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Saudi Arabia – Paris – Berlin: Some thoughts about time, place, and language

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical reading and analysis of the novel *al-Ḥizām* (The Belt, 2000) by Saudi novelist and poet Ahmed Abodehman. By focusing on different aspects of the 'time' theme in the novel and comparing it to other Saudi novels, it shows how Abodehman portrays the unique temporal culture of his village and the beginning of the changes that rural Saudi society went through with the advent of modernity in the 1950s and 1960s, bearing in mind that urbanization has been the setting in which the modernization and individualization of Saudi society has unfolded throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The paper also discusses issues of place and language, asking why this very 'Saudi' novel was originally written in French and published in Paris. The paper shows that Paris allowed Abodehman to grow as an individual and how it was only in Paris that he could truly discover Saudi Arabia and rediscover his village. It also shows that Abodehman's decision to write in French was dependent upon socio-linguistic considerations related to the advantages of the French language and the disadvantages of Arabic, and was also, as I argue, connected to Abodehman's experience as an immigrant and his need for belonging.

Keywords: *Saudi Arabia, rural society, social change, Al-Hizam, modernity*

Introduction

> I wait for days and weeks to enter
> a feeling that's had years to leave.
> *(Howard Altmann, 'Fragments')*

After three and a half months in Berlin, my daughter started forgetting Hebrew words and replacing them with German ones. The love that she has felt for the city (from day one) and for the new friends that she made at kindergarten made her embrace her new place in the world wholeheartedly. Her big brother, on the other hand, firmly refuses to 'leave Israel behind'. He holds on as hard as he can to the temporality of our stay in Berlin, reluctant to fit in and speak German. Everybody tells us to let time run its course… When he had just started school here, he asked me to buy him a watch, an item in which he had shown no prior interest. I did not think too much about it at the time and bought him one similar to mine. Only afterwards did I realise that owning a watch was his way of regaining some sense of control after losing the ability to communicate in his own language, by 'controlling' time.

The connections between time, language, and place have been occupying my mind from another direction lately. My current research concerns entangled rural-urban relations in Saudi Arabia through the prism of the Saudi novel and is about social changes that have been taking place in the kingdom against the backdrop of swift and massive processes of modernization and urbanization. Over the last 70 years, Saudi Arabia has witnessed remarkable urban growth that has transformed it from a mainly nomadic and rural society into a primarily urban one. The extent of this shift, and the scale and complexity of urbanized life in Saudi Arabia, mean that social relations have changed considerably. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, urbanization was the setting in which the modernization and individualization of Saudi society unfolded.

The basic premise of my research is that fictional literary texts can serve as a legitimate source for the study and understanding of various developments in society. This is in line with the Critical Theory school of thought, which holds that literature has no 'objective' meaning divorced from history, because every literary work is based on, or rooted in, a particular ideological, political, and historical context.[1] Aside from being works of art, many Saudi novels address the reality in which they are set and discuss a wide variety of subjects connected to Saudi culture and society, and can thus serve as invaluable historical resources.

Out of approximately forty Saudi novels that my research builds upon, I have chosen to focus here on one novel called *Al-Ḥizām* (The Belt; henceforth: *Al-Hizam*) by Saudi poet and novelist Ahmed Abodehman.[2] I chose this novel because it is a magical and special novel that presents the very beginning of the influence of modernity on Saudi rural society in the 1950s and 1960s, and because of its unique treatment of the themes of time and language. Another reason for choosing this novel, which only became clear to me in hindsight, was my desire to read it again but this time exactly how Abodehman wrote it – far away from my country and my language. I believe that the insights I drew from this second reading could not have been drawn under different circumstances.

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[1] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 169–89.

[2] Ahmed Abodehman, *Al-Ḥizām* (Beirut: Dār al-Saqī, 2001); all the quotes from this novel that appear in the paper are taken from the English translation: Ahmed Abodehman, *The Belt*, translated from the French by Nadia Benabid (London: Saqi Books, 2002). Other translations, from Arabic and French, are by the author of this paper.

