



**African Characters in Saudi Arabian Novels:  
An Anthropological Approach**

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**Abstract**

Time has proven the limitless relationship between Arabs and Africans, which has been categorized as the most influential between any ethnic group throughout the human history. Therefore, when Saudi's fiction and non-fiction works select Africa, or include it as a major topic, it reflects the extension of an existing relationship, and it might reveal, on the other hand, the subconscious part about Africans in Saudi culture. This paper focused on African Characters in Saudi Arabian novels, and it applied an anthropological approach, which focuses on content instead of style of narration. In order to achieve the set goals, the study selected three Saudi works: "Maimunah" by Mahmud Traore, "The Smell Trap" (Fikhakh Rohiha) by Yusuf Muhaimed, and "The Tar" (Alqaar) by Alwaan Al-suhaimiy. The study worked on clarifying the position of Saudi novelists through their works; how they portray the image of African characters; their ability to deal with their issues and crises; and also, their attitude to interact with their own vision and others. The characters in the selected works are nothing but a symbol that signifies how others view Africans. Therefore, the characters of the novels are samples which can be generalized as a Saudi Arabian cultural overview (belief) about Africans. The paper adopted content analysis and descriptive methods. The paper's finding reveals that the main theme for these characters are: selfish, religious, conflicted and slave characters.



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The framing questions for the elements that the study aims to reveal can be summarized as: What are the researcher's starting points in studying the characters in this paper? What does the researcher aim to achieve from studying these characters? How did the novels portray these characters? The study will start from the premise that the characters were treated in creative works as a social being that has a presence and a role in life...( Hjylan. 2009. P. 58). Therefore, the study's starting point is the visions of (Balzac), who made his novels reflect all the natures of the people who make up the society he writes for and about; he describes what they had of faults and emotions, and the grudges and evils contained in their hearts, and the pain and horrors they live in their daily lives (Murtad. 1998. P. 733).

What the study seeks to accomplish here is an attempt to extract the traits and characteristics that the Saudi novelist used to portray African personalities. Therefore, the study will clarify the position of the Saudi novelist through building the African personality in its ability to deal with its issues, crises, and its position in interacting with its own and others visions.

The study will be based on three novels: Maimunah by Mahmoud Traore, The Smell Traps by Youssef Al-Muhaimid, and The Tar by Alwan Al-Suhaimi. These novels were selected based on their main focus on the African race or black-skinned people in order to express the social visions specific to Africa or intellectual visions specific to black-skinned people. These characters represent models whose trends, issues, concerns, and fate can be generalized to those involved with them culturally, socially and intellectually.

The researcher will consider the narrative characters in the study as the typical characters with their modern concept adopted by many European story writers – as Ghonimi Hilal says – which is: "The study of man in the story is a model for a class of social classes or for a generation, in which its intellectual tendencies and ideals are manifested. The story of these people is a history of customs, traditions and social issues (Hilal. 1997. p. 506).

Perhaps it is not supposed to be differentiated here between those African characters being main, minor, or marginal in the novel, but the study relies mainly on the main characters, and then the secondary characters if their interaction in the novel includes what can be extracted as a data and dimension. And this may justify the study's approach to adopting the anthropological aspect that is concerned with the social content in the novel,



and perhaps modeling the characters of the novels in order to reach a comprehensive vision of gender, race or class, which helps to achieve the objectives of the message in this topic, in an attempt to determine the social dimensions of the characters in the novels.

### **Chapter 1: Characters in " Maimunah"**

The novel was presented from the angle of the co-narrator (the vision with), which is expressed by the following equation:

Narrator = character (Lahmidany. 1991. P. 47).

At the beginning of the novel, Maimunah, a self-identified narrator and a presenter of other characters of the novel, explains the type of relationships that bind her to these characters. The explanation was in brief kinship terms to indicate the kind of social structure and kinship relations between the characters. The levels of relationship were expressed in the novel as follows:

- Women younger than me call me (Grandma Munna), girls and boys call me (Auntie Munna), the children of the neighbors and those I have breastfed from the houses in which I rode, they call me (Mama Maimunah). (Traore. 2011. P. 9).
- My father came from the jungles of the forests and mines of gold, copper, phosphates, diamonds, ivory, rubber, coffee, cocoa, palm oil, drought and hearts that yearn for salvation... (Ibid. P. 11).
- "My uncle wasn't named by his father, when he came, the imam of the village asked him not to give him a name, because he will grow up and receive the name of his manhood from my father, so when he grew up and the ships were sailing in the sea, my father called him (Omar), and he saw in him a resemblance to Al-Faruq"(Ibid. P. 12).
- "My mother told me what I heard from my aunt and uncle about the horrors...: I was the youngest of your father in years that I can hardly count, I am about thirteen years old"(Ibid. P.15-16).

