



Rethinking Masculinity in Saudi Literature: A Critical Analysis of Fatimah Abdulhamid's *Alūfug Alāla* (The Highest Horizon, 2022)

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ABSTRACT. Despite a growing body of literature on feminism, scholarly research on masculinity in Saudi literature is very limited. The portrayal of men's experience in literary production is still underrepresented. This highlights a gap in the existing literature, which this study aims to address by examining *Alūfug Alāla* (The Highest Horizon, 2022) by Fatima Abdulhamid, depicting the life of Sulaiman, a 13-year-old boy married off to a 24-year-old woman. Abdulhamid's novel presents Sulaiman's incomplete journey from childhood to manhood, shaped by multifaceted challenges arising from societal expectations and traditional gender norms. Through the lens of masculine studies, the paper underlines the critique of hegemonic masculinity in the novel and highlights how gender expectations significantly influence an individual's life. The paper also examines how the novel can make a valuable contribution to the field of masculine studies by providing a unique perspective on the construction of masculinity within Saudi social context.

INTRODUCTION

Fatima Abdulhamid's novel, *Alūfug Alāla* (The Highest Horizon, 2022), was shortlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (The Arabic Booker) in 2023 and received a great attention ever since (Ali 2023). While there are numerous novels that shed light on the issue of child marriage in Saudi society or in the Arab world in general, very few discuss the concept of marrying a minor male child, as the general perception is that early marriages are limited to girls and prior to the legal age of 18. The *Highest Horizon* presents the story of Sulaiman, a boy who was married off at the age of thirteen to a woman eleven years older than him. By analyzing the novel through the lens of masculine studies, the paper argues that the novel offers a distinctive viewpoint on the construction of masculinity and the male experience in Saudi society. Abdulhamid's novel is one of the few Saudi works of fiction that is explicitly conscious of how men are struggling to maintain certain social standards. The novel demonstrates how societal expectations of masculinity have a significant impact on Sulaiman's life, forcing him to conform to the dominant notions of manhood at a very early age. These expectations not only hinder his development but also have a significant impact on the formation of his masculine identity.

Compared to the extensive focus placed on feminism in literary studies, there is a lack of attention given to the construction of masculinity in Saudi literary studies. Currently, research that explore how men's identities are constructed, preserved, and how these constructions shape their experiences in society, as well as how they are presented in literary productions 'is virtually inexistent' (Karolak et al. 2014). This highlights a significant gap in the existing literature, which this study aims to address. Shifting the focus from the woman's experience to that of the man, this study examines the meaning of masculinity in the Saudi novel. It searches into the novel's exploration of hegemonic masculinity and its contrast with the daily experiences of men. Abdulhamid's novel provides an insightful critique of how rigid politics of masculinity can pose challenges to men, offering a deeper understanding of the struggles faced by those who do not conform to the standard vision of manliness.

The paper commences by exploring the concept of masculinity in general before delving into the specifics of the Saudi meaning of masculinity. Despite the patriarchal underpinnings of Saudi culture, wherein men wield power and privilege, the expectation might be a portrayal of an 'essentialized, monolithic, and normally patriarchal "male"' (Ghoussoub & Sinclair-Webb 2002 183)—a unified and static form of masculinity. However, the novel under discussion challenges this perception, reflecting the complex perspective of manliness within Saudi culture, emphasizing the tensions and contradictions between hegemonic masculinity and the daily experiences of men. The paper examines the concept of hegemonic masculinity in Western theory, followed by a comparison with an Arabian perception of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity, being the

dominant form of manliness in any society, will be explored in terms of its characteristics in a Saudi context. The analysis will extend to how it is approached in the selected novel, arguing that Abdulhamid's characterization of men challenges hegemonic masculinity, shedding light on the authentic experiences of men under the pressures of this dominant form. The paper concludes by asserting that *The Highest Horizon* constitutes a valuable contribution to the field of masculine and gender studies in Saudi literature.

