

The Answer Lies in the Resilience: Cross Cultural Conflict in the Bamboo Stalk

Dr. Ghada Fayez Refa'at Abu-Enein

Assistant Professor of English Literature

Faculty of Educational Sciences and Arts/ UNRWA University

Jordan- Amman/ Almuqablain



Abstract - The *Bamboo Stalk* is a daring work which looks objectively at the phenomenon of foreign workers in Arab countries and deals with the problem of identity through the life of a young man of mixed race who returns to Kuwait, his father's homeland, the 'heaven' which his mother had described to him since he was a child. The novel is written by Saud Alsanousi and he is a Kuwaiti novelist and journalist, born in 1981. He published his first novel *The Prisoner of Mirrors* in 2010, which won a prize awarded for novels and short stories by young writers. His second novel *The Bamboo Stalk* won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction 2013. Receiving this prestigious prize, he became the youngest author to win the prize. Alsanousi raises complicated themes related to religion, discrimination and identity. His sharp criticism of Kuwaiti society particularly in his last two novels is an attempt to inspire a positive change in the way Kuwaitis view both others and themselves. Although many have discussed the complicated themes of culture and identity in *The Bamboo Stalk*, a few critics have examined its protagonist's coming of age journey realizing his identity through reconciling two cultures and hence his bicultural identity.

Keywords - Identity, Culture, Discrimination, Conflict, Reconciliation, Kuwait.

I. INTRODUCTION

The *Bamboo stalk* comes from a tree that grows in any land and it can be cut down and planted in a distant land and then it can re-grow there easily, so the author chose the name *The Bamboo Stalk* to indicate the resilience of the personality of Isa who has multiple roots, nationalities, names, religions and even multiple mothers. The novel exposes the reality of acceptance when having to live with multiple identities, forming deep questions about the capability of having more than one mother, being scattered in more than one name, belonging to more than one homeland as well as having more than one religion. The novel recounts the Kuwaiti-Filipino protagonist José's coming of age journey, a quest to embrace his bicultural identities. In the novel Alsanousi employed a distinctive pattern of the thematic and narrative characteristics of the

Bildungsroman, a type of novel that traces the moral, psychological, and intellectual development of a protagonist during his quest for authentic selfhood. This distinctive pattern is linked particularly to the Arabic Bildungsroman of which *The Bamboo Stalk* is an example.

José Mendoza/Isa al-Tarouf, the protagonist of *The Bamboo Stalk*, struggles to define an identity apart from the rejection he experiences. The result of an urfi marriage (a kind of marriage in which the marriage contract is not announced or registered officially) between parents of distinct social classes, his bicultural identity stems from his mother, Josephine Mendoza, a Filipino domestic servant, and his father, Rashid al-Tarouf, the Kuwaiti son of her employer. Since birth, José has experienced rejection and isolation at the hands of both cultures and so embarks on a pilgrimage to find his authentic self. Leaving behind his

mother's land, the Philippines, José imagines that the Kuwaiti culture will provide him with the acceptance and, ultimately, the fulfillment he has been lacking. José believes Kuwait to be his true home, and that only there he will find his authentic self. By undergoing the thematic stepping-stones common to the Arabic Bildungsroman, José will reconcile his feelings toward both cultures.

The Arabic adaption of the genre revolves mainly around the cultural-specific challenges that the Arabic protagonist faces during his quest for reconciling two opposing cultures and achieving self-realization. The first theme is a cross-cultural conflict of the East and the West, the second is the occurrence of a spiritual crisis during the protagonist's journey which leads to the conflict of the story. The story begins with Josephine who comes to Kuwait from the Philippines to work as a household servant, leaving behind her studies and family, who are pinning their hopes for a better future on her. In the house where she works, she meets Rashid, spoiled but kind-hearted only son of his mother Ghanima and father Isa. After a brief love affair, he decides to marry Josephine, on condition that the marriage remains a secret, but things do not go according to plan. Josephine becomes pregnant with José and Rashid is obliged to abandon them when the child is less than two months old, sending his son away to the Philippines. There he struggles with poverty and clings to the hope of returning to his father's country "The Heaven" when he is eighteen. It is at this point that the main story and a new struggle begins.

