

## Saud Al-Sanousi's *Bamboo Stalk*: Deconstructing the Split Border of a Double Identity

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### Abstract

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To be in-between and to be bewildered to which country to belong is what the main character of Saud Al-Sanousi's *Bamboo Stalk* (2013) suffers from. In this novel, the main character is the son of a Kuwaiti father and a Filipina. Being confused to which country to belong shakes the basis for one's own identity and belonging. Al-Sanousi reflects the dramatic identity crisis and the bitter internal and external conflict by aggravating the obsession of belonging from inside to the outside and vice versa. To resolve his inner conflict, the main character decides to embrace the two identities together. This paper examines the significance of hybridity in the modern world. Unlike the concepts of diaspora and multiculturalism, Hybridity is paramount as it promotes togetherness-in-difference rather than disintegration and discrimination.

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**Keywords:** Saud Al-Sanousi, In-between, Identity, Hybridity, Homi Bhaba

### Introduction

Al-Sanousi, the Kuwaiti writer and novelist of *Bamboo Stalk* got the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2013 among more than a hundred and thirty novels that entered the competition. The novel deals with the subject of the search for identity in Kuwait and the Gulf states through the life of the narrator, the son of a Kuwaiti and a Filipina. *Bamboo Stalk* deserves this prize aptly as it reflects the obsession of the Gulf societies with identity, the strong authority of the tribe, customs, and the complexity of social relations.

There is no doubt that the Arabic novel has reached an advanced stage in the field of expressing what is going on in the minds of Arabs and their communities, which has made great strides in the way of openness to others. The question of identity may be one of the most pressing issues, and it is not strange that the Gulf societies are the most wary and sensitive toward such issues when compared to other Arab peoples. The novel of Al-Sanousi, *Bamboo Stalk*, takes from this particular theme a problematic issue as it is preoccupied with the search for roots and identity. The novel gives a way to compare the Philippines with Kuwait, providing valuable information about the life and the details of the two countries. The author has succeeded in writing his novel in a narrative way that makes the reader moving with the narrator among many paths while contemplating into the amazing worlds in their diversity, stretching from the Philippines' archipelago, the plains of this country, its farms, and the concerns of its people to the shores of the Arabian Gulf, the streets of its cities, the thresholds of its houses, the tempers of its people, their habits, and their traditions.

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*Bamboo Stalk* discusses the foreign workers' problem in the gulf countries and the complicated relationships which are formed under the human interaction. Al-Sanousi reveals some of the features of this dramatic clash not only with confidence and sincerity but also with consoled swab and agony. The reader sees him drawing impressive paintings, unleashing a brush to illuminate this dramatic clash. The author tries to delve deeply into this simmering clash. He also demonstrates the growth of the strained relationship between the two.

*Bamboo Stalk* exposes the attitude of our societies toward the foreign workers, coming from poor countries. *Bamboo Stalk* reveals the blunt and brutal exploitation of the foreign workers. Al-Sanousi demonstrates how the customers and the owners of the business treat foreign workers with verbal abuse and insults. And because the writer seeks to be objective in his writing, he does not hesitate to talk about the aggressive feelings that are generated in the hearts of migrant workers, making them think of revenge of the citizens in response to the degrading treatment that they receive from them: "...have bad attitudes. I do not like their behavior at all, and at the same time, I do not like what the workers in the restaurant are doing in response to the ill-treatment they receive from the other. Some offend themselves by the way they treat others. We, who often work in the kitchen, hear one of the customers screaming and insulting the person who is in charge of taking the order "(Al- Sanousi, 2013,p. pp. 232-233).

### Main Text

Al-Sanousi identifies a complex world plagued with a sense of in- between. The author demonstrates Issa / José dropping into the abyss of identity dilemma. It must be acknowledged here that the writer has portrayed the cultural differences between the two communities in an aesthetic way that deserves admiration. It must be said that Al-Sanousi has enriched the Arabic literature with this beautiful sliding in the affairs and concerns of that far Asian community that is unknown to many of the Arabs authors and writers.