Hegemonic masculinity

Masculine studies, also known as men's studies, is an academic field that focuses on exploring the lived experiences of men and masculinity within cultural, social, and historical contexts (Petersen 2003). This interdisciplinary field is rooted in gender studies and shares many of its theoretical frameworks, perspectives, and approaches with women's studies and feminist theory (Kahn 2009 xiii). However, it critiques traditional gender norms and patriarchal ideologies that reinforce restrictive, and contradictory definitions of manhood and masculinity (Connell 2005). It seeks to examine how masculinity is constructed, performed, and represented in various contexts and cultural artifacts, such as literature, film, art, and popular culture. Some of the key themes that masculine studies explore include men's experiences of power, vulnerability, emotions, gender roles, race, and class.

The idea that masculinity, like femininity, is a cultural construct that influences the perspective and behavior of men is widely acknowledged in Western theories. These theories propose that 'gender is the socially constructed binary that defines "men" and "women" as two distinct classes of people' (Schippers 2007: 89). According to Western theories, this construct gives rise to specific traits such as emotional restraint, boldness, and aggression, potentially leading to adverse outcomes like violence and domestic abuse (Connell 2001: 22). In response to these concerns, Western academic discourse, especially in gender studies and feminist scholarship, has sought to destabilize traditional binary notions of gender (Abruzzo, 2022). Acknowledging the diversity of gender identities and expressions, scholars have explored alternative constructions of masculinity and femininity within society. This exploration has led to the exploration of in-between and queer categories which serve to weaken and blur the delineations between traditional definitions of masculinity and femininity (Lykke 2010: 83).

On the other hand, the binary understanding of gender is a common ground in Arab studies to date (Kahf and Sinno, 2021). This perspective arises not only from the naturalist belief in biological differences between women and men but also from the religious Islamic certainty of divine distinction between the two and the roles assigned to each. Within the field of Arabic masculine studies, the concept of Islamic masculinities is being presented as an alternative for Western

masculine theories (Amar 2011). Instead of focusing on leading gender and queer theories popular in the West, Islamic masculinity research aims to investigate masculinity through the lenses of religiosity, nationalism, or ethnicity. This shift is not only useful but also thought-provoking, paving the way for stimulating avenues of research within the study of masculinity in Arabic literature, which is 'more representative of the class and ethnic diversity of [the Muslim] society' (Gerami 2005: 451). By embracing Islamic masculinities and redirecting the focus toward elements like religious, ethnic, or traditional practices, Islamic masculinities argue for the importance of these aspects in understanding and interpreting the construction of masculinity within an Islamic context.

The notions of masculinity and femininity in Saudi society, like in other Arab cultures, are described as 'polarized entities with the male heterosexual in the position of power and at the centre of the social, moral, and symbolic order' (Aghacy 2009: 63). The theory of distinct characters, strengths, and weaknesses based on biological gender affiliation remains central to Saudi literary studies. Normative gender roles are deeply ingrained in Saudi culture, with men expected to embody characteristics such as strength, courage, and honor, while women are expected to embody traits like submissiveness, caretaking, and morality. In this study the question of masculinity and men experience will be in term with the accepted belief of the difference between the sexes and their distinctive aspects. However, it is essential to acknowledge the evolving discourse surrounding gender roles and recognize that societal perspectives are dynamic. The exploration of masculinity and men's experiences will consider the cultural and contextual nuances that shape these roles in contemporary Saudi society. The study will draw upon terminology from Western masculine studies, including the concept of hegemonic masculinity formulated by Raewyn Connell in 1982. This concept is widely regarded as one of the most valuable theses in men's studies (Hobbs 2013). It introduced the groundbreaking idea that multiple masculinities exist, with hegemonic masculinity being recognized as the 'most honored way of being a man, [which] require[s] all other men to position themselves in relation to it' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 832). Raewyn Connell's statement suggests that within the concept of hegemonic masculinity, alternative or non-dominant forms of masculinity are not completely eliminated or erased. Instead, they exist but are positioned as subordinate to the dominant or hegemonic form. In this context, the culturally exalted hegemonic masculinity relies on the existence of these alternative masculinities. The acknowledgment of these alternative forms serves to validate and reinforce the dominance of hegemonic masculinity (Hobbs 2013: 386).

