their

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children, with little indication of romance; the novel depicts al-Ḥāj ʻAmmār belittling his wife when their son is punished at school for not having done his homework:

ولما رأى زوجته أمامه خاطبها قائلا: انظري إلى ابنك البليد الذي تطرين في توقد ذكائه. أتريدين شهادة أكبر على غبائه من رجليه المتورمتين من أثر الفلكة؟ اللعنة عليك من أمرأة جاهلة.ولاذ عيسى بأمه يحتمي بها من شر يوشك أن ينزل به. إلا أن أباه لم يدعه في مأمنه فقد أمتدت إليه يده الغاضبة وانتزعته وهو يهدر قائلا: تعال يا بن الكلبة.وشيعت الأم ابنها وقلبها يكاد ينخلع من الخوف ولم تكن تملك سوى أن تتم داعية بأن يبعد البلاء عن ابنها من شر هذه الغضبة المحمومة.

When he saw his wife before him, he said to her: Look at your dim-witted son, whose intelligence you keep praising. Look at how swollen his feet are from the beating. What more evidence of his stupidity do you need? God curse you. What an ignorant woman you are!

ʻIssā hid behind his mother to protect himself from the disaster that was about to befall him. But his father would not let him be. He grabbed him angrily from his refuge, shouting, *Come here, you son of a b...* His mother's heart pounded with fear as she let go of him. All she could do was mutter some prayers for the protection of her son against such fury (ibid., p.12).

This episode illustrates the cruelty that Arab males inflict on their helpless wives. As a father, he absolves himself of any responsibility for his children's education. Additionally, it is clear from this novel that he is regarded as the authority figure in the house as the husband, while his wife is expected to obey his orders, as "The father is the one who holds the reins of absolute power, whether he is right or wrong" (al-ʻInazi, 2010, p.70). As a result, the wife appears to be relegated to a subordinate role in the family, living in the shadow of her husband. This novel, al-Nassir's longest work, portrays the social reality of women's traditional status in Arab society and their marginal role in the family by focusing only on the life of the male protagonist in his family and the role of his father. As wife and mother, the female character has no decision-making authority, as "women occupy an inferior status in this system" (ibid., p.70).

Suhaila Zine al-ʻAbidīn (2012), a Saudi Arabian human rights activist, asserts that violence against women is a global issue that is not unique to Saudi society. The issue stems from ancient social customs and a misinterpretation of religious teachings. However, this phenomenon is also a result of women's acceptance of this type of violence from men. Because they were unable to learn about their rights, Arab women's illiteracy played a significant role in the emergence of this issue. This phenomenon will gradually disappear in modern societies when women are given their full rights.

Another traditional husband-wife relationship is described in *Ghuīūm al-Kharīf,* where the wife is unable to express her love for her husband owing to her modesty and shyness as a result of social conditioning, resulting in an emotional drought in their relationship. This in turn motivates the protagonist to seek love by cheating on his wife with a prostitute while on a business trip outside the country. The following exchange between husband and wife (al-Nassir, 1988, p. 59) demonstrates this relationship:

ورن الهاتف في منزله.

- **البطل: كيف صحة نورة؟.**
- **الحمدلله تحسنت كثيرا. متى تعود؟.**
- **مازلت مشغولا.**
- **الجميع في شوق إليك. (الحياء منعها أن تقول أنا وبناتك في شوق إليك)**
- **سوف أعود إن شاء الله قريبا. أكل شيء على مايرام؟.**
- **نحمد الله. نحن في انتظارك.**
- **البطل: مع السلامة.**

His home phone rang.

- Protagonist: What is Noura's state?
- Thank God, she is doing a lot better. When will you be back?
- I'm still busy.
- Everyone misses you. (Her modesty prevented her from saying "my daughters and I miss you").
- I'll be back soon, God willing. Is everything okay?
- Yes, thank God. We're waiting for you.
- Protagonist: Bye-bye.

The novel demonstrates the formality and lack of passion conveyed in this husband-wife dialogue. The third-person narrator indicates that the woman hides her true emotions from her husband out of shyness, as Saudi society requires; yet, this affects their relationship. While traveling from country to country, the protagonist takes advantage of the opportunity to experience relationships with other women, unlike his reserved wife.