The narrator uses the first-person pronoun to speak about herself and about the incidents that she witnessed throughout the plot. By using this technique, the narrator did not witness the incident that she is narrating, but she declares that she only heard about it, or she heard from someone who heard about it, or read about it" (Alkurdy. 2006. P. 120). The aforementioned piece revealed her on multiple levels; firstly, the event that she herself realized and lastly, what was told to her. The narrator here appears to accompany the characters of the novel throughout the plot, as she is considered, in addition to her



assumption of the narrator's job, a character in the novel alongside her father (Issa), her uncle (Omar), and her unnamed mother.

Therefore, talking about the characters here – as the study methodology requires – revolves around the main characters Maimunah and Omar, in addition to what can be extracted from other characters such as Issa and Maimunah's mother. The researcher excluded Maimunah's character because her mission was more evident in narrating the events rather than showing her interactions, and as a result, the light that was shed on her was insufficient, and it was not able to reveal typical features that could be generalized on members of African society. Her mother is also excluded because her role wasn't emphasized in the novel.

### **Omar:**

The starring role was distributed in this novel. Aside from Maimunah, who took over the task of telling the events of the novel, we find Omar. He is one of the main characters as seen in his prominent and influential actions throughout the course of events in the novel. The reader was introduced to the character of Omar through his monologue in the face of many life problems, and its events occupy a large proportion of the novel's chapters (Al'ejlan. 2015. P. 84), especially since the monologue is one of the most prominent elements that are used by him to know the characters of the novel and their descriptions and characteristics.

Omar's character was distinguished by his sobriety and experience, which was expanded by his observations of the course of what his ancestors had suffered. The white chains and slave masters took them from their countries with the help of their own people. That character suffered a bitter struggle with himself and the remnants of the brutal practices that he opened his eyes to when the whites with their equipment and ships invaded Africa, but Omar could not escape in the end from the defilement. The current events around him and the conditions in which he found himself paved the way for transforming his resentful personality to all the derivatives of slavery, servitude and hatred of whites, as the novel states that: "Ignorance and hunger corrupt the soul and religion..."(Traore. P. 27).

It is assumed that the hunger and hardship of life in which he and his brothers family (Maimunah's father) found themselves provoked in him the decisions of thinking about migration and residing beside Haram, leaving their homes in Africa due to the whites' bad practices against the blacks, and Omar's hatred for these practices that turned the free



people into slaves, and deposed the nobles. His tribe is dressed in humiliation; so, it is difficult to imagine the satisfaction of this character and submission to the heinous acts that were practiced on his ancestors and his relatives during those periods. Later, a manipulator was able to awaken in this intellectually and morally sedate personality from the early days of his life another aspect of the human psyche, and from here, the role of Omar was manifested in the novel as he plays the role of the whites and he began to trade in human. Omar – a black-skinned person – did not trade with whites to be considered as revenge for what has been done by the whites to his ancestors, so the inductive interpretation of these events and situations is that his role as a slave trader is a reaction to what his ancestors swallowed at the hands of whites, but his trading was rather with black boys. He had to give it a second thought when he saw that there is no way out of the hunger: "Omar continues hammering, mixing between hunger and the taste of barley grown in dung and the taste of the meat of mangy dogs, a lust for relief shines in his eyes" (Ibid. p. 39).

His dream of breaking out of the narrowness of life made him justify the actions that he would take, and he underestimated them as long as the end of them was pleasant as he expected. And from here, Omar tasted the same bitterness of his ancestors. He did not open his eyes except while he was chained by the chains of slavery and was sold like any ordinary slave in the market.