Furthermore, Connell (2007) argues that hegemonic masculinity is shaped and influenced by various factors, including the specific time period, geographical location, and cultural context in which it emerges. This emphasizes the dynamic and context-dependent nature of constructing hegemonic masculinity. In Saudi society, the notion of exemplary masculinity is prevalent,

often intertwined with specific cultural practices and customs. Indeed, ‘archetypal masculinity’ is viewed in a positive light, ‘as it is associated with the notions of protection and defence’ (Nahshal 2019: 121). Attributes associated with esteemed masculinity in Saudi society include familial responsibilities, economic power, and social status. These encompass obligations like continuing the family lineage, providing for the family, engaging in traditional male activities, adhering to religious norms, and maintaining emotional stoicism. The word masculinity itself is equated with terms like *marjlah* and *rujulah* (Mahadeen 2016: 450). These terms denote ‘attributes such as bravery, authority, and control of women’ (Omar 2008: 864–65). *Rujulah* is often linked with dominance and control, associating physical strength and bodily resilience with exemplary masculinity while *marjlah* denotes ‘characteristics attached to hegemonic and nonhegemonic forms of masculinity’ (Mahadeen 2016: 451). In the light of this conception, we can say that hegemonic masculinity in the Saudi culture is a multifaceted concept with both positive and negative aspects. It comprises various traits and behaviors associated with the idealized aspects of manliness. These aspects include positive traits like responsibility, leadership, or protectiveness. Such traits persistently endure through societal expectations and cultural norms, placing considerable pressure on men (Kahf and Sinno, 2021). Many may find it challenging or even impossible to meet these expectations. This understanding sheds light on how social expectations in this context intensify pressures, presenting distinct challenges for Saudi males in fulfilling their societal roles. This perspective is instrumental in interpreting the experiences of Abdulhamid’s male characters in the novel, providing insight into the pressures men typically face and how these dynamics influence the perception of their masculinity.

FAILED MASCULINITY IN *THE HIGHEST HORIZON*

The main focus of this study will be Abdulhamid’s protagonist, Sulieman, who grapples with vulnerability as he falls short of societal expectations regarding masculinity. At the age of thirteen, Suleiman, aspiring to score a goal that might earn him respect among his peers and perhaps alleviate the mockery about his ‘bat ears’ (Abdulhamid 2022: 11), is interrupted by his mother’s request to return home to his older wife and ‘do what men do!’ (10). As she forcefully pulls him away from his friends, they mock him intensely: ‘Suleiman is running away from the bridal house’ (10). Confined to his bridal room, he is expected to fulfil marital duties despite his lack of understanding. In this context, Suleiman is subjected to sexual abuse, as he is coerced into participating in sexual activities that he cannot fully comprehend. Child sexual abuse is defined as situations where children are involved in sexual behaviors that they do not understand (Raslan et al. 2024: 379). At this tender age, Suleiman is compelled to exhibit behaviors typically associated with adult men in society, such as refraining from playing football, suppressing his tears, sitting in the majalis (men’s section of the Saudi house)

(30), and engaging in 'what men do with their wives' (11). While these expectations are present for all young men in Saudi society, Suleiman is thrust into them at an earlier age due to his father's death and the absence of brothers. This places immense pressure on him to assume the role of the man of the family, leading him to internalize a sense of failure for not conforming to the prescribed ideal of masculinity enforced by his mother.

After her husband's death, Hamda, Sulaiman's mother, found herself as an elderly woman responsible for continuing the family's lineage with her only child (Abdulhamid 2022, 10). Despite societal norms, Hamda married her son off to a woman eleven years his senior, expecting them to produce heirs and carry on the family name. Hamda sees Sulaiman primarily in the context of his role in fertilization, dedicated to continuing the family's lineage. While attempting to make Sulaiman the family patriarch, she defies conventional norms by assuming the role herself. Hamda challenges the concept of child marriage, typically more tolerable if the child is female. This defiance results in most men rejecting her proposal to marry her son to their daughters (10). The novel explicitly highlights society's flawed view of justice, tolerating the marriage of a minor girl to an older partner while condemning the same union when the genders are reversed. Consequently, securing a marriage for her son becomes challenging for Hamda due to societal unacceptance. She eventually finds a match within her extended family, Nabila, who bears an 'ugly birthmark covering the left side of her face' (32), limiting her prospects for a conventional marriage. Nabila accepts Hamda's proposal, acknowledging the rigid norms that dictate a woman's societal worth based on her 'height, skin color, and facial symmetry' (32). Recognizing the limited opportunities for marriage if lacking conventional beauty, Nabila conforms to Hamda immediately.