There is no doubt that Al- Sanousi recognizes the importance of the content dealt with in the text of the novel, but this content remains secondary unless accompanied by new techniques. Subjects such as foreign labor, lost identity, schizophrenia, duplication , affiliation, loyalty to the homeland, love, war, legend , and the social heritage are familiar and current topics to the point of daily consumption, but dealing with them in an artistic way is what gives this refined thread the new creativity.

This novel is based on parallel structures, and this is a part of the new techniques used by Al-Sanousi in the formal building of his novel. If the national hero José Rizal is the symbol of the Philippines' revolution and resistance against the Spanish occupation, then the novelist Ismail Fahad Ismail , the poet Faik Abdul Jalil, and the composer Abdullah Rashed are symbols of the Kuwaiti resistance against the Iraqi occupation. The novel does have a melodramatic aspect, but what makes it interesting is the smooth style, durability of the plot, spontaneous narrative, and the strength of the topics addressed by Al-Sanousi.

To support its parallel structure, *Bamboo Stalk* compensates the absence of a detailed spatially knowledge of Kuwait with its historical weight. The use of major historical events of Kuwait is equivalent to the presence of the deep spatial description of the Philippines. The author starts Kuwait's historical events since the National Day of Kuwait that is paralleled with the same day of crowning the first woman to rule the Philippines on the 25th of February 1987. The novel highlights the event of the assassination's attempt of the Kuwaiti Amir at the same day Joséphine arrived in Kuwait. Then the kidnapping of the Kuwaiti plane, Jabriya, on its way to Thailand is demonstrated as coinciding with the birth of Issa. Then the author discloses the second Gulf War and the death of Emir of Kuwait at the dawn of the same day on which "José / Issa" arrived in Kuwait. This historical map is equivalent to the spatial map of the Philippines described throughout the novel.

When Joséphine comes to work in Kuwait as a maid, she falls in a very short love story that ends with secretly marrying Rashid Issa Rashid Tarouf, who is forced later to make the marriage official after the birth of Issa, but he abandons them after a short time and sends the baby with his mother to the Philippines where he suffers hardships when his father falls in the hands of Iraqi forces and then dies in a mass genocide in Karbala. After he reaches the age of maturity, Issa decides to return back to Kuwait, and his family accepts him reluctantly, but mainly in the expansion of the house in which the servants live.

Issa could not merge with Al-Tarouf family or obtain their recognition, with the exception of his sister Khawla, aunt Awatef, and aunt Hind to some extent, so he decides to return to the Philippines after he loses his work and discovers that he cannot make roots, like the bamboo, in the Kuwaiti land. José says: "If I were a bamboo tree that has no roots, we can cut a piece of its stalk and plant it with no roots in any land. It will grow so fast until it has new roots. It will grow again in a new land with no past or memory, with no importance of the different names " (Al-Sanousi, 2013,p.94).

Al-Sanousi reflects the duplication of the main character's identity even through his double name that is Issa / José. The first glimpse of duplication in the main character is demonstrated by making the main character divided between two names, two lands, and science and two religions, culture, and two cultures. As Stuart Hall (1992) states: "Identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point" (P.16). The author presents the main character in a disciplined and effective way. Indeed, the author pays a great attention to the personality of the main hero. He shows how the main character's two un-matching names in meaning and spelling reflect the dilemma of belonging to two identities.

As Issa / José's identity is split into two halves, the plot of the novel is set in two countries: the Philippines and Kuwait. Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses. ... [Until recently, we have incorrectly thought that identity is] a kind of fixed point of thought and being, a ground of action ... the logic of something like a 'true self.' ... [But] Identity is a process, identity is split. Identity is not a fixed point but an ambivalent point. Identity is also the relationship of the other to oneself." (Hall, 1992, p.10)

The novelist has been able to dig deep into the Philippines spatially to portray the details that reflect a deep knowledge of that country. That knowledge is not only confined to describe scenes of nature, but also it penetrates deep into the cultural and historical textile of the Philippines and its special and distinguished people as José Rizal, a novelist and a painter who moved the popular consciousness to rise in defense of his country against the Spanish who occupied the Philippines for nearly four centuries. Such drilling puts the reader of the novel in illusion of believing that the writer of the novel is José Mendoza and not the Kuwaiti Saud Al-Sanousi because of such precision that is rarely mastered by people not belonging to the same country. Al- Sanousi uses the setting to describe the dilemma of Issa / José's identity. We find that moving to describe the physical location in Kuwait comes contrary to what was in the Philippines: "Nature here does not look like nature there in anything except the sunrise during the day and the rising of the moon at night. Even the sun, I doubted at first it's the same sun that I know" (Al- Sanousi, 2013,p. 29).