Omar tried to get rid of his slavery more than once, and eventually realized that his falling into the shackles of slavery was an expiation for his crime: "Within him is a deep belief that what happened is a punishment from heaven"(Ibid. p.109). Punishment for his neglect of the trust entrusted to him by his brother (Maimunah's father), as well as when he tempted himself to sell free people as slaves, and he himself fell into the misfortune of his actions.

In conclusion, this character appeared throughout the novel, and was granted a greater space than other characters. The main theme for the role of this character can be summarized as the selfish nature of the thought of Africans, especially those who cooperate with the whites in denying their brothers freedom during the slavery and servitude period that swept across Africa. They only deduced from their practices material things that benefit them alone, this made them manipulate right and freedom of others who bear the same color, sweat and blood, the result of which is nothing but falling into the same pit.



**Issa (Father of Maimunah):**

His personality was not as intense as the previous one; the novel's events were crowded out with other characters. However, what can be considered a chapter devoted to this character was "A dream of a holy sacrifice" (Ibid. p.73–85). The chapter reflects only a slight aspect of the dialogues that were not sufficient to know the moral or intellectual aspects of his personality, and this justifies categorizing him as a secondary character. The researcher preferred to talk about him, however, given what can be learned from the novel's events, which represents a model for members of African society.

This character represents a religious model. The strength of his religious personality was demonstrated by what was reflected in his fortification of Quranic verses in the face of dangers:

And when we were about to return to the depths of the forest, we were surprised by a boat, from which lights emanated, which began to shine on us harshly, we were terrified, but your father began to whisper: And We have put a barrier before them, and a barrier behind them, and We have covered them up, so that they cannot see" (Ibid. p. 18).

This foretells the characters familiarity with the rituals and manifestations of religion, otherwise he would not have been shielded from the enemy. Issa was a character ready to sacrifice himself, his possessions and every precious thing he had for his belief. He encountered dangers and faced difficulties, but all of that did not deter him from the decision of his pilgrimage, as the horrors only made him stronger and more determined to achieve his sanctities:

"When my father came to Mecca as an emigrant to the neighborhood of the House of God, I was not present, my mother was with him, he just married her, he asked his mother's permission, saying goodbye, informing that he would travel to the holy places, but his father had landed before there, the day that he chose and wept, his father was so passionate for the Hijaz, so he sharpened his passion and travelled, and he did not return because the crocodiles ambushed him, so they blessed their flesh with his flesh (Ibid. p. 15).

He was a father figure who could not resist the oppression of the non-believers, so he decided to leave, and this was accompanied by a strong determination to stay close to the House of God, so he abandoned his home:

"My uncle knows my father's attachment to the book, his love of traveling through the lives of the Companions and his love for them, his vast desire to trace their tracks and his



fascination with history, which is as if it were legends..."(Ibid. p. 29). He left behind his children without provisions, and embarked on another religious journey, hanging on his belief that God, who had delivered him to the Kaaba, would bring him to Jerusalem and protect his family.

What this character reflects can be seen in the religious manifestations that are manifested in some members of society, and the affairs of African society members do not differ from this general perception. The novel generally reflected the Islamic religion principles in its characters, and this was not limited to this character alone, but rather included the narrator, her father, and Omar Al-Mutahir who controls the events of the novel. These characters strongly believe, especially since the events of the novel are based on the religious journey to the sanctuary and the neighborhood of the House of God.

## **Chapter 2: Characters in the novel "Smell Traps"**

The events of the novel revolve around two main characters. The novel mobilized a group of characters who suffered from different life complications, but their concerns were united – almost– in a lack or distortion in their creation, other than a natural factor. We see a mutilated Tarrad, then Nasir with a blinded eye, and Uncle Tawfiq, a black castrated slave. The novelist thus "establishes a cordial relationship and communication between the exiles, and the successive and synergistic domination of their world, which assassinates them to enslave them, and banishes them to liberate them from sticking to their exile" (Alqurosby. 2013. p. 210–211).

As for Tarrad, who controlled the narrations throughout the novel, and Nasir, who was only presented in some parts and chapters of the novel, their characters are not of interest to the study. The main character whose voice and role emerged in the novel, and held nearly five of the eleven chapters of the narrator is Uncle Tawfiq, the African personality. Therefore, the researcher will focus on this character as a sample to be used in order to reach a general argument in what the Saudi novels reflected as an African character.

