

**Revising the Cultural Master Narratives of the Saudi Society
in
*Tarmi Beshararen Kalqasr / Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles***

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Contemporary literature in the Arabian Gulf countries, particularly fiction, is characterized by a tendency to reflect various aspects of life in these desert communities since the post oil era until the present time. Nevertheless, a scrutinized analysis of scholarships on the recent literature by writers from the GCC/ Gulf Cooperation Council countries reveals the limitations of narrow critical approaches which abandoned the geopolitical background of the region ignoring the intricate dialectics between tradition and modernity which is a central motif in local literary works. Investigating the significant intricacies and overlaps in GCC fiction between past and present, this paper explores Abdo Khal's Tarmi Beshararen Kalqasr / Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles (2010) to probe the novelist's attempt to navigate the interrelated trajectories between two eras (the fishing / pearl-diving era and the post-oil era) articulating a spectrum of terrifying and untold narratives of violence, hypocrisy, sin and incest banned in the Saudi community. Within the parameters of contemporary literary theory , the paper argues that Khal's provocative novel aims to underline the menacing consequences of political corruption and economic monopoly on the moral traditions of the local Saudi society in the post oil era engaging taboo discourses and incorporating sophisticated fictional strategies alien to indigenous GCC novels.

Key words: *Arabian Gulf Literature – sex and incest – religious taboos - resistance – Saudi community – pre-oil era – post-oil era- master narratives- intertextuality.*

Introduction

The process of rapid modernization in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries - Saudi Arabia , Kuwait , UAE , Bahrain , Qatar and Oman - has significantly and expansively engaged different fields such as education, economy, industry , tourism , culture and media leading to complicated consequences (positive and negative) which captured the imagination of GCC writers who came to occupy the literary scene at a critical moment in the modern history of the Arabian Gulf region . In the early 1970's and after the economic boom overwhelming the GCC countries the entire region has been gearing toward an era of modernization integral to the radical developments and transformations taking place after the discovery of oil. Due to the developments born out of the process of urbanization in the aftermath of the post oil era, the social and cultural infrastructure in the GCC countries underwent major changes.

For instance, the new economic and technological developments accelerated the process of urbanization and modernization paving the way for the rapid shift from a traditional way of existence to a more complicated life-style.¹ Under the current trans-cultural and multi-lingual nature of the Arabian Gulf communities, the contemporary GCC writer is no longer the speaking voice of the tribe but s/he becomes part of the enormous regional transformations and the international challenges which left their imprints on the geopolitical map of his/her country. Therefore, the process of massive transition attracted the attention of a generation of promising GCC writers who were trapped in the limbo of conflicting cultures.

Most of these writers were proud of the new strategic status acquired by their countries and their significant place on the world map of education, economics, politics and tourism. Nevertheless, they were appalled by the economic monopoly and political corruption that accompanied the dramatic transformations that swept their countries. They witnessed with fear the emergence of a new parasitic class of corrupt politicians and profiteering businessmen who dominated the GCC communities through authority centers, favoritism policies and despotism. The new evolving class, in general, made use of the economic boom to achieve vicious purposes at the expense of the poor classes which are robbed of most of their human rights and dignities. This opportunistic class which mainly consists of immoral tycoons and greedy profiteers is intricately connected with senior figures in the world of politics. Through money, power and hegemony the members of the new domineering class were able to control the governmental centers of decision-making penetrating every sector of public and private life. Such process of dehumanization and emasculation of a complete nation takes place in communities which preach integrity, transparency, morality, virtue and national unity on a daily basis.

In this context, many local writers specifically the prominent Saudi novelist, Abdo Khal, attempted to expose the catastrophic ramifications of the double standards advocated by GCC countries particularly the Saudi society revealing the damaging consequences of tyrannical policies rooted in hypocrisy and power abuse. In his highly controversial novel *Tarmi Beshararen Kalqasr / Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles*, the winner of the Arab Booker prize (2010), Khal attempts to underline significant socio-political issues rooted in the moral infrastructure of the Saudi society. Khal also illustrates that the mutual alliance between corrupt politicians and opportunistic businessmen who monopolize national wealth and economic resources leads to the impoverishment and marginalization of the great majority of people in Saudi Arabia particularly women and those who live on the peripheries.

Unlike writers who celebrate the economic, industrial and technological accomplishments resulting from the new changes in the GCC region, Khal expresses his doubts and fears concerning the threats and challenges integral to the politics of modernization jeopardizing native existence, domestic culture, indigenous heritage and local identity. Entangled in the labyrinth of the modern metropolis, a product of the process of urbanization and economic monopoly and threatened by the invasion of an intruding class that robbed the poor masses of their rights, Khal, in his Arab Booker prize winning novel, introduces an agonizing narrative viewing the victims of the process of urbanization in the city of Jeddah, a microcosm of the Saudi society.