José's birth is socially unacceptable in class-conscious Kuwaiti society. Denounced for his relationship with a domestic servant, José's father, Rashid, succumbs to social pressure and sends José and his mother, Josephine, to the Philippines. Rashid ultimately rejects both mother and son by announcing that he is divorcing Josephine and remarrying. José begins a life in the Philippines now defined by poverty and loss. However, he retains his dream of one day experiencing prosperity in his native Kuwait, and with the assistance of his father's friend, Ghassan, José returns to Kuwait. Upon landing in Kuwait, José experiences discrimination for not being fully Kuwaiti; his partial Filipino ancestry, as well as his parents' scandalous relationship, engenders immediate rejection. José also begins to fall victim to the rigid, prominent Kuwait caste system. Again, he finds himself being oppressed by a culture and its people. Unraveling his complex ethnic and cultural roots enable José to transcend the confines of his birthright. Through his many struggles, and the power of his own experiences and observations, he gradually finds his place within both cultures. He learns he is able to transcend

his past and define himself; he is both José Mendoza and Isa al-Tarouf. He is Kuwaiti-Filipino. The novel closes showing José, his wife and son, Rashid, leading a comfortable life in the Philippines. His self-concept is his own, and his journey to self is a success. In *The Bamboo Stalk*, the protagonist's strenuous journey toward maturation serves to recognize and resolve the complexity of bridging opposing cultures.

The general themes of the traditional Bildungsroman can be found throughout *The Bamboo Stalk*. In the Philippines, José endures emotional alienation, among many other challenges and obstacles. His maternal grandfather, Mendoza, mocks José as being fatherless and blames his birth for his mother's unemployment: "Although I was still young, Mendoza became openly hostile towards me. 'If there was any good in this boy, his family there wouldn't have abandoned him,' he said" (Alsanousi, p. 64). While the emotional rejection is particularly painful, it motivates the protagonist to begin the all-important quest for self. The many instances of societal reproach serve as necessary growth points. Rejected by both his maternal grandfather and parental family, he learns that he must become self-sufficient. The aspiration to develop his own mind and character is a controlling feature of the typical Bildungsroman protagonist, one who eventually learns that it is unwise to depend upon others for sustenance. The rejection in the Philippines does not destroy the young José, who ultimately endeavors to live in his homeland, Kuwait. He believes that he will one day live peacefully and prosperously in Kuwait, and be fully embraced by his father's people. At this point in the novel, José is a passive child who lacks all keys to self-realization. He pins his hope on his chances for individual fulfillment upon the unknown—another place, another time, and the actions of others. While José's mother naively supports this plan, she does supply him with something he will need throughout his journey: **hope**. Her encouragement gives José the motivation and fortitude he needs throughout his journey.

II. THE CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICT THEME

Although the Arabic and Western Bildungsroman both involve a journey, the Arabic protagonist heads not to a city, but to a foreign culture. Throughout, he will endure multiple challenges and experiences that will assist his understanding of self and world, and also help to reconcile the opposing cultures. Al-Mousa (2006) explained that "the young hero's exposure to a foreign culture proves to be beneficial, in that it enables him to form better insight into himself and to develop a more accurate understanding of the native and foreign culture" (p. 263). Thus the outcome of the quest in

the Arabic Bildungsroman pivots on the character's coping with bicultural stress. That the journey to a foreign culture benefits the individual's personal growth and the cultivation of his or her mind is best expressed by Said (2006) who pointed to the journey's influence on the individual's development:

The more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily one is able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment and generosity necessary for true vision. The more easily, too, does one assess oneself and alien cultures with the same combination of intimacy and distance? (p. 259)

In *The Bamboo Stalk*, José does not take his journey to the West, but rather returns to the East, specifically to Kuwait. Although no Western journey occurs, the educational benefits of a trip to another culture, Since José's childhood had been spent in the Philippines rather than in his native Kuwait, his direction home conflicts only superficially with Al-Mousa's (1993) model of the Arabic Bildungsroman. Being exposed to another culture allows José to evaluate things from "a cross-cultural perspective" (Al-Mousa, 1993, p. 224).