According to tradition, a woman's place is in the house, and historically, women were not permitted to leave the domestic sphere in Saudi culture. On the rare occasions that a wife did leave the home, traditionally, her husband would not walk next to her, as a sign that she was subordinate to him. Shopping for pleasure was interpreted as a sign that she was neglecting her family responsibilities, and everybody would know who she was if her husband was walking next to her. In the public sphere, women might experience sexual harassment, which could have ended their married life, even if they were not guilty.

There is no doubt that the character of the desert environment is reflected in that of the Saudi man; the rugged wilderness of the desert has shaped the personality of the Saudi man, who needed to develop

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toughness. Modern city life, however, has made him more responsive to social changes, as is the case with Faliḥ in Ra'shat al-Ẓil. Coming from a small desert community, he became more attracted to the urban lifestyle until he finally decided to settle there, not wishing to return to the desert. Although the Saudi male mindset is now changing, the traditional role enforced by social norms and customs creates problems in husband-wife relationships.

The Saudi social novel exemplifies some of the beneficial changes that have occurred in the nature of this relationship. *'Adhra' al-Manfā*, (al-Nassir, 1978, pp.87, 95-102), which was written during the Saudi economic boom, as the actions of the characters indicate, shows a kind of intimacy between Zāhir as husband and his wife, Buthaina, both of whom are educated. Their relationship is infused with love, understanding, and harmony. Images of this intimacy appear in many places throughout the novel. Although their marriage ends in divorce, the secret of this deep relationship between them lies in the fact that they are both educated and able to share the decision-making and respectfully accept each other's views. Their level of education makes the couple better able to adapt to modern life, which requires active sharing between them.

As a result, the more educated women are, the less willing they are to tolerate violence; both men and women are aware of their rights and duties in contemporary civilian life and the changing nature of their roles in society. This novel demonstrates a fresh understanding of the male-female interaction in contemporary culture and the attempts to alter conventional concepts of this relationship.

It is worth noting that the relationship between husband and wife gets more open over time. A novel such as *Hiṭān al-Rīḥ*. depicts a marriage based on openness, understanding, and happiness, even though this relationship ends in divorce. The husband is very open in expressing his feelings towards his wife (al-Nassir, 2008g, pp.20, 62) as is she towards him (ibid., pp.102, 144). This type of modern relationship is found in *al-Ghajarīa wa al-Thu'ban* (al-Nassir, 2008a, p.53), which depicts a Saudi wife who is not embarrassed about expressing her feelings towards her husband.

أنت لاتنام بسرعة فمالذي يشغل قلبك.؟
أجاب: متى جاءني النوم أستسلمت له. ولايشغلني سوى العمل.
تساءلت: عسى أن لايكون عقلك يفكر بإمرأة أخرى.؟
أجاب: أنا لاأفكر بالنساء مطلقا.
قالت: وهؤلاء اللاتي يتحدثن معك بالتلفون ألسن نساءا؟
رد بسرعة: نامي ولاتتعبينني بهذه الأحاديث المكررة .
قالت: أنت تعرف محبتي لك. واستعدادي لقتل من ينافسك علي .
ضحك فقال: أعرف أنك مجنونة. إنما نامي وتعوذي من الشيطان.

– It's taking a while to fall asleep. What's on your mind?
– He answered: When I get sleepy, I'll fall asleep. Nothing is worrying me except work.
– She asked: Perhaps you're thinking about another woman? He answered: I don't think about women at all.
– She said: What about all the ones who call you? Aren't they women?
– He answered quickly: Go to sleep and don't bother me with your usual chatter.
– She said: You know how much I love you and how I would be ready to kill anyone competing with me for you.
– He laughed and said: I know that you're mad. Just go to sleep and put such devilish thoughts out of your mind.

It is clear from this dialogue that the relationship between husband and wife is more open. The wife feels free to express her feelings of love and jealousy to her husband, who answers her questions gently and diplomatically. As with the previous relationship, these transformations indicate that Saudis have begun to realise that things have changed in the modern era and to accept this new way of life, letting go of those old customs that are out of touch with the Zeitgeist.

