

## Modernity and Alienation in Fahd Al-Atiq's *Life on Hold*

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### Abstract

The second half of the twentieth century Saudi Arabia witnessed an extraordinary economic boom that resulted from the oil production. The new wealth changed people's life and instead of the old and impoverished life, there started a new one of unimaginable riches and wealth. This sudden metamorphosis has had negative psychological impacts such as alienation and estrangement on Saudis who, unexpectedly, found themselves in an entirely new world. Fahd Al-Atiq's novel *Life on Hold* depicts this economic transformation and its impact on the life of Saudi people. The aim of this paper is to analyze Al-Atiq's usage of alienation as a consequence of modernity and consumerism in Saudi Arabia. The paper examines Al-Atiq's disappointment with modernity as a culture of alienation in its celebration of appearance and superficiality which necessitates the need to look beyond the surface.

**Keywords:** modernity, alienation, Saudi Arabia, Saudi novel

### Introduction

Saudi Arabia is located in Western Asia and constitutes the majority of the Arab Peninsula. The territory which now constitutes Saudi Arabia has been the site of many ancient cultures and civilizations. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was founded by Ibn Saud in 1932 (Al-Rasheed 2010, 69; Wynbrandt, 2004, p. 188), who united the four regions of Najd, Hejaz, Southern Arabia (Asir), and parts of Eastern Arabia (Al-Ahsa) into a single state through a series of conquests which started with the capture of Riyadh in 1902 (Al-Rasheed 2010, 37-42; Harper, 2007, p. 24-8). Islam, the world's second-largest religion (Bettiza, 2019, p. 172), emerged in modern-day Saudi Arabia which is sometimes referred to as 'the Land of the Two Holy Mosques' referring to Al-Masjid al-Haram and Al-Masjid an-Nabawi in Mecca and Medina respectively and due to the two mosques it has become the center of the Islamic world and is visited by millions of Muslims every year either for Haj or Omra (Harper, 2007, p.12).

Oil was first produced in commercial quantities in Saudi Arabia in 1938 (Al-Rasheed 2010, 89; Wynbrandt, 2004, p. 193). The Kingdom has since become the world's second largest oil producer and the world's largest oil exporter (Fawthrop, 2020, para 11-12; Bradshaw, 2019, p. 5). It controls the world's second largest oil reserves. Before the discovery of oil, the majority of the Saudi population was nomadic, herding camels, sheep, and goats (Jones, 2010, p. 25). In many regions of Saudi Arabia people depended on farming (Jones, 2010, p. 26-7). Trade was another mainstay in the region. Pearl diving and fishing in the Gulf and Red Sea coasts were vital to economic life. And finally, Hajj and Omra were other sources of income before oil. During those times, people lived in

tents and mud houses (Peterson, 2003, p. 13). They had no electricity or plumbing, and they cooked their food over open fires. Their life centered on finding water and green pastures for their camels. According to *Saudi Gazette* (2014),

Seeking sustenance has been every man's aim. Before Saudi Arabia's current prosperity and riches, fueled by the discovery of oil, starvation was rampant in the harsh desert climates across the Arabian Peninsula.

It was an extension of centuries of hardship during which the specter of poverty was prominent amid a lack of resources, which were almost restricted to primitive farming of dates and select cereals. (para 1-2)

The income sources were very limited and, therefore, to earn their livings people traveled east and west in search of work and had to stay away from the homeland for long periods. The social life was also very simple.

Suddenly oil was discovered, and a new era began. Huge amounts of money rolled in and massive changes took place. People got money to buy anything they wanted. New lifestyle began. Big and modern cities were built. Roads, airports, electric plants, water and sewage systems, schools, hospitals and health centers were constructed (Harper, 2007, p. 78-80). As a result of oil production, Saudi Arabia moved very rapidly towards the modern world. The Saudi government, in its attempt to move the nomads into cities, has given them all facilities such as loans to build new homes and sometimes housing has been built for them (Harper, 2007, p. 39-40). And hence many of the desert Bedouins and people living in old cities and mud houses moved to the newly-built, modern cities. In short, during the past seventy years, Saudi Arabia has changed to one of the richest countries in the world (Goodwin, 2001, p. 9).