Issa / José suffer from a psychological displacement because of his in-between identity. As Crawford and Rossiter (2006) pertinently comment, "Young people's interest in identity is usually personal and psychological" (p. 8). The psychological alienation of the character José in the Philippines is present because of his pre-knowledge of belonging to another place and another homeland: "Despite the years I spent among you, I do not belong to you" (Al-Sanousi, 2013,p. 179). Issa also suffers also from psychological alienation in Kuwait. He suffers from a split identity since the first moment he arrives in Kuwait in a dramatic scene full of tragedy: "I stood in confusion in front of these queues, should I go to the queues where Filipinos are standing? Or to the other queues?" (Al- Sanousi, 2013, p. 185). Kuwait is linked - and the Gulf in general - in the other's mind, as a land of dreams that gives its people unlimited financial safety. Josphine always draws to José the image of Kuwait as being similar to Paradise: "I started to wait that day when I will become rich and be able to get what I want without effort" (Al- Sanousi, 2013,p. 71).

People in the Philippines always think that he has the privilege of luck in a country where the fortunes of men became more: " My mother realized that a safer future, rarely available to man, is waiting for me in Kuwait, which provides its citizens, and I am one of them, with what is not offered by the most advanced countries " (Al- Sanousi, 2013,p. 79). However, discoveries do not always come along perception presets; Kuwait is not like the Wonderland. The homeland is not money or wealth, and that what is discovered by Issa as soon as he arrives in the country of his father: "In the land of my mother I have nothing only the family, in the land of my father I have everything but a family " (Al- Sanousi, 2013, p. 303). Upon his arrival in Kuwait, he discovers that Kuwait is a fake reality, and that wakes up nothing but his longing to the Philippines:

"Wonder land! a totally different picture of the one I used to know all my life in the Philippines... a picture not identical to my dreams... there is no similarity between the old country in my imagination and the new reality " (Al- Sanousi, 2013,p. 367) .

Accordingly, he is, in all his situations, exiled from Kuwait and inside it. In Kuwait, Issa has faced relegation many times since he was born and until his final leave. The first relegation is when he is deported with his mother to the Philippines. The second relegation is when he returns back to Kuwait, and he feels exiled inside the expansion of the house: "I used to look at my family from my exile in the house with bitterness filling my heart" (Al- Sanousi, 2013,p. 265) . The third relegation is when he is exiled from Al Tarouf house for the second time so that Khawla can stay in it to live alone. The fourth relegation is when he leaves to his last exile to the Philippine.

The image of the hero remains positive; its features isn't disturbed by the sour intensity of rejection and repulsion that he faces from his father's family that does not want to acknowledge him as an offspring. His family members cannot accept the idea of the erosion of their social status and shaking their image in front of people's hearsay. But there is a small hope that comes from his sister of his father - Khawla - that loves him and wants him to remain there for her, and that increases his determination not to surrender.

The Filipino features of Issa prevent him to be able to integrate within the Kuwaiti society. He becomes a secret that should not be told when he is accepted to live in the expansion of the Tarouf's house: "I will live in my Grandma house, or the expansion of her house, as a secret that should not be told to others" (Al- Sanousi, 2013,p. 230) . He has to memorize very well the rules list which should not be violated ; otherwise, he will expose the family to humiliation and contempt. Khawla says to him: "If the neighbors or their servants asks you... you are the new cooker"(Al- Sanousi, 2013,p. 230). In addition, he is held responsible for the consequences of telling this secret to his friend Jabir: "I didn't make a mistake when I told my friend about my relationship with Al Tarouf, but I made a mistake when I didn't ask him to keep this matter as a secret as my family wanted" (Al- Sanousi, 2013,p. 366).

