

Identity in Al-Qusaybi's Novel "Al-Asfouriyeh": A Semiotic Study

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Ghazi Al-Qusaybi is one of the Saudi men of letters who enriched the literary arena with lots of works that included poetry, stories, and novels. Such works of this prolific writer reflect his stature in the literary field. The position Al-Qusaybi held throughout his life helped in creating a different type of thinking. The current study aims to investigate identity in Al-Qusaybi's novel "Al-Asfouriyeh" in an attempt to highlight its constituents, to analyse it, and to approach it semiotically. The study adopted the analytical descriptive method to illustrate the novel's theme and the types of identity that Al-Qusaybi wanted to delineate through listing them and through explaining the symbolic connotations that such an identity incorporates. The study came up with a set of findings; the foremost among them are the several types of identities represented by: symbolic identity of the title, psychological identity, political identity, literary identity, and finally religious identity. Through such types of identities, the author managed to disseminate his ideas in the novel "Al-Asfouriyeh: that concentrated on madness as a cover by which he could convey some ideas and narrate events.

Key words: *Al-Asfouriyeh; Al-Qusaybi; Identity; Semiotism*

1.0 Introduction

Study of identity is very important for unraveling of personality, whether that of the writer or the personality of his characters, as manifested in its features, types, methods, constituents, intentions, and secrets.

The concept of identity should be specified linguistically from the onset. Ibn Manthoor in the book, "Lisan Al-Arab" (1414 A.H) defined it as: "A very deep well..." Al-Asmai defined it to be a well; Abu Amro specified the well to be very deep.

Thus, identity in Arabic involves depth and actuality of the person whose personality cannot be understood without categorising his identity and basic qualities (Hani, 2011).

Al-Jirjani (1983), in his book “At-Tareefat” (definitions), defined identity to be: the absolute truth that involves facts the way the core incorporates the tree of the unknown future. All extant things have identities, conditioned or non-conditioned.

The term identity embodies three meanings: personalisation, person themselves, and external existence. Some said that existence of anything is its actuality, personalisation is its identity, and if taken in general, it is entity.

To summarise, the word identity (Hawiyeh in Arabic) is derived from the pronoun (huwa), (he) in English, which ended up with (hawiyeh) in Arabic, the root of which is (Hawa) = dropped, and got involved in the constituents of identity by which ‘he’ is singled out.

Though the preceding definitions vary regarding the term identity linguistically and idiomatically, yet they all incorporate the following: (truth, essence, personalisation, and identification), which are sufficient to specify the concept of identity, its constituents, and features.

1.1 Study methodology

The study adopted the inductive descriptive analytical approach to examine identity in “Al-Asfouriyeh” in order to unravel its nature and to draw its characteristics and features. This will be achieved by using the semiotic theory to elicit identity and to elucidate its implications and symbolism.

1.2 Study question

What are the types of identity in Al-Qusaybi’s novel “Al-Asfouriyeh”?

2.0 Literature review

To the knowledge of the researcher, no previous studies could be found that tackled the issue of identity in “Al-Asfouriyeh” semiotically. The studies that were found tackled the novel thematically and critically.

The studies are:

In his study entitled “Readings of the Novel Al-Asfouriyeh”, Obeidat Mahmoud (2011), approached the novel from the issue of madness in which he explained how it was utilised to be the outcry of the highly educated person who couldn’t divulge his secrets. The writer

succeeded in personifying and criticising the Arab mind and reality. The study revealed that madness exists in Arabic narration.

The researcher made use of the previous study as it tackled the concept of madness, but the current one differs for it attempts to present a comprehensive picture of identity that covers all aspects and the various types of the issue.

In the study entitled “Al-Asfouriyeh novel for Ghazi Al-Qusaybi” Al-Biqae (2001) indicated that his study was a reading of the novel. He focused on names in literary works as manifested in this novel. His reading of the novel was partial and never covered the whole work. Al - Biqae’s study provided the researcher with different visions and readings of the novel that were of benefit.