Because of its role as the guardian of the two Holy Mosques, Saudi Arabia is a crossing road where two entirely different worlds meet: the traditional world of the Islamic culture and the modern world of globalization and industrialization (Harper, 2007, p.13-16). And due to this economic boom, Saudi Arabia faced a thirst for manpower and therefore several million of expatriates from different parts of the world arrived and were engaged in almost all occupations. Most of these people come with different cultural backgrounds, customs, clothes and languages (Harper, 2007, p. 77; Peterson, 2003, p. 14). This led to a clash between the past, the traditional, tribal and religious values which are seen as an Islamic heritage and sacred trust for all Muslims and the present and modern lifestyle (Harper, 2007, p.11).

### **Theory of Alienation**

The shattering of the established traditions and values in contemporary times has originated the concept of 'alienation'. This term suggests that modern human being believes that the world is chaotic and fragmented, and hence feels a sense of displacement. The result is impossibility for humans to find order and meaning in life. This ideology is rooted in existentialism and has been a recurrent theme in modern fiction. Many of contemporary fictional works present alienation as a major theme and the alienated man as a protagonist. Due to the overuse of the term, it has become a common 'cliché' in contemporary fiction.

The two founding theories concerning alienation in sociology are Karl Marx's as set out in his books *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844) and *The German Ideology* (1846) and Melvin Seeman's *On the Meaning of Alienation* (1959). Many other contributions, however, have been made during the last few decades. Three aspects of alienation are identified by Marx: private property, the commodity character of labor and the division of labor in society (Ekerwald, 1998, p. 17).

Seeman, unlike Marx, provides a methodological framework which is more suitable when analyzing alienation in literature. For this reason, in this study Seeman's theory will be used as a framework. But before discussing Seeman's theory, it is preferable to start with the definition of the term. According to Kalekin-Fishman (1998), "alienation is a term which refers to the distancing of people from experiencing a crystallized totality both in the social world and in the self" (p. 6). Richard Schacht (1996) claims that alienation is "the loss or absence of identification with, and participation in, the form of life characteristic of one's society" (p. 10). So, alienation is a psychological condition in which man is separated from himself and his fellow men; a condition in which man is never truly whole or truly at home.

Seeman's *On the Meaning of Alienation* is one of the most often cited works concerning alienation. He identifies five meanings or dimensions of alienation: "powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement" (1959, p. 783). The first dimension mentioned by Seeman is powerlessness which, Seeman says, refers to "*the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks*" (1959, p. 784). It is a blurred line between things one wants and things one has to do. In short, powerlessness should be understood in terms of the degree of control an individual has over his life or it is a condition in which humans, to use words of Maria Augusto and Helena Oliva (1996), "become dominated by an external rhythm and, instead of regulating their own time, are made into its victims. They no longer see themselves as building their life and their world. Rather, they feel susceptible to threats whose origins they cannot detect, and whose development they cannot control" (p. 188).

Meaninglessness in Seeman's theory, refers to "the individual's sense of understanding the events in which he is engaged" (1959, p. 786). Seeman further clarifies that meaninglessness occurs when "*the individual is unclear as to what he ought to believe—when the individual's minimum standards for clarity in decision making are not met*" (p. 786). Clarifying the two meanings of powerlessness and meaninglessness, Seeman writes: "where the first meaning of alienation refers to the sensed ability to control outcomes, this second meaning refers essentially to the sensed ability to predict behavioral outcomes" (1959, p. 786). The availability of trustworthy information highly affects decision-making and makes such an endeavor easier and more confident.