In Kuwait, José discriminatory treatment typically enacted against people from the Far East. José is not only subject to the prejudicial attitudes of strangers, but finds he is also disdained by his parental family. José discovers that his grandmother worried that José's presence could irreparably damage their reputation, his aunts try to disown him from the family. Ghassan explains to a bewildered José that Kuwaiti society is complicated, but José cannot initially comprehend the complexity of the class system:

I didn't understand what Ghassan said about Nouriya's attitude. Why was she so upset? What was it that threatened her reputation and made her the laughing stock of her husband's family? Why did my presence complicate marriage for her son and her daughter? Those were the same words Grandmother "Who'll marry them after what you've done with the maid?" (Alsanousi, 2015, p. 195-96)

At the age of 18, Isa's/Jose's dream is about to become a reality, Isa/Jose travels to Kuwait to seek a place in his father's nation. Rashid has long ago died a hero, resisting Saddam Hussein's invasion. When he arrived, he was scared that his family "Tarouf family" would never accept their half-Filipino son. His father's family at first refuses to take

him in at all although he is the only male child for Rashid and the only one who can continue the legacy of Tarouf family. For them, accepting him would result in threatening the family's status in the society and then finally with the insistence of his half-sister, Khawla, his grandmother let him live with the servants of the family. Isa/Jose arrives prepared to love and be loved by what he imagines is his family, but he could not find the love in his family's except his free-spirited sister who once told him that "Tarouf" means a net and, as she says, "we can move only as much as the net allows, but you Isa like a small fish, the only one who can move through it" p.68. With a Filipino features, Isa is not accepted. On the other hand he has other marks of identity that is not Filipino, that is he carries a Kuwaiti identity card and another mark that is the first thing and the only thing that opens the heart of his grandmother, which is his voice. It was Isa's voice which is the same as his father's that makes Ghanima collapse in front of Isa remembering his father Rashid. As the story goes on, we can see that his relationship with his grandmother, his sister, and his aunt Hind slowly gets better, but with limits, for example, they should not never be seen together, he must not tell anyone who he is. On the other hand his relationship with his other two aunts cannot get worse, all they care about is what other people especially their husbands going to say if they know that they have a Filipino child and this indicate that gossip is a destructive disease in the Kuwaiti society and that the Kuwaiti society is ethnocentric toward immigrant workers. With the pressure of saving the social status, Tarouf family could not accept their own child, so Isa decided to leave Tarouf house and live alone.

Clearly the structure of the novel is divided into two separate parts, with the first half detailing Jose's life in the Philippines, while the second focuses on his move to Kuwait. Throughout the novel, Jose struggles to find his place in the society. The struggle begins from the many names he is given, nicknames Arabi or Filipino", to choosing between religions and finally to the encounters he has with family and peers. Jose's story is not an individual story, it is the story of many children like him especially in the Gulf States due to the ethnocentric people there, where they treat the immigrant worker as inferior human beings and because of this superior look to these workers, Isa will never be accepted in the Kuwaiti society. Issues relating to identity and acceptance are more common now than ever, as globalization has enabled goods and individuals to cross the borders of countries around the world both legally and illegally. With Indian, African and Southeast Asian emigrations to the Arab countries for the sake of improving

their economic conditions, younger generations are being born in lands that are wholly different from their ancestors', leading many to question not only where they come from, but who they are and where they're going.

Isa/Jose's existence is evidently one of controversy, especially in the Arab world where racism is common and gossip is more destructive than war. Josephine, Isa/Jose's mother, a former maid of a well-known family in Kuwait, fell in love with Rashid al-Tarouf, the family's son. After Isa/Jose's father and mother married in secret, Josephine became pregnant. Upon hearing of her son's actions, Ghanima, Rashid's mother, banished him and Josephine from the al-Tarouf household, not only because of her own racially-fueled nature, but also to protect Rashid's sisters from becoming socially rejected in the small country of Kuwait. While Jose was born in Kuwait, his first 17 years were spent in the Philippines. In the Philippines, very few people he encountered seem to notice anything different about Jose, other than occasionally calling him 'The Arabi'. Otherwise, he passed as one of them, but with the belief that one day his father would summon him back to Kuwait, as was Rashid's promise to Josephine, his identity struggle begins. In the Philippines, he lived the life of poverty and hardships and that in my opinion contribute to his struggle with his identity, where he couldn't fit because he is been captured by the dream of living in the heaven "Kuwait" one day.