3.0 Discussion and analysis

In this section of the study, the researcher will discuss all types of identity as presented and elaborated on in the novel “Al-Asfouriyeh”. By analysing elements of the novel, one can understand constituents of identity and what it symbolises through the following:

3.1 Title symbolism

The novel’s title “Al-Asfouriyeh” is quite symbolic as it refers to the first psychiatric hospital founded on a mound in Lebanon in 1890. The hospital whose name belongs to the whole area of “Al-Hazmia” in Lebanon stopped work in 1972 as mentioned by (Siraj, 2020 Muheidli, 2018; & Haneen 1986). That hospital which was built during the last decade of 19th century, was mainly assigned for people suffering from psychological disorders.

The question that arises why was that mound called “Al-Asfouriyeh”? Some say that because birds loved to live there due to richness with fruitful trees and water, while others say because the mound was named after the family that owned it, “Al-Asfour” (The bird). The name “Al-Asfouriyeh” is still retained in the minds of the Lebanese though it has been out of use since 1972.

Thus, the title crystallises the ideas that the author wanted to convey through the dialogue between a doctor and his patient in a psychiatric hospital.

The outside cover the author chose also helps to clarify the author’s idea. It is a portrait for the world artist Picasso whose components are: head, hands, doors, windows, houses, a blend of darkness with light, branches, and wooden frameworks. The colours of the portrait include: yellow and various tones of blue and brown. Thus, the outside cover with this amalgam of different colours and components reflects the general mood dominating the novel with regard

to events, ideas and a variety of dialogues. This is surrealism which reflects events and ideas, a kind of fantasia the psychic hero lives in. Such a kind of person lives in a non-clear kind of life where he blends a variety of things and pretends to be psychologically sick to be able to unleash his hidden ideas.

Figure 1. Picture of the cover page of Al-Asfouriyeh novel



3.2 Psychological identity

This kind of identity is typified by the hero, the psychic professor, who visited several psychiatric hospitals where his last destination was Al-Asfouriyeh.

A dialogue that revealed events of the novel took place between him and his physician, Sameer Thabit. That dialogue disclosed to the reader the psychological identity of the hero through his fluctuating moods and fantasia which are aspects of madness resulting from the psychological disorders from which the hero was suffering. According to (Ibn Manthoor, 1414 A.H) in his book “Lisan Al-Arab” (Arab Tongue) the term madness correlates to concealment. When somebody says he was overwhelmed by night that implies that he was taken by darkness which conceals everything. According to Arabic culture, madness implicates incongruity to what ordinary people do.

Al-Sabah (1987), in his book entitled “Madness in Literature”, pointed out that madness was a means used to express situations and ideas that couldn’t be made clearer by a normal identity.

The literary mad person often puts on a mask of madness to disseminate his beliefs away from censor. This is what was done by Al-Qusaybi who presented his hero with a mask of madness through which he could freely depict terrible reality away from eyes of the authority.

The narrative text is a series of events and ideas, culturally, politically, and creatively rich, that echo the inner turbulent life the hero goes through as manifested by the dialogue between the hero, the professor, and his physician, Sameer Thabit.

The psychologically sick hero tells his story of visiting four hospitals and of the physicians who treated him before coming to Al-Asfouriyeh to be treated by the doctor Sameer Thabit. Those hospitals were Montree hospital and Doctor Johnson in America, Blackpool hospital and the British physician Splewater, Geneva hospital and the Swiss physician Montseque, and finally Al-Asfouriyeh in Lebanon and Doctor Sameer Thabit.

Through the dialogues between him and his doctor, Sameer Thabit, the reader comes to know that the hero's psychological life started to deteriorate as a result of the medications prescribed for him by each doctor. The women he fell in love with, like Suzi and Afraa, all died and he was accused of killing them.

He was shocked for what happened for each of them and that eventually led him to a psychiatric hospital where he lost concentration and identity. He several times tried to commit suicide, but was treated via electric shock or Freudian treatments.

Al-Qusaybi commented on the dialogues between psychiatrists and their patients saying that such doctors wanted to strip the soul the way they did to the body so as to infiltrate into the hidden secrets to accuse people of schizophrenia and psychological depression that led finally to a psychiatric hospital.

After the professor's psychological identity was destroyed, he started to hallucinate and talk about the world of Jinn to his doctor, Thabit.

The electric shocks separated his soul from real life and eventually ushered him into that world where he got married from the Jinni, Daffaya, and daughter of the king of Jinn. All such things were aspects of hallucination, the outcome of a psychologically sick person.