Normlessness, according to Seeman, "denotes the situation in which the social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules for behavior" (1959, p. 787). Nicholas Zurbrugg's statement is indicative of this stance, "The late twentieth century is an apocalyptic age in which all cultural practices have become superficial, weightless, static, vacuously objective, vacuously subjective, or vacuously obscene" (2000, p. 61). It is the inability of an individual to identify with the dominant values of society. This is a symptom of modern life as Kalekin-Fishman (1996) remarks, "normlessness, the bewilderment that may accompany a rapid change in position or status, is a type of alienation with which people in modern society often have to cope" (p. 97).

Social isolation refers to the "feeling of being segregated from one's community" (Kalekin-Fishman, 1996, p. 97) or "the lack of contact or of sustained interaction with the individuals or the institutions that represent the mainstream society" (Wilson, 1996, p. 64). Human beings are social species, and living in a group or a community is very crucial to survive and thrive. He has to form certain relationships with others whether males or females. However, isolation in the modern world has become the norm as Neal & Collas (2000) note "While social isolation is typically experienced as a form of personal stress, its sources are deeply embedded in the social organization of the modern world" (p. 114). Undoubtedly, meaning is constructed from the community, and therefore

social isolation leads to the previously mentioned dimensions: powerlessness, meaninglessness, and normlessness.

Seeman's last dimension of alienation is self-estrangement. Seeman explains this dimension by citing C. Wright Mills, "Men are estranged from one another as each secretly tries to make an instrument of the other, and in time a full circle is made: One makes an instrument of himself and is estranged from it also" (Seeman, p. 789). Self-estrangement refers to "the psychological state of denying one's own interests –of seeking out extrinsically satisfying, rather than intrinsically satisfying, activities" (Kalekin-Fishman, 1996, 97). All the "defining criteria of self-estrangement...involve loss; sadness is the prototypical affective reaction to loss of, or failure to possess, what is valued or desired" (TenHouten, 1983, p. 92). There are five defining qualities for self-estrangement which contribute to an individual's self-estrangement: experiencing one's actions as alien, experiencing one's self as alien, experiencing one's past as alien, experiencing one's dreams as meaningless and irrelevant and finally experiencing uncertainty of one's own feelings.

### ***Life on Hold***

*Life on Hold* (first published in Arabic in 2004; the English translation was published in 2012) is set in the 1970s, the period that witnessed the oil boom in Saudi Arabia. During this period Saudi Arabia was rapidly transforming into a modern state. People left their old homes in old neighborhood and a new life of consumerism followed. They rushed into the new consumer lifestyle. Since life has become so easy, the individuals do not face any serious or significant challenges. But this modernity has resulted in people's alienation. Edmund Fuller (1958) remarks that in our modern age "man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problems...a conviction of isolation, randomness, meaninglessness in his way of existence" (p. 3). In the same vein, Anthony Giddens (1991) writes: "Personal meaninglessness—the feeling that life has nothing worthwhile to offer—becomes a fundamental psychic problem in circumstances of late modernity. We should understand this phenomenon in terms of a repression of moral questions which day-to-day life poses, but which are denied answers" (p. 9). The clash is no longer between man and man but rather between man and city, the symbol of modernity. "But in a modern cultural context," writes K. D. Verma (1991), "which essentially derives its meaning and power from commerce, materialism, and luxury, man and the city happen to be the two warring adversaries that in the social and historical process dehumanize each other and are finally themselves dehumanized" (p. 73). Riyadh is a modern city which robs persons such as Khaled of their conscience, individuality, identity and imagination. In return, individuals like Khaled are engaged in the business of whoring, disengaging the centrality of communal ideals and values.

*Life on Hold* is the story of Khaled, a young Saudi, who was born and grew up in the old city Riyadh. In the narrow and muddy streets of old Riyadh, he learned walking and talking, and spent the happy days of his childhood. He, along with other children in the neighborhood, played together barefooted; glimpsed at people inside their homes and shared their fears and dreams. However, in the 1970s, Khaled's family, like tens of Saudi families, was wrenched from the old neighborhood; it was uprooted and re-rooted in the new Riyadh. The whole family were happy to move from the mud house to the new villa in the center of the new city of Riyadh. The shift to the new villa had been the dream of the whole family including Khaled for many years.