The climax of Isa's identity struggle is in the Philippines not in the Kuwait. This struggle occurs because he was raised to believe his mother's words that someday he will go to his father's homeland and live like a prince. His struggle begins with the question "Am I a Kuwaiti or a Filipino". Although he has a Filipino face, he has been called "Arabi" when he was a child, so his identity struggle begun at an early age. As he tries to find a balance between these two fighting identities within himself, when yet another struggle occurs, which is the struggle of which religion to follow. He is the son of a Muslim Kuwaiti father and a Christian Filipino mother. When Isa is convinced that his family would not accept him not because they do not want him but because the society would not accept him; therefore, it is not their decision as it was not of his father's, because a whole society is standing behind them. So, he returns to his mother's homeland, and marries his cousin, Myrla, and bears a son he calls Rashid, after his father and this indicates the end of his identity struggle.

III. CONCLUSION

Identity struggle, hybrid identity, racism, Arabs status, stubborn prejudices, migrant workers and poverty are all themes that the author addresses throughout Isa's story. It's a novel that should be read by Arabs specifically, as it provides an open approach to terrible issues that deeply plague Arab societies. With simple words and a heartbreaking story, Soud Al-Sanousi's novel develops a reality for people and issues that have been ignored for far too long. The novel ends with Isa/Jose realizing his own unique identity that combines the features of both of his parents. The main character has come to the conclusion that he is Kuwaiti-Filipino, Jose Mendoza and Isa Al-Tarouf, with Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist religions. Unlike his grandfather Mendoza, who was born without knowing his father and his cousin Myrla, who was born for an unknown Europe man, Isa turn his life where he struggles with his identity to a journey of self-discovery, crossing over his inherited controversies, and so shaping what is called a "hybrid identity".

Isa's/José's journey follows strictly the Arabic bildungsroman pattern of steady growth culminating in the protagonist's reconciliation of two opposing cultures and thus possession of a whole and authentic self. Although some may read José's return to the Philippines as an indication of the failure of his journey, reading *The Bamboo Stalk* against the thematic features of the Arabic Bildungsroman highlights, on the contrary, the success of José's journey to self-realization and to reconcile two cultures. José's return was preceded by awareness of his growth after going through many hardships and tribulations.

Alsanousi wielded the features of the Arabic Bildungsroman to emphasize this process of maturation and growth. Just as personal growth and the reconciliation between two cultures in the Arabic Bildungsroman are journeys from the inner heart to the outside world, in *The Bamboo Stalk*, the protagonist's inner dissatisfaction drives him to search for his identity by reconciling his bicultural identities. José goes through all of the stages of the transition of the Arabic Bildungsroman protagonist. This transition culminates in his return to the Philippines when he comes to the full realization of who José is and what his newfound principles are. The return to the Philippines thus becomes the culmination of Alsanousi's story about his Kuwaiti-Filipino protagonist's coming of age, as well as the culmination of his years of bewilderment and pain.

REFERENCES

- [1] Al-Mousa, N. (1993). The Arabic bildungsroman: A generic appraisal. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 2(3), 223-240.
- [2] Alsanousi, S. (2015a). *the Bamboo Stalk*. Qatar: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing.
- [3] Belkhasher, K. & Badurais, R. (2016). Third Space Identities: Hybridity in Saud Alsanousi's *Saq Al-Bamboo*. *Al-andalus journal for humanities & social sciences*.
- [4] Court, P. (2001). The Impact of 'Globalization' On Cultural Identities. Retrieved February 23, 2019 from <http://www.pass.va/content/dam/scienzesociali/pdf/acta7/acta7-morande.pdf>
- [5] Elayyan, H. (2016). Three Arabic Novels of Expatriation in the Arabian Gulf Region: Ibrāhīm Naṣrallāh's "Prairies of Fever", Ibrāhīm 'Abdalmagīd's "The Other Place", and Sa'ūd al-San'ūsī's "Bamboo Stalk." *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies*.