### **Uncle Tawfiq:**

The experience of this character was shaped since his childhood through the images and memories he had of what happened to his village. The community he grew up in was subjected to the looting of the "Jellaba"(Arabian slave traders) who would kidnap people from their homes and afterwards display them as ordinary goods and items in the various slave markets. The character lived his early years in the fear of falling into the trap of





human traffickers, but he eventually fell into one because of the smell of grease when they were starving. He narrated: "We were like beasts, living on the grass and vermin of the earth, and we were crippled by hunger until we fell into the trap". (Al-Muhaimeed. 2006. p. 27).

This character represents a sample of an African slave who was driven to the Arabian Peninsula. His African features emerged through the novel in what was described as: "He has a full, round face, full of old freckles, yet he has two full, flat ears, resembling the ears of an elephant. He takes great care to clean his beard of white hair that grow every two days"(Ibid. p. 24). This character was subjected to various kinds of humiliation; such as physical rape and harassment while being driven from Africa, and it was narrated as: "Before he tightened the loincloth, he was examining my mask with his huge hand, and he pushed me from the back of my neck, and at that time I felt his remembrance like a hermit!!..." (Ibid. p.31). In addition to being castrated as a prelude to freeing him up to work as a servant in palaces, the character himself narrated while comparing between loss of ear and being castrated: "You have lost your ear, O guy!, but the problem is who has lost his life, his future, his happiness and his stability"(Ibid. p. 59). But Uncle Tawfiq, with his speech, plays down Tarrad's misfortune; What is the comparison between losing one ear and the loss of manhood? Castration turned him into an introverted personality; Since the castration did not draw anything to his personality but contempt and ridicule among the palace slave girls who insulted him by calling him: Uriner (Ibid. p.94), because his manhood organ was not useful except for urine.

Slavery ruined Uncle Tawfiq's present and future. Indeed, slavery made him nothing but a living corpse. Freedom did not benefit him even after he obtained it with the issuance of the royal order. Slavery and enslavement, even if freedom comes, he could not find work, so he clings to making tea and coffee to preserve his life (Alqurosby. p. 210–211) For him, freedom was not a salvation, he saw it as more tormenting experience that brought him multiples of hardship and suffering.

It was not that freedom, and what freedom after my life went without job, wife or child accommodating my loneliness and seclusion? I was like a bird to which the cage door was opened and did not fly, not because it did not understand freedom and that its wings were free and loose, never and by God, but because It is more wise and has learned in the cage that grain and water come for free, so how can we provide that outside when we have not been taught that (Al-Muhaimeed. p. 108). That loss was the result of slavery and servitude in which he lived from his childhood, and the best explanatory symbol





according to the novel is like a bird that refuses to leave its cage after its freedom.

This modeling in the novel reflects the type of life the African slave lived in the Arabian Peninsula, and it depicts the material and moral violations that these slaves encountered during and upon their arrival on the island. Many of these maltreatments accompanied these slaves till after their liberation, leaving open unanswered question in their speech about how he who spent the golden age of his life in slavery enjoys life and freedom!

### **Chapter 3: The characters in The Tar:**

The novel employs the polyphonic narrator technique as explained by Dostoevsky and Bakhtin (Zhongwen. 1997. p. 779), which could be simplified as: using of a multiple narrator. The heroes take turns telling the events one after the other, and each one of them is concerned with telling his story or telling a different story from different points of view (Lahmidany. p. 49). The thirty-day novel came in thirty chapters; the voices of the narrators multiplied in each of these chapters according to the multiplicity of its characters. The character of Sahar Bayadh, the heroine of the novel, dominated the book, as her voice was heard in the narration of eleven chapters, and the voice of her husband's character Abdo in nine chapters, and the rest of the chapters were shared by secondary characters who have different relationships with Abdo such as neighborhood, kinship and friendship.