IV. Parent-Child Relationships

The Saudi social novel pays close attention to the changing nature of the relationship between parents and children in Saudi society. Generally speaking, children are born without any experience, knowledge, or idea about how to behave, so they receive their first lessons in social and interpersonal relations from their family in general, and their parents in particular, who contribute to the formation of their personality (Ḥalawa, 2011, p.73). In addition, the relationship between parents and children is affected by the environment in which the family lives.

This relationship has experienced many changes as a result of economic, political, intellectual, and social factors. The economic prosperity experienced by Saudi society, the advancement of globalisation and technology, the education system, and the impact of the media have all had an impact either positively or negatively on the nature of this relationship. A number of studies have noted the rapid impact of some of these factors on parent-child relationships:

> The exposure of Saudi youth to ever more diverse experiences, ranging from the Internet and satellite television to a more secular education system, leads to a perception, shared by their parents, that externally driven change is becoming faster and more uncontrolled (Yamani, 2000, p.56).

a) The Status of Children in Saudi Society

In traditional societies, the son occupies an important position in the family as he is considered the second authority after his father. 'Issā in *Thuqbun fi Rida' al-Layl* is the eldest son in his family, which gives him a high position in his family, meaning he has authority

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over his brothers and sisters who have to obey him (al-Nassir, 1961, p.10). The novel explains why the son is given this authority inside the traditional family, since he is regarded as the one who will take over the father's responsibilities towards the family as breadwinner (ibid., p.43).

Even though the protagonist of *Ghuīūm al-Kharīf* has three daughters, he dreams of having a son, as he himself is an only child, so the family line will stop if he does not have a boy. The protagonist is also concerned about who will inherit all his money when he dies (al-Nassir, 1988, p.81). This traditional mindset indicates the high position of boys compared to girls within the Saudi family, with the son bearing the burden of providing income for the family and guaranteeing the continued existence of the family line.

The Saudi social novel does not show the traditional role of girls in the family except for their daily role in cleaning the home and preparing the food (al-Nassir, 1978, p.25). However, a novel such as *Dam al-Barā'a* shows the struggle faced by some female characters, such as Mūḍi, who tries to be more powerful in her society by playing a new, more socially active role. Moreover, the Saudi social novel shows the status of the daughter in modern Saudi families, such as Buthaina, who has the same status as a son inside her family, as she is their only child. Buthaina's father is very proud of his daughter, and he believes in her choices, so she has the freedom to do what she wants. Buthaina's status indicates a new social role for Saudi women, which is no longer confined to just housework and reproduction.

b) Traditional Relationships

Traditional relationships between parents and children are based on the absolute dependency of children on their parents, as "the family still provides the main reference point for the new generation's identity formation" (ibid., p.57). The Saudi social novel demonstrates how some families have preserved this traditional type of relationship. *Thuqbun fi Rida' al-Layl* depicts children who follow the orders of their family. Sa'īd, the protagonist's brother, (al-Nassir, 1961, p.54) follows in his father's steps, and tries to be like him even in his way of speaking or behaving, thus elevating him to the position of favorite child. As previously said, the name Sa'īd means happy, and using it for this character implies that the child who respects tradition often receives special treatment and a position within the family that ensures him happiness.

'Adhra' al-Manfā, (al-Nassir, 1978, p.25) also depicts a traditional relationship. Hudā, the protagonist's sister, embodies the traditional daughter since she constantly chooses to follow her mother's advice and tries to be like her in taking on the traditional responsibility for the family, which is limited to housework. As a typical daughter, she is portrayed as lacking ambition, as her social responsibilities do not extend beyond the walls of the house.

As previously stated, al-Nassir's protagonists are not involved in this type of relationship but appear to rebel against tradition, both within the family and in society as a whole. However, because these images reflect the traditional relationship between parents and children, they might contribute to the development of stereotyped characters in society, thereby impeding the progress of positive social transformation.

c) Modern Relationships

The Saudi social novel presents some modern relationships between parents who deal with their children in keeping with the needs of the modern era, especially the needs of the younger generation. *'Adhra' al-Manfā*, reflects a modern relationship between Buthaina and her father. Both are very well educated, which makes them more able to understand the complexities of modern life, so they get on well together and they seem more harmonious. Buthaina's father gives his daughter the freedom to live as she wants, so she opts to attempt to break into the man's world by working in a community that was previously limited only to men. Working in the media field requires openness towards the other gender, which would have been impossible in a conservative society. In spite of that, her father supports her working with men.