Another aspect of hallucination is the hero's visit to the outer space where a new brain was transplanted in him and got married from the astronaut, Farasha.

Adventures in such types of worlds reflect the dispersion of the hero's psychological identity.

3.3 Political identity

The author in this respect compared Arab and Western identities through the political systems and parties each has.

Al-Qusaybi (1996) said that he wished to have united Arab states like the U.S.A so as to move freely like the American who travels from Los Angeles to New York without being stopped anywhere by any soldier.

Such words reveal the authors wishes which he saw in practice while studying at Sanford University.

Though the novels laments such wishes, as reality of Arab nations contradicts with that, instead wars broke out since old times during Islamic caliphate when the war known as “The Camel War” happened and hundreds of Arab Muslims were killed.

The novel is rich with discrepancies of ideas in the Arab nation. For example, the professor, the hero of the novel, disagreed with Sheikh “Al-Muhtadi” who believed that Islam is the only religion to rule the Arab world, but the hero emphasised that politics shouldn’t be religiously oriented.

The author moves further in his discussions of democracy and the role everyone should play to achieve that kind of life. Every citizen serves his country by his specialisation: the scientist with the mind, journalist with the pen, and politicians by establishing good relations with other world nations. Unfortunately, none of these are done by Arab citizens. The author satirically comments on Arab politicians who attend parties not to gain support for the Arab cause, but to enjoy meals and socialise with foreign politicians. Thus, the identity is of no existence in the Arab world.

3.4 Literary identity

The literary identity of the author was manifested through the hero, the professor, the mouthpiece of the writer himself, who was highly educated and conversant with the best Arab writers like “May Ziada”, “Al-Aqqad” and others. In the dialogue between the professor and Saleem Thabit, the former gave details about the previously mentioned renowned writers: “May” was a source of inspiration for many men of letters, and “Al-Aqqad” was conceited.

To emphasise the broad literary life and knowledge the author has, he provided some instances of his meetings with other well-known Arab poets and men of letters like the meeting in Paris with “Ahmed Rami” (an Egyptian famous musician) and “Adonais” a famous Syrian poet.

The dialogue the professor had with his physician on the writer “Kafka” was very symbolic as presented in his work “Metamorphosis” in which a young man woke up one day to find himself metamorphosed into an injured nasty insect. Imagine the feeling of that man “It is exactly what I feel now” the hero said. Though well-educated and conversant with many renowned writers, yet internally dissatisfied.

Another example one might cite from the novel, “Al-Asfouriyeh” which reinforces the broad knowledge of the author is enumerating his collections of short stories “Veil of the White Mouse” and “Francisco Nightmares”.

In addition, the hero’s rich literary knowledge, which reflects the authors, could be also seen in his discussion of structuralism that was elaborated on by the hero to his physician. The former informed the latter that the movement was German; it considers the human mind to be a collection of human experiences which doesn’t need investigation or explanation.

The previous examples given by the professor, who is the mouthpiece of the author, ascertain the variety of relations that the author had with several men of letters. Such relations provided a clear picture of the literary and political identities revealed to readers through narration by the professor who showed himself to be erudite, but at the same time psychic.

3.5 Religious identity

This kind of identity relates to the hero’s thinking and intentions which he attaches to politics sometimes. It is worth mentioning that the author was conversant with all types of religions.

In an instance of nervous collapse of the hero, he narrated the story of the clergyman who turned infidel. He used to deliver daily an oration in the psychiatric hospital saying “I am the father, she was the virgin who bore my only son whom I intended to send to salvage humanity from sin, the original one with which every human being was born, except the Virgin Mary. Satan corrupted everything and tempted the Virgin to commit suicide. The Virgin has gone, and the Son has gone as well, then who will salvage humanity”.

The preceding citation reveals the author’s wide knowledge about Christianity, the religious identity of Christians. He also tackled Muslim identity by expounding on the death of his beloved Suzie elaborating on their relation, denying killing her. He was convinced that her death was predestined, an aspect of Islam that ascertains the belief of fate and destiny. This is the Islamic identity the author holds.