But the crisis does not only escalate within the main hero as being split between two nations and two countries far apart, but it also reaches around him wherever he goes. Here the author excels in aggravating the obsession of belonging from inside to the outside, and vice versa. Many novels tackle with the gulf identity problems especially after the petrol era. The emphasis of most those novel is placed upon the movement from inside the gulf states to the outside, but *Bamboo Stalk* deals with this matter differently directing the movement from outside to inside the Arabian Gulf .At the height of this aggravation, we see the hero standing still despite the constant sense of bitterness in the Philippines as well as in Kuwait. In the Philippines, the kids call him the Arabic even though he looks like them. In Kuwait, on the other hand, people call him the Filipino.

The return of the hero to the land of his mother, loaded with symbolism, makes us aware that this return does not mean estrangement from the homeland of the father and the separation from his identity, but it also carries the meanings of loyalty to the roots , the faith in the possibility of merging identities, the desire to achieve psychological harmony and the cultural compatibility. That is how we read the symbolic bottle of dirt, the flag of Kuwait, a copy of the Quran in English, and a prayer mat that he takes from the land of Kuwait, carrying them in his traveling bag. Even the issue of his marriage to a Filipina girl and giving his son the name of his father, Rashid, emphasize the idea of merging his two identities by putting an end to the internal conflict of belonging either to here or there. The title of the novel is symbolic. The main title evokes us to think about the content of the text and its basic theme that is identity and roots. The bamboo stalks rise high as if they look for a special space for existence and belonging while their roots are deeply dug in the ground. The more stuck to their roots, the more they grow to touch the sun in the sky establishing the balance, which is a must to remain strong upright.

The aesthetics of the novel's end is exciting, where Al- Sanousi employs with tact and intelligence the game of football in his narrative, utilizing it as a symbolic vehicle to resolve the dilemma of the split identity. The telling of the football match that is between Kuwait and the Philippines is linked with the feelings of the hero and his conflicting emotions. He cannot encourage one team more than the other; the loss for one of them means a loss and a breakage for him, and every goal that one of the teams scores against the other is considered against him. Accordingly, he wants the two teams to be equal on points to reach a psychological balance. He cannot be only Kuwaiti or only Filipino:

"More than half of the time I do not want to watch. I do not want to lose my balance. I do not want to lose me or win me. With this result ... I am even" (Al- Sanousi, 2013, p. 396) . Here we have a positive side of hybridity, or we have what Jacquie Lo has termed the "happy hybridity" (Lo, 2000). While the latter is nourished by hybridity's perceived possibility to ingest difference into a new consistent culture of commixture and amalgamation. According to David Scott , difference "has now to be seen not as a final destination, a distant horizon, but as one moment in a larger relation permanently open to contestation, open to the moment when difference contests sites of normalized identity and demands a rearrangement of the terms, and perhaps even the very idiom, of consensus" (Scott, 2000, p.298).

## Conclusion

This paper examines the double identity of the main character of Saud Al-Sanousi *Bamboo Stalk*. Such a person lives "'border lives' on the margins of different nations, in-between contrary homelands" (McLeod, 2000, p. 217). According to Bhabha, this kind of having a hyphenated identity leads to a kind of hybridity, a fluctuating state of mind: "We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 1). In many cases, compromising the two identities demands that we go over a border of some kind. The border can be actual or fictional, but the significance of borders is very fundamental since it is here that the dilemma of thought starts. In other words, hybridity is important in our endeavors to beat what Rita Felski (1997) has coined the doxa of difference:

Metaphors of hybridity and the like not only recognize differences within the subject, fracturing and complicating holistic notions of identity, but also address connections between subjects by recognizing affiliations cross-pollinations, echoes and repetitions, thereby unseating difference from a position of absolute privilege. Instead of endorsing a drift towards ever greater atomization of identity, such metaphors allow us to conceive of multiple, interconnecting axes of affiliation and differentiation. (p. 12)

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