The novel shows a modern father who can understand and read the minds of the younger generation. This understanding is presented, for example, through his dealing with the ideas of Zāhir and Buthaina, when he comments, "be sure that I support your generation's ideas, although I am older" (ibid., p.42). This shows the modern attitude of Buthaina's father towards his child in not imposing his opinions on his daughter, which leads to building a good relationship between them both. Moreover, he did not force his daughter to marry someone like some more traditional fathers do, and he refused any intervention from his family in choosing her husband, believing it to be her personal choice (ibid., pp.87-90).

Buthaina's mother (ibid., p.68) has a similar approach to dealing with her daughter, and as the novel shows, their relationship is solid as reflected in the following passage.

كانت بثينة تعلم بمدى محبة أمها و حرصها على إدخال السرور إلى قلبها العامر بالطموح. وقد جربت حين كانت ببيروت عدم مضايقتها اطلاقا فقد سمحت لها بأن تتجول بحرية مع صويحباتها, كما أنها لم تمانع في أن تتعلم قيادة العربات, وتقوم برحلات بحرية .. وبالاجمال فقد مارست بعض الأعمال بمفردها حتى اعتادت في الاعتماد على نفسها.

Buthaina knew the extent of her mother's love and care for her, and her mother was keen to bring happiness to her ambitious heart. She tried her mother, who had not bothered

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her at all when they were in Beirut; she had allowed her to roam freely with her friends, and she had not prevented her from learning to drive a car and or going on a cruise. In general, she did many things alone until she became accustomed to relying on herself.

This passage shows a kind of intellectual compatibility between the daughter and her mother, who gives her total freedom as long as she is doing the right things, meaning this relationship did not generate any conflict between them. Buthaina is in conflict only with her community, which attempts to limit her social role and freedom by imposing its traditional customs, which are no longer suited to modern life.

d) The Generation Gap

The generation gap is a recurring issue, as each generation has its own aspirations and ambitions, and each era has its own environment and conditions. The rapid pace of social change has widened this gap, and hence, certain changes reflect this relationship. However, as Saudi society undergoes many transformations, there has been a kind of dilemma and complexity in the relationship between parents and children. According to a recent study on Saudi society's transformation (Yamani, 2000, p.57), "the generation gap is widening and in a more bewildering way than the change that took place between the grandparents' and the parents' generation".

The Saudi social novel highlights some issues related to the generation gap, such as what parents and children require of one another and what factors most influence the parent-child relationship, given that the parents' generation was significantly different from their children's. The answer to this vital issue can be discovered by re-reading some of al-Nassir's novels in light of this generational split.

Thuqbun fi Rida' al-Layl depicts a traditional father who acts dictatorially toward his children out of a deep-seated fear for their futures. As the protagonist's grandfather stated (al-Nassir, 1961, p. 112), times have changed, yet the father continues to use the same traditional method of discipline with his children. The novel presents many images that encapsulate the father's style in dealing with his children, as he believes that the new generation is full of idiots (ibid., pp.21-13). In addition, he always uses beating and shouting as ways of forcing his children to behave (ibid., pp.11, 46).

Additionally, the novel depicts a conflict between the parents' authority and the children's desire for greater autonomy in their decision-making. *Thuqbun fi Rida' al-Layl* (ibid., pp.59, 66) describes an argument between a father and his son; the father attempts to convince his son to join him in business, while the son wishes to study literature. Although 'Issā fears his father, the latter always insists that his son has the right to make decisions to determine his own future. The novel (ibid., p.56) also shows that 'Issā does not want to rely on his father's high social position, suggesting that the younger generation wants to rely on itself to achieve self-realisation.