In one of the dialogues with his physician, the professor pointed out that Muslims were the forerunners in explaining dreams as manifested in Ibn Sireen’s book “Interpretation of Dreams”. Thus, Arabs preceded other interpreters of dreams, like Freud. Here, the author through that dialogue wanted to stress that Islamic identity was comprehensive as it encompassed psychology, spirituality, ideology, and science.

The professor also talked about parties in Islam and how the militant ones create disputes and deform the face of Islam. Such things could be elicited from the discussion between the professor and Sheikh “Mahdi” on the book published by one of Muslim militants Sayyed Qutub (An Egyptian cleric) who wrote “Road Landmarks.”

The dialogue revealed the ideology of moderation the professor holds. The cleric continued as follows: ‘Don’t you think that accusing Muslims with blasphemy just because they disagree with Sayyed Qutub regarding world governance is extremism’?

Then what is the benefit of faith if you don’t accept God’s ruling over the world? From this viewpoint Sayyed Qutub saw that all modern societies are pre-Islamic. He adds we are in a new pre-Islamic era which is even worse than that extant before Islam. Everything around us is pre-Islamic: people’s beliefs, traditions, sources of culture, art, literature, legislations and rules. Even what is considered to be Islamic philosophy and ideology is also pre-Islamic. The professor commented that some of what Sayyed Qutub says might be right, but most of his ideas are wrong. Nobody can ascertain that all traditions, customs, and beliefs in every Muslim country are pre-Islamic; “this type of thinking is the kind of venture that is never accepted by any sensible person”.

From the preceding dialogue, the author involved us in Islamic issues and identities. Thus, the professor tackled parties and Islamic ruling in issues related to doctrine and how some Muslims abandoned Islamic morals, principles, and culture, thus becoming more ignorant than those of the pre-Islamic era.

Islam grants the human dignity, the actual Islamic identity that reveals itself in morals, commitment to preaching and Islamic traditions and to what is stated in the Holy Quran and Sunnah (tradition of the prophet).

Through this kind of dialogue, the author wanted to convey the moderate Islamic identity, moderation, away from rigidity and extremism.

4.0 Conclusion and recommendations

4.1 Conclusion

The study came up with findings through examining identities in the novel which encompassed political, literary, and religious identities. The analysis of such identities disclosed the educated and encyclopedic kind of character the hero was as revealed in the numerous dialogues he had with his physician, Sameer Thabit.

The findings could justify the symbolic relation between the title and events of the narrative. They could also account for the internal picture Al-Qusaybi included in which all the components were intertwined, a surrealist picture which reflects the ideas with which the mind of the sick hero was obsessed. Those ideas were odd and imaginative.

As for the findings pertaining to the various identities: psychological, political, literary, and religious, one can notice that:

With regard to the psychological, that identity was made clear through madness which the hero successfully feigned as a cover for the actual hidden feeling of the hero, the mouthpiece of the author.

As for the political identity, the author presented it to readers in the form of a comparison between two political identities Arabian and its western counterpart. He outlined the differences that in the west they have parties, but in the Arab world religious sects struggle with one another. That could be elicited from the dialogue talked about previously between the hero, the professor, who believes that Islam has to be excluded from politics, while his counterpart Sheikh Muhtadi insisted that Islam is the only political system that should rule over the whole world.

Regarding the political identity, Al-Qusaybi, through his mouthpiece, the professor, revealed to us how erudite he was. He had relations with the most famous Arab men of letters. Through that kind of survey of relations, the author's intention was to disclose the wide range of literary efficacy he had, being himself, a man of letters and being conversant with the foremost Arab writers.

Finally, concerning the religious identity, the author propagated moderation in religion through the professor who excluded religion from politics because if religion was adopted in politics, then extremism and fanaticism will emerge and will deform the reality of freedom in Islam. Such ideas could be elicited from the dialogue that took place between the hero, the professor, and Sheik Muhtadi.

4.2 Recommendations

The researcher recommends the following:

- 1- To conduct further studies on other works of Al-Qusaybi to find out whether consistency of his moderate ideology exists all through his works or just applies to some.
- 2- To conduct a comparative kind of study between the heroes of more than one work for the same author, Al-Qusaybi, to figure out variations of presenting and introducing his characters to readers.
- 3- To try to find equivalence between the author of "Al-Asfouriyeh" and similar writers from different cultures.
- 4- To conduct analytical studies of his poetry as he was a poet as well.



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