Life in the old Riyadh is very simple. People spend their evenings sitting in front of their homes in groups, drinking tea and smoking, narrating stories, tales and adventures of their neighborhood, happy and sad ones; women sitting and talking behind the men and children, for whom streets are more important than homes, mischievously playing. Girls on the doorsteps listening to their radios from which the voices of singers such Mohammed Abdu, Tala Madah and

Om Kulthoum fill the air. People are sociable to the extreme. Khaled's family home is surrounded by the houses of his mother's relatives, her mother, brothers and sisters. His grandma never leaves their home. After *Magreb Salat* (Sunset Prayer) the family members, his uncles, their wives and children, gather on the roof chatting and eating sometimes until midnights. More importantly, it is in this neighborhood that Khaled used to see and meet his beloved Ameera, the neighbor's daughter, every day. There are many ancient buildings, mud streets, and domestic animals. Though people are impoverished and live in mud houses which are built without a city plan, there is a sense of belonging, love and joy. That is why the child inside Khaled does not die and his memories of childhood are never erased from his mind.

Unfortunately, life in the new city of Riyadh is not as Khaled expected. Though Khaled gets his dream job, he feels alienated from his society and from himself as well. Life here is totally different from the old one. The houses are no longer made of mud; they "were built of concrete and steel, with high walls and sealed windows" (p. 45). The new homes are equipped with all the modern conveniences and glittering pieces of furniture, new and costly cars, and high quality clothes and perfumes. People have surrounded themselves with collections of rich and costly pieces of furniture instead of humans. However, these are not the only transformations: modernity has radically altered the nature of daily life and affected the most personal aspects of experience of Saudi people. This economic boom and the unimaginable oil wealth has produced a class of emaciated men whose ambitions never extend beyond the constructing of new buildings, running into business and accumulating wealth.

In "this city of masks," (p. 2) as Al-Atiq calls it, Khaled is deeply frustrated by the superficiality of the people around him and the masks they wear. Metaphorically, these masks are identities which people are able to wear and remove at any time; they also prevent any deeper mutual understanding and love: "All of us are like that: we and the neighbors, and the neighbors' relatives. We offer smiles and polite language only to outsiders, while we insult and hit each other. Talking about politics is banned because the walls have ears" (p. 78). The society is fragmented. Trust is lost and people are isolated. Khaled feels that life is full chaos, despair and sadness. He longs to identify himself with people around him but he is encountered with high walls and sealed windows. As he endeavors to enter the rapidly changing society, he is faced with many difficulties: rootlessness, lack of identity, isolation, ennui and purposelessness. He is left in a position between a past that he has to forsake and a present he cannot embrace. Exiled from society at large, he suffers a greater exile still: an inner exile.

Khaled feels "a deep sense of alienation" (p. 12) and self-estrangement. Though he gets his "dream job...it turned into monotonous drudgery" (p. 3) and "days are all much the same, bringing nothing new, and the truth is always elusive" (p. 8). Days lose their joy and interest and become monotonous and repetitive: "The days were much the same in this city, which did not know if it was pious or decadent" (p. 12). He wonders how life has deteriorated into a meaningless repetition and succession of days. While everyone around him busily establishes a new life of prosperity and wealth and seems to be engulfed by material gratification, Khaled is entirely lost: "Not only did he feel out of place in his father's house, in this city for no good reason, he felt he was inferior to everyone else" (pp. 26-27) and feels, to use his own words, "like a lost and useless creature" (p. 15). This implies that, for him, life does not make any sense. Khaled always reflects upon the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence, its treacherous emptiness and disgusting hollowness. Daydreams become his refuge from the suppression around him that he runs to when he feels bored. Actually, Khaled is unable to understand the cultural and social changes around him. This

results in a difficulty: his inability to locate his place in the new social and cultural context. He feels isolated and alienated in spite of his hard attempts to adjust himself with the society.