In short , *Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles* explicitly reveals the absurdity and inequity of power and authority in the post-oil era in Saudi Arabia. Throughout more than three hundred pages, the novel exposes the inner world of the palace reflecting the destiny of those who are fated to become its puppets and victims . Khal's explosive novel condemns the corruption and immorality of the dwellers of palaces who turn their backs on the socio-economic problems of the surrounding poor neighborhoods . Obviously , the grotesque satire of power and authority is the novel's basic motif. Set in a destitute Jeddah neighborhood , the events alternate between the poor district and a palace that has recently been built next door depriving the poor community of going to the sea shore : “ And the last task our exhausted sun undertakes each day – after it has cast off its searing heat – is to descend towards the palace in complete peace” (Calderbank 2010 : 3ⁱⁱ).

Explicitly, the novel explores the contradiction between the poor class that dwells in the “ Hell” district and the inhabitants of the palace (paradise) who live in an ivory tower. This intruding class which emerged in the post-oil era have monopolized the stock market and the state economy accumulating unlimited wealth through illegal and crooked methods . Instead of devoting their massive wealth to the welfare of their society, they utilized it in perverted ways to satisfy their egos and achieve dubious and immoral purposes including sex slavery and violation of fixed moral codes. The immoral behavior of this hegemonic class leads to the victimization and dehumanization of the lower classes tearing apart the national unity of the local society .

For instance, the owner of the palace is a well-connected gambler who has many consultants and insiders from the world of business and politics assisting him to keep monopoly over investments funded by the government . He owns “ an army of consultants” whose main job is to dig deep holes and set traps for other potential bidders and rivals” in order to “ drown them in the lake of greed and subsequent bankruptcy” (Khal 2010 : 166ⁱⁱⁱ). Apparently, the big master , the owner of the palace commits heinous crimes against his rivals . In several occasions , when the master of the place decides to ruin his rivals he sets traps for them using whores , bribery , rumor-mongers, owners of fake projects and corrupt bank managers in order to drive his enemies to bankruptcy. When Hatem Tarabi , a businessman , flirts with Marram , the seductive and favorable mistress of the palace owner, he decided to destroy him. So he seduces Hatem , through one of his assistants , into accepting a fake economic enterprise. Afterwards, Hatem lost his money and became bankrupt .

Furthermore, rumors constitute an integral part of the palace world . There are rumors about Marram , the sexy whore , who entertains the master . It was said that she is the ex-wife of a greedy businessman who abandons her to the master in return for a big transaction (Khal 2010 : 168). Other people said she is the daughter of a well-known merchant who left her in the hands of the master until he repays his loans (Khal 2010 : 169). There are also rumors about the family members of the palace's owner . There is never-ending gossip about the story of Shahla (the aged wife of the master of the palace) and her first lover. It is said that the old woman still remembers her ex-lover who remained bachelor after being deprived of her . According to the rumors, he spent his life dreaming of marrying her but his ambitions were never fulfilled.

There is no doubt that Khal's masterpiece is a painfully satirical work which depicts the damaging impact of power and money on the lives of the down-trodden classes in the surrounding environment. Most of the novel's incidents oscillate between an old slum quarter of Jeddah, a central Saudi city on the Red Sea, and a neighboring luxurious palace. Through the eyes of the multi narrators in the novel, the reader is introduced into the horrifying reality of the palace (a symbol of the intruding rich class in Saudi Arabia) and the Saudi underworld (the poor district in the old city of Jeddah). The novel reveals the bitter realities of life in the Saudi metropolis incorporating sex, violence and incest, therefore the book achieved success on the popular level.

In this connection, it is significant to argue that the novel's popular success on the local paradigm has exposed the disparity between the conservative Islamists and the advocates of free speech in the Arab world in general and in the Saudi society in particular. The local success of the novel uncovers the double standard of life in the Saudi society as it depicts a deeper divide, a wide gap between what is officially sanctioned and what is privately watched, read or talked about behind closed doors. In this context, it is noteworthy to mention that in the Saudi conservative circles, *Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles* is accused of celebrating sex and immoral behavior because it slanders the fixed moral traditions of the local society. But in educated communities, within the same country, the novel is highly appreciated because it denounces despotism and the abuse of power narrating tales that have been considered as taboos for decades. As a brilliant exploration of the conflict between the individual and the state, the novel alludes to the sacrosanct triangle of taboos - sex, politics and religion - therefore it is banned in Saudi Arabia.

Engaging the Saudi Society in *Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles*

The events of Abdo Khal's *Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles* are set in two adjacent locations - a poor district in the Red-Sea shore city of Jeddah and a neighboring palace on the seaside. In other words, the novel intricately depicts the overlapping interaction between these two contradictory worlds represented by the residents of the palace (Paradise) and the downtrodden dwellers of the miserable area (Hell) surrounding the palace who were attracted by its promise of glamour and extraordinary wealth. After the big master, a business tycoon whose origins are not fully known, seized the sea shore and built the palace, replete with gardens and swimming pools, young men from the neighboring slum were dreaming to explore the unknown world behind the high fences.