After the death of Hamda, Sulaiman fails to assume the patriarchal role that his mother had aspired for him, prompting Nabila to take on the position of the family patriarch. She not only takes care of her husband but also assumes responsibility for their three sons: Basem, Qusay, and Amjad. Nabila is in control of every aspect of their lives, including choosing wives for her sons. Her influence extends to the smallest details; she instructs Basem on the birthday gift he should get for his wife (Abdulhamid 2022: 175), and she reminds him to take his son to the doctor, pointing out a health concern of which his parents are unaware (29). In this narrative, Nabila reprises the role once held by her mother-in-law, Hamda. The family structure, at this point, is matriarchal, yet it bears similarities to the patriarchal society it succeeded. The authority and influence both women wield within the family mirror the traditional patriarchal power dynamics, where the head of the family makes decisions for all members. Thus, Sulaiman finds himself 'living under the protection of various women, [which] represents a counter-image to the stereotypical strong Arab male' (Riyadh Review of Books 2023). It highlights a departure from traditional and stereotypical representations of men in literature and society. The conventional

portrayal of male characters—in Saudi women fiction in particular—often presents them as dominant figures, exerting authoritative control over various aspects of life (Dhahir 2016). Such narrative challenges conventional depictions where the male is portrayed as a dominating figure with authoritative control, transcending time and place, and embodying vigorous action, misogynistic authority, and sexual control (Aghacy 2003). By contrasting this conventional portrayal with the narrative in question, which features a matriarchal family structure and challenges these traditional depictions, the novel suggests a re-evaluation of gender roles and a move away from stereotypical representations of male characters. By showcasing Nabila's assumption of the patriarchal role, the narrative challenges the conventional depiction of men as the sole authority figures within families, offering a more nuanced and complex understanding of gender dynamics in Saudi society.

The character of Nabila is portrayed as having the upper hand in her marriage with Sulaiman, not only due to the age gap but also because she initiated the marital relationship. Suleiman remains with his wife, Nabila, throughout his life, 'possessed by the memory of himself, as a child, running away from her bed as Nabila takes his hand to teach him how to be a man' (Abdulhamid 2022: 106). There is a clear connection here between sexuality and manhood. The idea here is brought into play, suggesting a narrative where women assert control over sexual dynamics. The prevailing mindset assumes that sexual culture is reserved for men, and 'the real man is one who is able to control the sexual behaviour of his wife, limit her mobility, and impregnate her, marking the offspring with his name' (Gallop 1989: 499). Any intrusion into this domain by women is perceived as a threat to male authority and, consequently, to masculinity. This places Sulaiman in an inferior position to his wife from the beginning, affecting Sulaiman's perception of his own masculinity. Because he is not conforming to the prescribed roles, he grapples with a sense of failed masculinity. As a child, Sulaiman tries to resist this idea and responds with an extreme reaction to his internal struggle. The novel describes how after his first encounter with his wife, he resorts to an act of violence by choking a cat to death with his bare hands (Abdulhamid 2022: 38). This violent act is portrayed as an expression of masculinity, suggesting that, in Sulaiman's perception, exerting control over another being, even though through violent means, is a way to compensate for the perceived challenges or uncertainties in his own sexual identity. Sulaiman attempts to regain a sense of control and dominance. Violence here becomes 'a means to reclaim the power that he believes is rightfully his' (Kimmel 2000: 262). Violence and aggression are often culturally associated with traditional, albeit toxic, notions of masculinity that link aggression and control to a man's sense of identity and power in Saudi society (Nahshal 2019: 119). Hence, apart from the age difference, it becomes evident that the underlying power inequality in Sulaiman's marriage is related to the imbalanced sexual dynamic between him and his wife.