Living in a new and “borrowed” culture Khaled is faced with a deep identity crisis. The pain of unbelonging disrupts his life and identity—it is a lack of human bonding that is intensified by individualism and self-centeredness. So his links with people, even his parents, and place are severed as time goes on. Within the Saudi setting of the text, this may suggest that Riyadhites have lost their identification with the land and their sense of belonging in the new neighborhood. This phrase ‘the pain of unbelonging’ brings us face to face with the concept of identity whether individual, group, national one. Khaled, in his attempt to belong to time and place, or more precisely, to defeat the boredom that he feels, he goes through a youthful incoherent form of rebellion. He gets acquainted with new friends and a new life starts. He attempts debauchery, drinking and prostitution as a cure for the hellish condition in which he lives. He travels with his friends and spends many sleepless nights together smoking and drinking engulfed by the smell of the alluring dance of women and drink. Describing his fall, Al-Atiq writes:

His life gradually began to reach into areas that were new to him. He made new friends and a new life, and little by little he adopted a dissolute lifestyle. He would travel abroad and stay up late all the time, until he descended gently into the netherworld of this city of masks and discovered a real world of fantasy, filled with the faces of women and varieties of alcohol, local and imported. (p. 6)

However, he gets bored and finds that he has just replaced one form of unsatisfying boredom with another.

Khaled finds himself confronting two worlds: the old world, one of simplicity, love, social and moral concern and integration and the new one, one of alienation, loss, privacy and individualism. The loss of the past is clearly seen when Khaled recalls his childhood in the old Riyadh “that seemed to have emerged overnight from a pile of dust” (p. 49). Khaled’s childhood has been full of excitement and adventures but now “his senses had been dulled, his view of things was apathetic, and the infrequent events that took place around him were unimportant and unexciting. But here he was, suddenly aware of his existence, and troubled about it, as though expecting the pressure cooker that long been boiling to suddenly explode and reveal the truth” (p. 36). It is a clash between the new, the cosmopolitan, the powerful and the privileged, on the one hand, and the old, the traditional, and the orthodox, on the other. Khaled’s shattering self between the past and the present is clearly stated by the narrator: “Then he entered a state of delirium, reliving what he had experienced and felt, wavering between reality and what he always imagined to be reality, in waking dreams and troubled dreams at night” (pp. 8-9). Khaled seems to cherish the old and shows a keen desire for a sense of the past in order to retain a sense of belonging to a home that is somehow fading away, torn between traditions and the pressures of capitalism, modern orientations and globalization. This state of in-between—the past and the present—is the way Al-Atiq chooses to represent the precarious search for identity in today’s Saudi Arabia.

The economic boom has subsequently resulted in a breakthrough in post-oil Saudi Arabia. These developments present a convincing case to argue for a cultural break which is reflected in Saudi novelists’ new rendition of identity and alienation. Khaled is not the only one feeling alienation; he stands for the whole society whose members feel the same “sense of personal dispossession, loss, enervation, resentment and yearning for experiences encapsulated in the past” (Engelberg, 1989, p. 5). Many of Khaled’s contemporaries are lost like him: “Everyone was constantly running, but they didn’t know where they were going. Young men chased breathlessly after business with no guarantee of success” (Al-Atiq, 2014, p. 96).

Dostoevsky, as Philip Rahv (1962) says, uses “the principle of uncertainty or indeterminacy in the presentation of character” of “hyperbolic suspense” that “originates in Dostoevsky’s acute awareness (self-awareness at bottom) of the problematical nature of the modern personality and its tortuous efforts to stem the disintegration threatening it” (p. 21). Al-Atiq’s treatment of Khaled reflects that indeterminacy or the ‘hyperbolic suspense,’ as Rahv calls it, which dramatizes the complexity of the psychic structure of modern man—the loss of his social faith, the degeneration of his consciousness, and the fragmentation of his identity. Fritz Pappenheim argues in *The Alienation of Modern Man* (1959) that the contemporary philosophical thought has attempted to grapple with the problem of modern man’s alienation, but nonetheless the issue has become more sharply pronounced; within the framework of modern civilization, can man conquer, alienation, pain, anxiety by his own will and action? The same question seems to be asked by Al-Atiq; can Saudis cope with and conquer the diseases of the modern age?