In the beginning of the novel the central narrator describes a world where people crammed into a shabby and dirty district: "The name of our quarter is The Pit, or The Salt Mine, or The Bottom of Hell, or Inferno; all are terms that reflect torment, and our lives". The destitute district which is reminiscent of Dante's Inferno (Hell) has been part of the old city of Jeddah since the pre-oil era. The narrator captures life's activities in the poor quarter prior to the building of the palace: "The quarter awakens before the sun's rays penetrate the windows of the huddled houses to the

contented lapping of the satiated sea. It awakens to the racket of boys preparing to set off down twisting lanes on their walk to school (Calderbank 2010 : 3) ”.

Abdo Khal describes the early morning rituals and the behavior of the alley's poor inhabitants in such a traditional fishing community referring to : “ The raucous banter of fishermen returning with fresh catches from trips begun the previous night, and songs on the radio exuberant in the dewy morning air. Songs that soothe the soul, refreshing like the drizzle of summer rain, they pierce the breast, and lungs expand to receive life's refreshing air.” (Calderbank 2010 : 3) . The Saudi novelist subtly provides minute details about the simplicity of life in a pre-oil Jeddah delineating the routine movements of the alley's dwellers : “The alley awakes to the rattle of padlocks on shop doors as the owners open up, and the cries of street hawkers calling after young school children, tempting them to purchase a sweetie or a poorly manufactured toy or a snack that begins with the mouth and ends up with a runny tummy for whoever's bowels have not been previously fortified (Caldebank 2010 : 3) . Obviously , Khal's description recalls his own childhood memories in the city of Jeddah after his family moved from Jizan , in the southern part of Saudi Arabia , to Jeddah , in the western region, seeking a better life.

Moreover, the author depicts the hot climate of the Saudi city as well as the daily path of the sun from East to West : “All things pass with quiet deliberation towards their daily demise. The sun proceeds unhurriedly across the sky above our quarter until it hangs directly overhead and sheds its vertical rays, overwhelming the faded colors of the walls, or the doors, or faces, or freshly laundered clothes hung out to dry on the roof tops. Everything dries so incredibly quickly here” (Calderbank 2010 : 3). In terms of content , the novel narrates the life history of three young men from a poor background who left their miserable environments to work for a rich authoritative businessman who owns the famous palace. They were allured by the affluent , but corrupt, lifestyle in the palace. When the palace was built , nobody among the dwellers of the dirty alley near the sea shore dared to confront the big master regardless of the ecological and economic disasters brought upon them . Instead , Uthman Kabbashi , the fishing boats maker , cancelled all the selling contracts of new boats. Though the fishermen were angry with him he does not want their money to be lost in the purchase of boats which “ will not find water to sail in” (Khal 2010 : 164).

The rest of the sailors in addition to Uthman Kabbashi were weeping after they lost their only source of income : “ In place of the waves of the sea lie blocks of iron and cement” (Khal 2010 : 163). Further , Hamed Abu Jalambo, the chief of the sailors and fishermen, reveals passive reaction that comes in the form of writing some popular lyrics, elegies that lament the disappearance of the sea . These ballads look like farewell songs “ written by a lover to his departing beloved” (Khal 2010 : 162) , nevertheless all the members of the fishing community were not able to challenge the owner of the palace who destroyed their source of living.

Due to his authority and wide relationships, nobody dared to mention the name of the palace's owner. His name remains unknown : “He is called the master” (Khal

2010 : 160) . Regardless of the negative consequences that resulted from the construction of the palace , most of the surrounding community was eager to enter its gates and see its owner . Such an ambivalent attitude toward the palace and its owner punctuates most of the events in the novel . For example Mohamed al-Rekabi is one of the palace dwellers who is not able to leave it anymore though he hates its rotten atmosphere rampant with prostitution , deception , intrigue , illicit / perverted sex and gambling . He criticizes the immoral behavior of the master and his friends who spread corruption and debauchery in the surrounding society .

Belonging to the emerging commercial class that determines the fate of the Saudi people the palace owner is rich and authoritative, thus he is able to seize an extended area of land on the sea shore of Jeddah where he established his luxurious palace. Near the palace there is a very poor district called “ Hell” which is a slum area . The district inhabitants are not allowed to have access to the sea shore after the building of the palace. However , young people from the poor neighborhood were attracted to its opulence and inner secrets. Eissa al-Rudeni , a young man from the district was able to save the elder son of the palace’s owner from drowning . Afterwards the gates of the palace were opened for Eissa who fell in love with Moudi , the spoiled daughter of the palace’s owner. Eissa dealt with Moudi as if she were his wife though in reality he developed an illicit love affair her . Eissa was engaged in sexual activity with Moudi inside the palace jeopardizing himself to the wrath of the master . Furthermore, Eissa paved the way for two of his closest childhood friends to enter the world of the palace : Tarek Fadel, the homosexual narrator of the novel and Usama al-Bishri .