Perhaps the black character that can be considered a model in this novel is Abdo Ghatfan; He is referred to as the subject of focus; (Focalized) which means according to Gerald (1987. p. 32) "the object of focalization: the existent or event presented in terms of the focalizer's perspective" the incident presented according to the perspective of the subject". He is the character around whom the subject of the novel revolves, and the following is a highlight of the most important features of this subject:

#### **1. 3. 1. Abdo:**

"Abdo was about thirty-six year old, an athletic build with a strong body, and a strong spirit that loved adventure, despite his limp that affected his gait, and with it his appearance became funny..." (Al-suhaimiy. 2012. p. 26). Thus, the novel presented the physical features of Abdo, to highlight his descriptions and inner feelings after that.

As for the sensuality of his character, it is because the satisfaction of his sexual instinct comes at the forefront of all matters. The discourses indicating this were numerous throughout the length of the novel, and these discourses, in addition to their plurality, are characterized by the generalization of this instinct in every black-skinned person: "I did



not turn to him to measure his reaction to what I said, but I know Abdo well, as he is like any black man, his lust always prevails if it collides with his dignity" (Ibid. p. 102). And "Blacks usually like huge kitchens, because they sanctify food as they sanctify sex" (Ibid. p.217).

The predominance of his sensuality was also shown through a series of monologues that Abdo held with himself, so that in the presence of his white wife he was only a model of the flowing lust, he sees the woman only as a machine to satisfy his flaming lust even on the days of her period. What can I do with Sahar in this case? Should I remain like this, or dare I to manipulate anything exciting in her to extinguish my lust? And what would Sahar say of me if she dared to be ashamed and timid and asked her to do so?" A beautiful woman like Sahar should not be treated with half pleasure, she is a perfect woman; the pleasure with her should be complete... (Ibid. p. 128).

As for the manifestation of his conflictual personality, he was wrestling against his color to prove his existence. This conflict left a psychological complex that was a reaction to what his ideology was formed by since his childhood of intense hatred for whites and his prejudice against them, and I hate some of its white inhabitants, for my history is full of all things bad towards them, I never accepted them, they felt that their white skin was everything, and I confess that I loved only their women (Ibid. p. 119).

This prejudice, which stems from despair and despondency, is manifested in the high position occupied by whites in the society; thanks to their color. He says: ..and as a good habit, she was very keen to be a star shining in any women's gathering she went to, so her dress on that day was very splendid and beautiful, and what she lacked was that she was supposed to be white-skinned to be an angel (Ibid. p. 120).

But this hatred and prejudice did not prevent him from marrying the sorcery of a white woman – for he only loves their women. His marriage to her was in itself a victory over many struggles; it may be the most prominent of them giving a kind of appreciation for his position among the members of his community, or his highness over his black peers who married the daughters of their own kind. White – in his opinion– is an ideal color in which an individual occupies a high position in society, or at least from the point of view of members of society.

In conclusion, what emerges from the position of this novel in portraying this black character can be summed up – in addition to the tyranny of lust instincts among the blacks – is what the color complex generates, and the conflict in which the black has been



floundering since his consciousness over the classes and classifications which were produced by the color of the skin of any individual, and that only few of blacks are often free from this conflicts, and perhaps this is what the novel reflects.

### **Conclusion:**

The research sought to extract the traits and characteristics that the Saudi novels used to represent African characters, and it focused on clarifying these traits and characteristics in terms of their connection to the social dimension of the personality. Generalizing it to other individuals in the African community, and through this representation, the traits of African characters were deduced, and can be summarized as follows:

1. The selfish personality and its negative impact on the society; this appeared in the character of Omar in the novel " Maimunah", and everyone who contributed to the perpetrations of the events of slavery that swept across Africa.
2. Religious personality is seen in the character of Issa in the same novel of Maimunah and the strength of his resolve, his arming with religious rites and remembrances, and his ability to face difficulties by adhering to religious manifestations.
3. The character of the slave and the negative impact of the denied liberties on black peoples' present and future. This was manifested in the character of Uncle Tawfiq in the novel "Smell Traps", and his confusion while gaining freedom. His manhood was lost by castration, and his future was lost during the years he spent in slavery.
4. Conflict personality and the psychological complexes generated by color between an individual and others. It is seen in the levels of discourse in the "Tar" relating to the personality of his servant and his marriage to a white woman, so he spent his life wrestling with himself and others to find justifications for his color and his marriage to a white woman. So, these justifications would serve as convictions that all individuals must accept.



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