Nabila's death did not liberate Sulaiman, much like his mother's death did not. Throughout their 40-year marriage, she kept Sulaiman entirely dependent on her. After her death, their children are visibly anxious because they believe their father is incapable of living on his own. They consider hiring personal help who can also serve as a driver and a cook (Abdulhamid 2022: 23). Despite Sulaiman being offended by the idea, he struggles from the very first night to perform simple tasks like finding his slippers or toothbrush, locating the coffee jar for his morning coffee (12), or looking up a song on his SoundCloud (27). Sulaiman continues to live under the shadow of his deceased wife's presence. When he is in the kitchen struggling to find the coffee jar, he hears Nabila's voice, as she explains why she has hidden the coffee jar away, which 'reflects her inclination to showcase her extensive knowledge and experience, a trait she has possessed since their wedding day' (14). The emphasis on the wife's voice and her inclination to showcase her knowledge implies a dynamic where she held a position of authority and wisdom in the relationship. Phrases like 'since their wedding day' suggest a continuity of her influence even in her absence, highlighting the enduring impact of the unequal power relation on Sulaiman.

Sulaiman, however, attempts to rebel against his wife's lingering influence after her death. The first act of rebellion is leaving the kitchen veranda's door open, defying Nabila's voice that tells him never to leave it open (Abdulhamid 2022: 50). This rebellious act marks a new beginning for Sulaiman. Through the kitchen veranda, Sulaiman meets his beautiful neighbor, Samar. He believes that he falls in love for the first time in his life. The author employs the most common template of a falling-in-love romance, the love story with the neighbor's daughter type of romance. The choice of this cliché template is a clear indication of the missing part of Sulaiman's adolescent stage. The narrator suggests that because Sulaiman did not have a normal childhood or adolescence, he has never experienced such a typical love story. A sentence in the novel attests to how Sulaiman is trying to relive his childhood after the death of his wife: 'They wanted him to be a man when he was thirteen, but today, in his early fifties, he wants to be a child' (201). However, the neighbor's daughter is not a teenage girl; she is a forty-year-old married woman involved in multiple extramarital relationships. This imperfection foreshadows Sulaiman's failure to relive the perfect youth love story, further emphasizing Sulaiman's failure.

Unaware of Samar's promiscuity, Sulaiman deeply falls in love with her. In his imagination, this is his reward for coping with all the pressure put on him throughout his life, whether by his mother or his wife. This aspect reveals that women play a dominant role in how Sulaiman defines himself as a man. Little did he know that Samar would be the third woman in his life to add to his imperfect image of himself as a man. Even though Samar shows interest in his company and sympathizes with his story, she keeps finding physical solace in a younger man, the foreign pharmacist in the neighborhood, Rami. Her relationship with Rami continues while she is seeing Sulaiman, who assumes that he is the only

man in her life. Therefore, the narrative indicates that older age for men is also another form of failed masculinity. The intersection between masculinity and men's statuses is significantly affected by age (Kincaid 2022). Being unable to assume sole control in this love relationship, Suleiman discontinues it. Sulaiman's reaction here 'gravitates towards traditional social and religious values, [...] where men are convinced of their supremacy even when they feel incapacitated' (Aghacy 2009: 19). It also aligns with hegemonic masculinity, where other men could be viewed as inferior for 'their economic and social status' (Aghacy 2009: 21). In Sulaiman's perspective, the pharmacist is an inferior rival based on his social class and race as a non-Saudi foreign migrant. However, Rami is a younger counterpart which makes him win Samar faster than Sulaiman. It is, once more, an indicator of a failed masculine experience for Sulaiman.

Another feature of women's power in the novel can be seen in the relationship of Asma and Qusay, the youngest of Suleiman's sons. Sulaiman thinks that Qusay is 'softer' than his other brothers (Abdulhamid 2022: 92). His softness worries the mother and when she chooses him a wife, she makes sure that the wife is strong and independent, believing that her son would be unable to take the lead in the marriage. His wife, Asma, is depicted as a self-centered woman who is obsessed with her career and pursues professional success. In their relationship there is no room for emotion, intimacy, or having children, as the wife's professional career is more important than any other consideration. Qusay fails to represent the hegemonic masculine attributes of the family's patriarch who is usually 'severe, resolute, self-centred, emotionally impotent, tyrannical, unyielding, and abusive to women' (20). For Asma, Qusay's sole role as a husband is to help her achieve her goals, his accomplishments are overshadowed by hers, and his wishes are subordinated to hers. In their marriage, the influence of the wife subverts the power dynamic, leading to emotional oppression and exploitation of the husband. By portraying this atypical relationship, the novelist is pointing out the societal exploitation of men, which often goes unrecognized. Qusay's perceived deviation from traditional hegemonic masculine attributes evokes the idea of 'domesticated maleness' (Aghacy 2003: 186), which suggests a reversal of traditional gender roles and attributes. This concept may point to a redefined role for men within the family, potentially emphasizing qualities challenging conventional patriarchal stereotypes.