The three young people were dominated by the owner of the palace and were used to serve his vicious purposes. They were used as instruments to torture the enemies of the palace’s owner , a well-connected wealthy powerful man . He is a ruthless and sadistic dictator who tortures those who opposed him . Tarek Fadel , the sadistic homosexual protagonist is forced to carry out his master’s vicious desires including intrigues , torture and rape adventures . Tarek , the sadistic guy with big penis (third leg) was used as a sex machine to ravish the male rivals of his master. The raping rituals were videotaped in order to intimidate the victims who were forced to remain silent in fear of scandals . These victims were humiliated and castrated on daily basis inside the palace in the presence of its anonymous owner who is satisfied after his rivals are punished and broken .

Inside the walls of the palace, an epitome of the rich class that dominated the Saudi society in the post-oil era, the three young men from the Hell district met with corrupt politicians, parasitic businessmen and Saudi tycoons who prevailed the money market. They also met with a great number of female servants and poor girls who are transformed into prostitutes and sex girls entertaining the master and his entourage in return for money. Many of these girls initially came to the palace to seek the assistance of the palace’s master to help them get some routine civil / social or administrative services from government circles.

After the death of the big master, his elder son became the new owner of the palace whereas his younger son, Nader, became crippled in the aftermath of a car accident. The corrupt behavior of the new master was identical to his father's. The affairs of the palace are run in the same way. Pain and torture are inflicted on potential rivals in a merciless manner and more people are dominated or victimized by the new master via bribery, violence and other ways of corruption and hegemony.

The three young men – Eissa, Usama and Tarek – remained in the palace for decades but they failed to become part of the master's social class regardless of the enormous wealth they made through the assistance of their master. For example, Eissa attempts to bridge the social gap between himself and his beloved Moudi by using Khaled Banan, the psychology teacher, to help him obtain the MA and the PhD degrees in international law from Arab universities through illegal ways. Moreover, Eissa succeeded in increasing his wealth through deceptive ways after he became part of the main players in the Saudi stock market. Consequently he became one of the biggest share-holders in several companies.

However, his master, now the son of the ex-palace owner who was rescued from drowning thanks to Eissa, decided to ruin him financially after he became sure that Eissa insisted on marrying his sister, Moudi. Through a dirty conspiracy designed in collaboration with Adnan Hassoun, a bank manager, the son of the palace owner dragged Eissa to be involved in suspicious deals and transactions until he lost his wealth. Finally Tarek, the macho homosexual protagonist, was forced to rape his friend Eissa in the presence of the master of the palace who witnessed the shameful scene. Afterwards, Eissa became mad and was seen walking in the streets of Jeddah completely naked. When Eissa returned to the palace attempting to restore his beloved, Moudi, he was shot dead by the owner of the palace. The palace guard, Hamdan al-Ghebeini confessed to the jury that he killed Eissa in self-defense after the victim attacked the palace.

Moreover, Usama al-Bishri, the third young man who entered the palace, was emotionally attached to his maternal cousin, Tahani. But this love affair was not consummated because Tahani fell in love with Tarek, the sadistic protagonist who attracts women in the district after rumors spread about his extraordinary penis. Instead of appreciating her love, Tarek broke into her house at night and brutally raped her and ran away. Her father, Saleh Khaybari, entered Tahani's bedroom after the heinous act was over but he failed to arrest the attacker who jumped out of the window. Tahani told her father that she was raped by an unknown human wolf. She denies any prior relationship with the rapist. To remove the shame that has fallen upon the family's honor, Saleh took Tahani to an isolated village where his tribal folks live and killed her without mercy. After burying her body in a secret graveyard, he told the neighbors that Tahani was married to one of his own relatives in a remote region in the country.

Usama, the desperate lover, who was deprived of his mistress, did not believe the fabricated story about Tahani's marriage and he spent most of his life waiting for her return. Nonetheless, Usama was not aware that his friend, Tarek, is the real criminal who ravished Tahani paving the way for her pre-mature death. When he knew the real story of Tahani's murder, he started a journey roaming the country searching for her

graveyard until he found it . He diligently attempted to find out the thief who robbed his beloved of her honor but in vain . In his misery he finds solace in visiting Tahani's grave punctually where he kept planting roses and flowers around it.

In a related context ,Tarek , the homosexual anti hero of the book, was cut off from his family and social roots after he entered the palace. Tarek , like Usama , Eissa and Mostafa al-Qannas , was involved in illicit sex affairs with different women and men inside and outside the palace since his adolescent years as a perverted way to prove his manhood and masculinity (Khal 2010 : 185). He believes that man is destined to live without being able to redeem himself from sin : “ Falling in sin is the law that governs man's life since primitive times” (Khal 2010 : 176). He adds : “ Life is a filthy business. It starts off clean and seductive with encouraging words of advice, but truth be told, you have to commit sins to be a human being” (Calderbank 2010 : 4).