Poetic Anthropology

Ahmed Abodehman was born in 1949 in the village of Al Al-Khalaf in the ʿAsīr Region in southwest Saudi Arabia.[3] At the age of twelve, after finishing elementary school in the village, he moved to the city of Abha, the urban centre of the south, to continue his education. After graduating, he moved to Riyadh, trained as a teacher at the Teachers Seminary there, and then returned to the village as a teacher for three years. He then returned to Riyadh to study Arabic literature at King Saud University. He left Saudi Arabia in 1980 to pursue higher education and study history and anthropology at the Sorbonne University in Paris, where he stayed until 2010, working mainly as a journalist for the *Al-Riyāḍ* newspaper. *Al-Hizam* was originally written in French (Abodehman was the first writer from the Arabian Peninsula to do so) and was published in 2000 by the prestigious Gallimard publishing house in Paris.[4] The novel received enthusiastic reviews by literary critics and was much celebrated in the French media.[5] Following its great commercial success (with eight thousand copies of the first edition sold in three months[6] and eight editions within one year[7]), it has been translated into eight languages. The translation to Arabic was carried out by Abodehman himself and was published a year later in Beirut. Although its distribution in Saudi Arabia was forbidden for about seven years[8], many copies were sold on the black market and circulated online.

The novel tells the story of Ahmed, who grows up in a small Saudi village steeped in traditional tribal culture, family ties, local legends, history, and songs. As he becomes a man, the changes of modernity spring up around him. Wahhabi Islam imposes itself more and more on tribal beliefs and the city becomes present in village life. Ahmed struggles to come to terms with this newly unfolding world without forsaking his village, his family, or Hizam, the old man who comes to epitomize traditional life itself and who grooms Ahmed to be his successor as the keeper of the village's memory. The story Abodehman tells in *Al-Hizam* is deceptively simple. On the surface, it is a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age novel that deals with the difficulties of growing up and transition (from childhood to adulthood, from village to city). However, the author's clever and delicate touch and perceptive hindsight also make it a study of the coexistence of old and new and a penetrating look at the religious and social forces at work inside Saudi Arabia at the time. With regard to style, one might say it is a rare combination of poetry (*Qaṣīda*) and an anthropological-sociological-historical text. If Claude Levi-Strauss wrote Structural Anthropology, then Abodehmen wrote Poetic Anthropology.

The novel describes the way of life of the village with all its good sides such as the strong connection between people, land, and nature; the solidarity between the people of the village/tribe; being satisfied with little; poetry and singing as a basic component of people's lives; and simplicity, innocence, and naivety. It also explores its less appealing sides such as poverty, neediness, and hunger; the hardship of life; and the gender-based discrimination, chauvinism, and machismo that leave no place for weakness, otherness, or alternative forms of masculinity. In his depiction of the invasion of modernity and the city into the village there is no real criticism of the trampling of the old ways or of a forced change of reality (as can be found in many other Saudi novels that tackle these issues).[9] Maybe it is because he writes about a period of time (the 1950s and 1960s) when these aspects were at a very initial stage, as opposed to the period of the 1980s and 1990s when the oil boom, the Gulf War, and other internal and external socio-economic, geo-political, and religious factors immensely affected Saudi society.[10] However, in a most sensitive manner, he portrays the entrance of 'the state' into the village and the side-lining of rural-tribal identity and the norms and traditions that bolstered it in favour of more modern conventions such as nationalism and state religion through 'modern' agents of change such as official health and education systems, Wahhabi preachers (*muṭawwiʿūn*), and more. He likewise describes the great suspicion and ambivalence on the part of the villagers toward these changes.

Fugit irreparabile tempus

The theme of 'time' is a device in Abodehman's toolkit for portraying the difference between the village and the city.

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[3] On the Al Al-Khalaf village from a historical-anthropological perspective, with an emphasis on its urban history, see: Mohammed Abdullah Eben Saleh, "Al-Alkhalaf: The Urban History of a Traditional Settlement in Southwestern Saudi Arabia," *Habitat* 19, 1 (1995): 29–52; idem., "Socio-economic Development in Formerly Isolated Rural Contexts: Al-Alkhalaf Village, Southwestern Saudi Arabia," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 19, 2 (1998), 221–58.

[4] Ahmed Abodehman, *La Ceinture* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000).

[5] See for example: Danielle Scharmm, "Douze chapitres pleins de grâce, comme autant de petits cailloux parfaitement polis, qui nous emmènent très loin, très haut," *Le Monde des livres*, May 12, 2000; Florence Noiville, "Liens de feu", *Le Monde* (supplement), July 21, 2000; Christophe Ayad, "Interview: L'Essence de l'Arabie," *Libération*, July 6, 2000, https://www.liberation.fr/livres/2000/07/06/l-essence-de-l-arabie_332165/

[6] Ayad, "Interview: L'Essence de l'Arabie."