Abdulhamid's novel is challenging traditional norms surrounding masculinity and are advocating for a more inclusive and diverse definition of what it means to be a man. Some of the male characters in the narrative are represented going against the idea that a man has to conform to certain narrowly defined roles and aspects. Sulaiman's middle son Amjad is a good example of this.

He is adept at connecting with his feminine side without extravagance or compromising his masculinity. He doesn't hesitate to wear pink,

adorn his wrist with colourful bracelets, or choose attention-grabbing, vibrant shoes. He is meticulous about styling his hair in various ways and has never hesitated to give someone flowers without a specific occasion. In the eyes of those around him, he has always been considered more attractive and bolder rather than effeminate. (Abdulhamid 2022: 91)

Such characterization effectively communicates the author's intent to challenge traditional stereotypes associated with masculinity by highlighting characteristics typically associated with femininity. The mention of details like wearing pink, colorful accessories, and vibrant shoes emphasizes a deliberate departure from conventional gender norms in Saudi Arabia. It is a representation of “‘real men’ young, educated, urbanized Saudi men who do not conform to prevailing definitions of hegemonic masculinity’ (Mahadeen 2016: 451). Thus, the author suggests that ‘manhood means different things at different times to different people’ (Kimmel 2000: 182). Abdulhamid's narrative delves into individuality and self-expression in the face of societal expectations, contributing to a broader conversation about identity and acceptance within the Saudi cultural landscape.

CONCLUSION

The Highest Horizon, published in 2022, attempts to redefine masculinity in Saudi society, advocating for a more inclusive and compassionate understanding of what it means to be a man. This novel provides a unique perspective on the construction of masculinity within the Saudi literary scene. Through the portrayal of Sulaiman, Abdulhamid challenges socially prevalent ideals that force men into a predetermined and often oversized masculine role—an issue exacerbated in Sulaiman's case due to his age. The narrative suggests that the pressure to conform to these roles can lead to breakdowns, mismatches, and failed individuality. Furthermore, the author illustrates how sometimes the negative traits associated with hegemonic masculinity are not exclusively associated with men; they can also be embodied by women like Hamda and Nabila. Both women not only assume patriarchal roles within the family but also adopt hegemonic roles that mirror traditionally masculine attributes. They perform the roles of the head of the household, the father, and the defender of the family lineage. The novel portrays them manipulating male characters—Sulaiman and his three sons—revealing a new dimension of gender subordination in Saudi society. While the novel reshapes masculinity by challenging gender roles, this transformation occurs at the expense of oppressing the male protagonist. Abdulhamid's narrative clearly fits within a wider literary application of masculinity studies. Far from presenting a unified and comprehensive experience, Abdulhamid's depiction of inconsistent and fractured masculinity is nuanced, exploring the intricacies of gender dynamics, and fostering a more inclusive discourse on what it means to be a man within the Saudi society.

While Abdulhamid's narrative reshapes traditional notions of masculinity, it also highlights the multifaceted nature of gender dynamics, where both men and women navigate the pressures of societal expectations. Future studies could benefit from a deeper exploration of the intersectionality of gender roles in Saudi society. Scholars might examine how the portrayal of both Sulaiman and the female characters, Hamda, Nabila and Samar, reflects broader cultural and societal shifts in perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Additionally, further research could investigate the implications of these gender dynamics on mental health and personal identity, particularly for men grappling with societal expectations. Such inquiries will enrich the ongoing discourse surrounding masculinity studies and contribute to a more helpful understanding of gender relations in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

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