When Tarek reached his fifties he tried to repent seeking salvation but he failed. His suffering reached a zenith when his younger brother Ebrahim , a devout person , rejected him. When Tarek tried to give his brother some money the latter turned him down because , according to Ebrahim, “ rotten money has a rotten smell”(Khal 2010 : 178). Tarek is also turned down by the Imam when he entered the mosque to perform prayers . The Imam did not allow Tarek to pray in the mosque because of his perverted homosexual nature . Apparently , Tarek is a perverse character who is psychologically disturbed due to the impact of his destructive environment and as a consequence of his miserable life in the slum.

Tarek, the central narrator, calls the palace “Paradise” while referring to his own district as “ Hell”. The palace owner used Tarek , originally a victim of economic dispossession , to sexually abuse his rivals . The aggressive narrator , a native son and a child of the neighborhood , notorious as homosexual and a bully becomes a pawn in the hands of the palace's owner . Nevertheless , Tarek is not a mere instrument in the hands of the master but a participant in violence, an agent of political oppression . Inside the palace , the victims of the master are stripped of their dignities . The victims are dehumanized and emasculated while being videotaped during the rape act .

Tarek's vicious aunt , Khayriyya , participated in his sadism and macho behavior. During his adolescence years, she caught him while he was attempting to have perverted sex with one of her goats. Catching sight of his enormous penis, she scandalized him in the neighborhood spreading rumors about his perverted sex liaison . She even pushed him to have sex with one of her neighbors, a woman called Souad . This sex relationship at such an early stage in his life was destructive to Tarek. Eventually whores and fallen women in the surrounding area trapped Tarek due to the unfamiliar size of his penis and he was seduced to have sex with them .

Subsequently , Tarek hated all women including his mother , Saniyya. He believes that his mother is a sinful woman who remains faithful to Geith , her first lover (Khal 2010: 189) even during her marriage to his father. When his father died in an

accident , she married Geith , her ex-lover and did not respect his father's memory . To Tarek “ all women look like sponges. They are able to absorb any liquids whether blood or water” (Khal 2010 : 210) . Further , Tarek hated his aunt who was responsible for the cutting of a small part of his mother's tongue. His mother kept the severed part of her tongue in the fridge in an attempt to fix it via a surgery but his aunt threw it away to a hungry cat. Tarek avenged his mother in a horrible way by cutting the tongue of his aunt , then he imprisoned her in an isolated house.

By the end of the novel, Tarek decided to assassinate the owner of the palace : “Tarek carries the corpse of the master in his own imagination” (Khal 2010 :181) . But he failed to accomplish his mission . The biggest surprise that breaks the back of Tarek is the horrible discovery , by the end of the novel , that Mariam , one of the whores who enters the palace and who has multiple sexual affairs with its dwellers including Tarek is his own half sister. Due to the issue of polygamy and since Tarek's father married more than one woman , the homosexual protagonist is not aware of the origins of Mariam . Like Oedipus , Tarek commits the sin of incest in blindness but unlike the Greek hero , Khal's protagonist does not punish himself for the heinous act .

Using the postmodern technique of collage, Khal added two appendixes after the end of the book . The first one is titled “The Palace Women” in which he provided information about women in the palace , one by one . Most of them are whores and sex girls , victimized by the inhabitants of the palace (Khal 2010: 192). In order to incorporate an illusion of reality through his appendix , the author provided names and pictures of the girls in the palace in addition to a copy of a love letter written by Tahani and sent to her lover Tarek Fadel . The fake message carries the signature of Tahani . Further , the author also created another appendix called “ The Barrier” which includes parts and extracts from local newspapers and websites which refer to many of the events that took place in the novel. Khal also utilized modernist and postmodernist narrative strategies like flashback , juxtaposition , intertextuality in addition to several allusions to the *Quran* , *the Bible* , *Hamlet* , *Othello* as well as novels by prominent Arab authors such as Najuib Mahfouz's *The Thief and The Dogs* and Ala' al-Aswani 's *Yacoubian Building* which also deals with the issue of homosexuality.

Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles : An Inter-textual Approach

Texts, according critics, are either reflections of an outside reality or autonomous entities that emerge out of other texts revealing no authorial referentiality. To conventional critics, the author is located in the center of the text production process creating a determinate text and controlling its meaning. But post-structuralist critics such as Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida have marginalized the role of the author removing him/her from the center claiming that language has no communicative functions. In this context , Barthes introduces “the death of the author” concept or what he calls the absence of “the father author” while Derrida considers writing as “an orphan”. Taking into account the non-existence of transcendental / universal reference (dismantling of paternity) , post-structuralists like Barthes and Derrida argue that all texts refer to one another , intersect and interrelate with one another randomly and infinitely. This brings

about the issue of intertextuality which has replaced the patriarchal self-presence advocated by traditional critics.