[7] ʿAlī Saʿd al-Qaḥṭānī, "Abū Dehmān yuʿakidu ʿala anna rūḥahu tashakkalat fī hadhihi al-bilād," *Al-Jazīra* (Saudi Arabia), March 24, 2001, https://www.al-jazirah.com/2001/20010324/cu1.htm

[8] The situation persisted until American-based Saudi filmmaker, director, and producer Hayfaʾ al-Manṣūr interceded on Abodehman's behalf with then Saudi deputy minister of culture ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Subayl because of her (unrealized) plans to adapt *Al-Hizam* into a film. But even after the official ban was lifted, Saudi bookstores encountered difficulties importing the book from Lebanon. See: "liqāʾ al-riwāʾī Aḥmad Abū Dehmān fi yāhalā Ramaḍān," [Interview with novelist Ahmed Abodehman in Ya-Hala Ramadan (Show)] *Rotana Khalijiyya* (Saudi Arabia), July 27, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-c17aEzl_a4

[9] For example: ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Mishrī, *Rīḥ al-Kadī* [the scent of the Kadi tree] (Beirut: al-Muʾssasa al-ʿArabiyya li-l-Dirāsāt wa-l-Nashr, 1993); ʿAbdo Khāl, *Al-Mawt Yamurr min Hunā* [death passes through here] (Köln: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 1996); only later would Abodehman talk about an 'attack' (*hajma*) against the social structure of the village by modernity and by the city. See: Kāẓim Jihād, "Al-Kātib al-Saʿūdī Ahmad Abū Dehmān: fi al-lugha al-faransiyya iktashaftu bilādī wa-nafsī," [Saudi Writer Ahmed Abodehman: In the French language I discovered my country and myself] *Elaph*, April 1, 2004, https://elaph.com/Web/Archive/990415622970176100.html

[10] For more on these periods, see: Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), chap. 5, chap. 6.

He uses it to delineate the unique ‘temporal culture’ of the village (to borrow Avner Wishnitzer’s terminology) – a term used to denote a historically created system of time-related practices, conventions, and values that structures the temporal dimension of social interaction and fills it with meaning.[11] Other Saudi writers preceded Abodehman in doing so, but their use of this theme is quite different, as are their emphases.

For example, the struggle between loyalty to tradition and the need for progress and modernization constitutes a main focal point in the literary works of ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Mishrī (d. 2000), probably the most prominent ‘keeper’ of memory of the southern Saudi village. In Mishrī’s novels, time is in constant non-linear motion between past and present. This motion is intended to highlight the changes that occurred in the daily life of the village and within Saudi rural society, mostly through the perspective of the inter-generational conflict. While the first generation nostalgically turns back to memories of the past and longs to return to the (good) old days and past values, the second generation tries to adapt to the changing realities, live in the present, and prepare for the future (of the third generation). Mishrī describes a struggle between humankind (mainly of the first generation) and the changing times in which the predetermined and inescapable outcome is articulated by the Arabic proverb ‘if time does not obey you, you must obey time’ (*idha ma ṭāʿaka al-zamān ṭīʿuh*). A good example for Mishrī’s use of the ‘time’ theme can be found in the following dialogue from his novel *Rīḥ al-Kadī* (set between the late 1960s and mid-1970s) between the old man ʿAtiyya, the representative of the older generation of the village, and his son Ḥamid about the influence of education on the younger generation and its implications for the social fabric of the village. While the son, Ḥamid, sees the positive sides and talks about the advantages of education (which he could not have enjoyed when he was younger), his father, ʿAtiyya, can see only the negative side, manifested in the desertion of agriculture and of the land:

> – Father, may Allah prolong your life, times are changing and the world does not stand still. Your times are not like our times, and our children’s times are times of education and knowledge. Look at your grandchildren, father. Despite their young age, they already know things you don’t. In a while, they will become educated and knowledgeable, get hired by the government, and earn good money without having to complain or to work hard and get tired.
>
> – Listen, son, I see how the changing times are ruining our children while we are still alive. I have already told you that the schools came and took away our children from working the land […] And what’s next? Are we going to send our daughters to school too?! Strange times indeed.[12]

Another good example can be drawn from the end of this novel, after the changing times and the advent of modernity have completely transformed the village, both physically and socially. Mishrī describes the grief and regret of Rifʿat, ʿAtiyya’s wife, after her family splits apart and she remains alone in the old house with her husband, who refuses to move to the new and modern ‘concrete house’ built by their son. She tries to hide her loneliness and fear and looks for someone to talk to about her misery but there is no one around anymore, so she raises her arms to the sky with pent up rage and curses all that has changed, ‘and time, which brought with it money that altered people’s souls, made people forsake their fields, and separated father and son.[13]