Conflict between parents and children is obvious in *'Adhra' al-Manfā*. Zāhir's family attempts to instill traditional values in him, but he rejects family interference in his personal or professional life. His family's long-established social habits and customs prohibit him from working with females because it is considered shameful. His mother says, "what will people say when they know about you working with a girl?" (al-Nassir, 1978, p.24). Zāhir tries to explain to his parents that working with a woman will not harm his reputation and that women work with men, but they are not convinced by his answer.

The educational gap between the parents and their son also has an effect on their relationship. He attempts to persuade them that working with a woman is not an issue as long as the relationship is completely professional. By contrast, the narrative demonstrates his sister's sympathy for his situation, since she is aware of social transformation and the subsequent conflict between new and old customs, even as she herself remains under the control of the old traditions (ibid., p.33).

The Saudi social novel explores some of the issues confronting the younger generation in light of the rapid social transformations. *Thuqbun fi Rida' al-Layl* (al-Nassir, 1961, p.9) focuses on the relationship between a father and his son, 'Issā, who experiences a major contrast between old and modern social values. 'Issā feels that what he learns from his parents is different from the reality that he experiences outside of the home:

أحس بنفسه ذات يوم يعيش في بحر متلاطم من المتناقضات. بحر يخوضه بكل وجدانه ومشاعره. ففي الخارج, خارج البيت حيث المجتمع الكبير. مجتمع المدرسة و الشارع والسوق تجد أن المرونة تبيح أمورا كثيرة رفضها هو وغيره في البداية ثم أستسلم لها مرغما لأن الواقع يفرض عليه أمورا يرى فيها المجتمع الصغير (البيت) كبائر ومحرمات.

One day, he felt as if he was living in a sea of ranging contradictions, passing through all his affection and emotions. Outside of his home was the larger community that included the school, the street, and the market, where there was great flexibility that permitted many things that he and others had rejected, and then he gave up, unwillingly, because reality imposed many things that his own small community (his home) considered heinous sins and taboos.

This passage shows the huge differences between tradition and contemporary reality. This clash between the customs and traditions that the son acquires from his parents at home and the world outside the home leads to problems for the new generation, who find it difficult to reconcile what they are taught with what they see in reality. This conflict has a negative impact on the relationship between parents and children at the

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level of trust, and leads to the younger generation feeling that they are being pulled in two opposing directions.

The son explains that the incompatibility between the customs he has acquired from his parents at home and the social reality outside is a brand new problem for his generation:

وأنطلق موكب شبيبة تلك الفئة المغتربة يشق طريقه على سفافيد الحذر و الاحتراز. مبلبل الفكر مزعزع الثقة وكان موقفها جد دقيق إذ أنها لاتدري أتتجه إلى أهلها في محافظتهم و تزمتهم المتشدد أم تنطلق مع تيار المجتمع الفسيح. وقد تحلل إلى درجة الارتباك من التقاليد. على أن جذور التنشئة المحافظة التي تشربوها صغارا قبل أن تتفتح مدارك الوعي فيهم مازالت تثقل الانطلاقة المتحررة من القيود المحافظة.

The procession of the youth of the expatriates took off, walking on ropes of caution and watchfulness with disturbed thoughts and uncertainty amidst a serious and complex situation. Should they follow their conservative families with their extensive strictness, or should they run free in the open flow of the community? They have reached a point where they are falling into confusion with regard to traditions. The roots of their own upbringing that nourished them as children before their conscience bloomed still bind them in heavy chains of traditionalism, unable to seek liberty (ibid., p.9).

This paragraph illustrates the younger generation's unsteady progression into modern life. Additionally, it highlights the desire of young people during this period of transition to abandon constraining habits and customs historically prevalent in society. The passage implies that this generation is aware that, as a result of social transformations, inherited customs are no longer viable in an era in which the world has become a small global village.

As the Saudi social novel demonstrates, the generation gap is not just a product of the conflict between old and modern traditions. The economic boom in Saudi Arabia has had an impact on this relationship, since both Saudi parents find work to provide a higher standard of living for their children. Thus, parents play a less direct role as a result of their reliance on foreign laborers such as housekeepers, nannies, drivers, and chefs, relinquishing many responsibilities to these servants, especially those related to their children's upbringing.