The term “intertextuality” was introduced by Julia Kristeva in the 1960’s, however, Eliot had been the precursor of intertextuality as seen in his critical theories and poems. In *Desire in Language*, Kristeva discusses the appearance of texts or parts of texts in a new created text. She points out that several utterances from other texts “intersect and neutralize one another in the space of a given text” (Kristeva 1984 : 36). Obviously, Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality can be traced back to the structuralist works of Saussure in addition to Bakhtin’s theories. Underlining the rational nature of language, Saussure argues that signs are not referential since they acquire their signification from different kinds of relationships with other signs, particularly opposition.

Furthermore, Bakhtin focuses on the social context within which words are exchanged. He observes that all utterances are either dialogic/double-voiced or polyphonic/multiple-voiced and this notion incorporates intertextuality. Advocating Bakhtin’s concept which signifies that all texts contain within them society’s ideological struggles and tensions, Kristeva argues that texts do not present stable meanings. To her, texts reflect society’s ideological conflict over the meaning of words. For example, words like “wealth”, “power”, “corruption”, “poverty”, and “death” that frequently appear in the text of *Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles* carry society’s conflict over their meaning.

In a related context, Julia Kristeva defines contemporary texts as explicitly intertextual forms of literature or what she calls “split texts”. Kristeva argues that these “split texts” are not original works written by talented authors of great genius but are rather the products of “split subjects”. Illustrating the split nature of texts, Kristeva, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, introduces two terms: “phenotext and genotext”. While the “phenotext” refers to the part of a text that seems to give shape to the voice of one unified subject, the “genotext” constitutes the part of a text which “emerges from the subconscious to disturb, rupture and undercut the phenotext” (Kristeva 1984 : 82). Furthermore, Kristeva incorporates Bakhtin’s dialogism (used by him in connection with the novel) into her semiotics dealing with poetic language. In *Desire in Language*, she argues that each work/text is an inter-section of words/texts and any text can be read as a mosaic of quotations. Any text, according to her, is the absorption and transformation of another, thus, “the notion of intertextuality replaces that of inter-subjectivity and poetic language is at least double” (Kristeva 1984 : 66).

Like Kristeva, Roland Barthes believes that a text is an inter-textual construct which is woven with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages — antecedent or contemporary — which cut across it through and through in “a vast stereophony”. He adds that the text’s inter-texts (which include other works/texts) are themselves inter-textual constructs and therefore cannot act as the signifieds of the text’s signifiers because they themselves are signifiers. Barthes also argues that the origin of the text is not a unified authorial consciousness but a plurality of voices, of other words, other utterances and other texts. In *Image Music Text*, Barthes states that the modern author does not release a single “theological meaning”, what he calls “the message” of “the author-God”

but produces “a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings — none of them original-blend and clash”.

Thus, the text is a “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture” (Barthes 1977 : 146). In the light of the theories initiated by Derrida, Kristeva and Barthes, *Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles* is partly a post-modern text due to its inter-textual peculiarity which is integral to post-modern literature as Linda Hutcheon argues in *The Poetics of Postmodernism*. Hutcheon argues that postmodern literature is typically inter-textual as it combines forms and styles from both high culture and popular culture. She points out that parody is “a perfect postmodern form, in some sense, for it paradoxically both incorporates and challenges that which it parodies” (Hutcheon 1988 : 11).

It is relevant to argue here that *Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles* fulfills the above-mentioned theories to a great extent in the sense that it is a text which is born out of other texts as it will be illustrated. However, Khal’s novel, which is based on the author’s experience in the city of Jeddah and in which the author appears as the consciousness of the central character cannot fulfill the French post-structuralist premise that writing is an orphan which indicates the death of the author. But it is noteworthy to argue that while Derrida’s theories kill the author, Barthes’s theories shift the emphasis from text to the reader constituting several binary oppositions including “work” versus “text”, “readerly text” versus “writerly texts”, “text of pleasure” versus “text of bliss”, and “doxa” versus “paradoxa”.

Within this context, it is clear that the French post-structuralist theories have removed the author out of the hermeneutic circle which makes it difficult to apply these theories literally to a book like *Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles*, based on the life experience of the author/ narrator/protagonist. Thus, it is more appropriate to refer to the post-structuralist theories of American critics such as Harold Bloom and Hillis Miller who agree with the French post-structuralists, to some extent, on the issue of intertextuality and reject “the death of the author” hypothesis. Furthermore, Susan Friedman reveals that the emphasis on the agency of the author represents a characteristically American redefinition of intertextuality. According to her, “many American critics from Bloom to Miller have refused to let the author die as they forged various inter-textual methodologies” (Friedman 1991 : 159).