Throughout the novel Khaled experiences feelings such as powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation, and self-estrangement, feelings which constitute the core of alienation. He feels that he is powerless in the face of the harsh changes taking place around him and that everything has no meaning and clearly shows his incomprehensibility of things and events. He is seen lacking commitment whether personal or social which usually leads to a sense of deviance and distrust. Further, Khaled is a stranger to the new conventional institutions and the modern culture and values and usually lives an isolated life avoiding any contact with people around him. Finally, he feels estranger not only to the outer world but also to himself.

Khaled’s condition of alienation is derived partly from conditions of perplexity and complexity in which he is entangled. He is “unclear about the composition and enforcement of social norms. Sudden and abrupt changes occur in life conditions, and the norms that usually operate may no longer seem adequate as guidelines for conduct” (Neal & Collas, 2000, p. 122). After the oil boom, the majority of the Saudis moved to urban areas; the development of transportation from primitive vehicles to jets airplanes, communication from post and letters to cell phones and internet, the rapid spread of information, the change in the daily life and routine, people’s interaction with others, all these have a profound impact on Saudi people including Khaled.

Khaled’s alienation from himself and his fellow man and his search for identity constitute the thematic center of Fahd Al-Atiq’s novel *Life on Hold*. Whether sociological or psychological, alienation, it can be argued, is often the sequence of the loss of identity because alienation and identity are closely intertwined. The narrative moves in a non-chronological fashion between the past and the present, childhood and adulthood, and old and new Riyadhs. The novel portrays the state of psychic unease of the protagonist, Khaled, who attempts throughout the story to find some order within the chaos of the present. Khaled contemplates the mysterious loss of his self, aspiring to find meaning to his own existence in this chaotic world. He struggles to find himself to establish an equilibrium not only with himself but also with others. In other words, *Life on Hold* narrates the existential struggle of Khaled—his alienation and idealism. The novel pointedly focuses on his loss of and search for identity. The story of Khaled is the story of modern man’s loss and alienation—of his persistent struggle to conquer alienation and accomplish some form of identity with the object-world.

Al-Atiq explores alienation as symptomatic of modern man’s existential plight and observes that modernity and the rise of capitalism in Saudi Arabia has facilitated man’s alienation not only from himself, but also from his community, deploring both for promoting the culture of consumerism and superficiality. The novel maps, re-examines and questions the impact of

modernity on Saudi people, negotiating the Saudi traditional and rigid values in the light of the changing cultural and sociopolitical landscape. He admonishes the blind acceptance and complacency of the status quo, calling for adhering to the Saudi ancient mores and culture.

In conclusion, it can be said that Khaled's estrangement is determined by modern transformations taking place in the country. Alienation is forced upon him by external forces which undoubtedly include globalization, modernization and the culture of consumerism. Therefore, it becomes impossible for him to create a sense of order in life; he finds himself in a "wasteland". Khaled is presented as living in an absurd world with no possible escape; a world which does not give him a chance to fulfill his needs. Another reason that does not allow Khaled to end his state of estrangement is his pathetic nature, which prevents him from perceiving the world logically. According to Sartre, life has no meaning in itself and only the individual can give it a partial meaning by his free choice of goals. Throughout the novel, Khaled seems to have no clear purpose. His fragmented and distorted vision of reality separates him from his family as well as the society, contributing to his alienation. His vision of life is unquestionably too blurred to help him survive in the real world. Consequently, Khaled is a clear example of the alienated individual: an absurd human being living in an absurd reality. Therefore, the concept of 'alienation' as conceived by Seeman, can be perfectly applied to Al-Atiq's *Life on Hold*.

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