According to recent statistics from Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Labor, 647,796 servants entered the nation in 2011, and the estimated overall number of foreign workers of various types in the kingdom is around 9.2 million, including irregular laborers who enter the country without permission. In other words, about 33% of Saudi society is made up of foreign workers (Wzārat al- ʻAmal fi al-Mamlaka al-ʻArabia al-Suʻūdiya, 2011, p.52). These figures highlight numerous critical points.

Al-Nassir (1988, p.20-21) focuses on this issue in *Ghuīūm al-Kharīf. Muḫaisin,* the protagonist, is a businessman who used to travel frequently and does not care about his family, leaving his deputy look after his family during his long business trip. Throughout the narrative, it becomes evident that the protagonist is completely dependent on his agent to look after his family. The narrative details three phone calls from his wife on different days, inquiring about him and when he would return; nevertheless, Muḫisin does not even call to inquire about his sick daughter, who is missing him. His wife is also busy with her new life as a mother, who is mostly concerned with travel and fashion:

ودخل عنصر جديد إلى المنزل. أخذ على عاتقه - بعد تدريبه- تنفيذ الرحلات اليومية المقررة مابين المدارس إلى البيت ثم إلى السوق فزيارة الأقارب و الأصدقاء. ثم بالتدريج شراء لوازم البيت من خبز ولبن ثم الخضار و الفاكهة وحتى ابتياع الذبائح. وهذا مادفع محيسن إلى التساؤل: (من أصبح أكثر أهمية في المنزل. السائق أم أنا ***[...]*** (؟لقد ألقينا مسئولية المنزل على السائقين كما أن الأمهات تخلين عن مسئولياتهن للخادمات.

A new man entered the home. He takes upon himself – after he has been trained – the implementation of the daily scheduled duties, going from home to the school and then the market, and afterwards, he takes the family to visit relatives and friends. Then, gradually, he starts to supply the home with bread, milk, vegetables, fruit, and meat. This status pushes Muḫisin to wonder (who is becoming most important, the driver or me?) [...] We have placed all the responsibility of the house on our drivers. Furthermore, mothers have handed their household responsibilities to maids. Thus, fair equality has been achieved in the home environment. But we will see the consequences of this foreign condition that starts with gibberish (ibid., p.74).

The third-person narrator depicts the parents' abandonment of their responsibilities towards their children. The servants gradually start to take over these responsibilities in the home, so that the father sees his role diminish whilst that of the servants grows ever more important. As a result of their ignoring their social duties towards their children and overly relying on the servants, as a result of economic prosperity, the parent-child relationship becomes less close. The text also reveals the father's fear of this transformation in their lives.

V. Conclusion

In al-Nassir's novels, several interpersonal and family relationships undergo several transformations. The family, which is considered the principal institution in any society, has witnessed several transformations in the relationships amongst its members. These are natural reactions to the numerous changes occurring in the broader community. As previously demonstrated, the narrative characters are not immune to the effects of these social transformations. Certain old values have been replaced by more contemporary ones. In the case

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of marriage, family bonds are no longer a prerequisite for marriage, since some families now need a groom to have a prestigious social standing and a strong financial status. The social novel demonstrates how some characters rebel against this idea, believing that a husband and wife's love and intellectual compatibility are more important than anything else. Additionally, the younger generation has rejected some traditional marital customs, such as arranged or forced marriage, and they also reject family interference in deciding their future partners.

The relationships between parents and children appear to be complicated as a result of the generation gap. There has always been tension between generations, but recent rapid transformations have heightened awareness of this issue to the point that it has become one of the most essential aspects of the parent-child relationship. Al-Nassir's protagonists battle in particular against long-established social customs that restrict their freedoms and aspirations, so they try to break free of their reliance on their family in order to gain their independence. Additionally, the books reflect a slight shift in society's mindset since al-Nassir provides an image of the modern family which does not distinguish between the two genders, whereas traditionally, sons would have been more highly prized than daughters.

The social novels of al-Nassir pay significant attention to the various types of transformations that have taken place in Saudi society, and thus, it is true to say that social transformation is a major theme of the social novel. Studying al-Nassir's work provides some ideas for future research on the Saudi novel.

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