For example, Bloom agrees with the French post-structuralists that all texts are inter-texts and a single text has only part of a meaning, “it is a synecdoche for a larger whole including other texts. A text is a relational event and not a substance to be analyzed” (Allen 2000: 136). Applying this theory to poetry, Bloom presents a map of misreading and psychological defense mechanism developed by poets to disguise the influence of their precursors. Nevertheless, it is significant to reveal that Bloom agrees with French post-structuralist critics in advocating an open intertextuality but he disagrees with them in excluding the social and cultural contexts from the open inter-textual domain. Unlike them, he insists on the role of the author. Further, Bloom uses the term “facticity” to indicate the unavoidable influence of certain writers within

Western culture such as Shakespeare and Eliot who influenced modern writers, even those who do not read them.

Taking into consideration Bloom's approach to intertextuality, it is relevant to state here that in contemporary literary theory, the term "intertextuality" has replaced the term "influence" which is associated with traditional influence studies. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein argue that critics prefer to use the concept of "intertextuality" in their studies because the term "influence" is elitist and is concerned only with major works. Dealing with all works as social products, the notion of "intertextuality" comes to replace the issue of "influence", which underlines the author and the authorial intention and skills (Bloom 1973 : 3). It is interesting to argue that *Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles* reveals its inter-textual side as a post-modern text but it is also characterized by an authorial presence. The book is characterized by the appearance of texts, drawn from different domains and disciplines. Khal's text interrelated with other texts but not at random as the French poststructuralists argue. Every text that appears in the novel is carefully chosen to serve the novelist's vision. A variety of texts coming from a variety of sources are manipulated by "a talented author" to create a post-modern text which is a mosaic of other texts.

Finally , the issue of intertextuality is also raised by Umberto Eco who states that in writing a text , the principal problem is inter-textual. According to Eco, "the already written and the already said" threaten to turn "one's narrative and narrative voice into a mere repetition of previous utterances and previous texts" (Allen 2000 : 194). In his treatment of local social motifs , Khal uses many texts from other books . Khal's novel , is characterized by the appearance of many texts in the fabric of the narrative including references to *Othello* , *the Old Testament* and *the Quran* . The text's title "*Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles*" is a quotation from the holy Quran , " Indeed it throws about sparks huge as Forts/ As if they were a string of yellow camels" (Surah / chapter LXXVII , Those Sent Forth" (Ali 2001 : 882) . The Quranic narrative , used as an inter-text , refers to hell and its dwellers. Delineating Jeddah as a hell " The name of our quarter is The Pit, or The Salt Mine, or The Bottom of Hell, or Inferno ; all are terms that reflect torment, and our lives" (Calderbank 2010 : 3) , the novelist alludes not only to Islamic holy texts but also he draws from Biblical sources. In other words Jeddah is depicted as a sinful city analogous to Sodom and Gomorrah.

Other borrowed texts come from a variety of sources ranging from popular Saudi folklore, to historical studies , to contemporary Arabic novels , to documentary studies and allegorical prose works. Khal's novel is equally punctuated with erotic texts coming from ancient and modern sources and realistic descriptions of the city of Jeddah particularly the Hamra district as well as allusions to the mayor of Jeddah : "There were two directions we used to take so we could plunge our bodies into the sea: the beach which stretched along the coast south of Jeddah, but which had deteriorated suddenly so that taking the road there was no longer desirable. And there was Al-Hamra district that had sprung up as the destination for those heading for a day out after Engineer Muhammad Sa'eed Al-Farsi (The Mayor of Jeddah) reshaped the sea front as a series of inlets and lined them with pieces of art by some of the world's greatest artists, deploying

hundreds of workers to spruce up the entire length of the Corniche” (Calderbank 2010 : 8) .

In addition to distinguished realistic figures like the governor of Jeddah , the author himself and some of his childhood friends appear as characters in the text of the narrative. Such a mixture between fact and fiction , prose and poetry, modern and pre-modern, which characterizes Khal’s narrative raises controversy over many authorial and textual issues that have to be discussed in order to spotlight a controversial text which has remained the focus of academic and popular circles since its publication . In *Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles* , Khal incorporates intertextuality as a postmodern technique captures life in the city of Jeddah at a transitional stage ushering into a new era , prosperous post-oil era .

However there are many flashback scenes to the pre-oil yeas when the city was ravished by poverty and rotten traditions integral to the patriarchal nature of the conservative Saudi society : “My grandfather on my mother's side came here carrying his wares : Indian fabrics, Javan incense and mi'zars (male clothes) from the Hadramoot (a region in South Yemen) . He built himself a large house which he planned from the beginning to fill with his offspring , for there his lust had so overflowed that he acquired four women and put each one in a corner of the wide courtyard whereupon he proceeded to indulge with them his carnal desires every night. His pleasure intensified whenever he came to my grandmother (my mother's mother). She was of Turkish extraction and the beauty in her face had erupted and flowed all over her body” (Calderbank 2010 : 4) .

Khal’s retelling of the story of the people in Jeddah is a revelation of the ugly and corrupt practices that undermine the traditional foundations of the Saudi society. The central narrator reveals the macho / masculine mentality of his grandfather who lives in a society that consider women as sexual machines : “It is said that he (my grandfather) desired her (my grandmother) constantly but in order to treat each of his wives equally he had to pay them all a visit in order to end up with my grandmother , Saniyya. So after he had passed through the first three doors he would go and bathe , put on perfume and come to my grandmother Saniyya as if not one drop of his water had been spilled” (Calderbank 2010 : 4).

The narrator exposes the false concepts of manhood and masculinity deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of a society that abuses the concept of polygamy : “In his morning session he (my grandfather) would be bursting with pride as he told his companions how he had been able to see to his four wives without recourse to the potions of Abu Rasheed , the herbalist . Abu Rusheed was a herbalist of Indian origin who claimed some knowledge of herbs and their properties that enabled a man to behave like a crocodile and satisfy ten women without his passion waning. He was the subject of much veneration by those men whose strength had diminished and who were in urgent need of his services so that their manhood would remain erect in the boudoir” (Calderbank 2010 : 4) .

As a challenge to the religious and social taboos that dominate the Saudi society, this postmodern novel attempts to disrupt what Jean-Francois Lyotard calls “the grand

narratives” of traditional societies or what Jacques Derrida labels as the discourse of a “totalized system”. “Totality”, according to Lyotard, is maintained through the means of “grand narratives” or “master narratives” or the narratives sanctioned by patriarchal communities which are stories a culture tells about its practices and beliefs. Lyotard observes that every belief system or ideology has its grand narratives. It might be argued that grand narratives are kinds of meta-theories or meta-ideologies that explain an ideology; a story that is told to explain the belief system that exists. Lyotard argues that all aspects of traditional societies depend on grand narratives and postmodernism is a critique of these grand narratives because of its awareness that such narratives serve to mask the contradictions and instabilities that are inherent in any social organization or practice.

Moreover, Lyotard points out that postmodernism rejects grand / master narratives and favors “counter / mini narratives” or what he categorizes as “legitimate narratives” (Lyotard 1991:19) which are stories that aim to deconstruct conventional and conservative narratives. In rejecting the grand narratives of conservative Saudi culture, Khal seeks to introduce his postmodern counter-narrative throughout a novel which aims to uncover the dark sides of a backward tradition that hides beneath a veneer of religious hypocrisy. As a whole, the novel delineates the downfall of a poor district in Jeddah illuminating the ambitions, dreams, frustrations and miseries of the disenfranchised members of society particularly the marginalized inhabitants of the underdog community and a generation of whose voices have not been heard for centuries: “Our generation inherited hopes. As young men we consoled ourselves by stealing glances at everything we set eyes on; stealing a glance at some delicious food, some smart clothes, fast cars, and the money that flowed through the trades' shops, and women on their way to the market that lay between the houses and the narrow winding lanes. Our eyes would pick up everything and this is what trained us to dream, and be satisfied with what was suspended in our imaginations” (Calderbank 2010 : 6) .

Furthermore, the novel uncovers the hidden secrets of urban life in Saudi Arabia in the post oil era emphasizing local perspectives and deploying domestic narratives, banned in the country, which depict the confrontation between the poor and the rich, between the traditions of the sea and desert on one hand and the exploitative politics of the palace dwellers on the other. Capturing the complicated intersection between past and present, the novel illuminates the raving impact of unlimited authority upon an emerging society depicting the opulent life of an ultra wealthy class living in palaces while the surrounding society is inflicted with abject poverty. In other words, the novel spotlights the alternation between the world of decadent wealth and the world of poverty and suffering where people are stripped of their human rights even their simple dreams: “We would dream simply to sit in a restaurant and eat delicious food, or that this shop or that was ours, or that our evening would be blessed by the company of some women or other. A life in which we wore our dreams until they got dirty and then threw them into a bin for collecting dirty clothes and changed them for another dream. This was the life of poverty and hardship. A life suited to wearing dreams, and to be constantly changing them for, at any rate, they were unseen garments” (Calderbank 2010 : 6).

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Notes

ⁱ For more details see : Caesar Judith . Mohammad Al-Murr's *Map of Dubai* . Review Article . *Edebiyat* , V.11(2) 261-273.

ii Anthony Calderbank, trans. “Extract from *Tarmi Beshararen Kalqasr /Spewing Sparks as Big as Castles*”. *The Best of the New Arabic Fiction* (AbuDhabi: Emirates Foundation Publications, 2010) P.3.

iii Unless otherwise indicated in the text or the references , all extracts from the Arabic version of the novel are translated into English by Saddik M. Gohar, the author of the paper.

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