In the novel *Sharq al-Wadī: Asfār min Ayyām al-Intiẓār* (East of the Valley: Books from the Days of Expectation) by Saudi author and academic Turkī al-Ḥamad, when the protagonist describes his village in Najd (central Arabia) as a place isolated from time and space, he highlights its two interrelated temporal dimensions – the religious and the natural – and portrays them as elements of a centuries-long repetitive circular motion:

> The people of the village do nothing but pray in the mosque and work in the gardens of palm trees […] If you find the people of the village and they are not working, know that they are praying; and if they are not praying, know that they are working; and if they are neither working nor praying, know that they are sleeping. Their day starts shortly before sunrise with prayer and ends shortly after sunset with prayer and soon after, they go to sleep […] Their days, like those of their fathers and their fathers before them, have been going on like this for centuries […]
>
> Space and time have no meaning in our village. The endlessly spreading desert surrounds it from every direction. There is no place its people can imagine beyond Mecca and Medina. Jerusalem is nothing but the destination of the Prophet Muhammad’s night journey and where he ascended to heaven […] The only thing they know of Yemen is that it is the land of Balqis, who is mentioned in the Quran […] Time is nothing to them but sun rising and sun setting, defining for them their prayer time and the seasons for sowing and reaping, […] and the moon to tell them when to fast and when to feast.[14]

In contrast, the theme of ‘time’ in *Al-Hizam* serves a different purpose. Abodehman does use it to draw the inevitable comparison between the slow pace of village life and the fast and hectic pace of the city, but mainly to illustrate the village’s temporal culture and life perception, in which time is first and foremost nature’s time, and that human time is subordinate to and dictated by it. Time is a very abstract, concept, ungoverned by modern temporal conventions such as precision or punctuality, or by modern devices and apparatuses for telling or keeping time.

In a beautiful scene that describes the day he left the village for the sake of continuing his education in the city, Abodehman portrays the connection between man and nature that used to exist in the village and writes how he went through the village with his eyes closed in order to sharpen his other senses and feel, among other things, the unique time of the village:

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[11] Avner Wishnitzer, “At Approximately Eleven, Just Before Nightfall: An Introduction to Ottoman Temporal Culture,” in Dror Ze’evi and Ehud R. Toledano (eds.), *Society, Law, and Culture in the Middle East: Modernities in the Making* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 121–34. On the connection between the quotidian level of time organization, and notions of progress and modernity, see for example: On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

[12] Mishrī, *Rīḥ al-Kadī*, 73.

[13] Ibid., 105.

[14] Turkī al-Ḥamad, *Sharq al-Wadī: Asfār min Ayyām al-Intiẓār* (Beirut: Dār al-Saqī, 1999), 33–34.

> Leaving the village was a kind of death for me. As I think back on it, it was water that helped assuage my pain and fear. Yes, water was my talisman […] I went around the village with my eyes closed, moving from well to well, drinking and bathing in every single one. I loved my village, knew it inside and out – every animal and every tree, every work tool, the feel of its days and of its nights, the familiar smells of people and of rain, the true hour for everything. (p. 82)

Immediately afterwards, Abodehman describes how Hizam, who tried to pass on to him as much information and knowledge as he could before he left, showed him two holes in a certain door where the sun never fails to fall, once in summer for the sowing of wheat and barley and once in winter for corn and winter grain. These were essentially the only two periods of time that really mattered in village life. Working the land unites the time of nature and man. This union, in turn, yields crops and produces life, which stands in perfect contrast to the death that the move to the city symbolizes for young Ahmed.

It is no coincidence, that only two paragraphs later, Abodehman writes about the invasion of a new and foreign dimension of time into the village. One of the villagers who had taken his daughter to Sweden for medical treatment returned to the village packed with tales about Swedish women and a sun that never sets, and a wristwatch. He was the first one in the region to own a watch and the villagers had a difficult time understanding the concept of this new device, for their notion of time was entirely different from the Western/modern one. For a few months after he returned, whenever the children saw him, they would ask him the time, even though they were never quite sure what they were asking… However, thanks to this 'Swede', they began to realise that there is a whole world outside their village and the neighbouring villages – however far and strange it may be.

In the next chapter of the novel, called 'The City of Clouds,' in which Ahmed and his friends are already living and studying in the city (Abha), he writes about an owner of a store who wanted to pay his respects to the village and invited Ahmed and his friends to a fancy dinner at his house. Interestingly, when that wonderful evening ended, the host wanted to give the boys a special gift – something practical yet impressive and unique (for the villagers). And so, Abodehman writes:

> When the evening drew to a close, he made us a gift of an alarm clock, which only my friend knew how to operate properly. We had never had watches or radios or electricity or gas or toothbrushes or books – with the exception of schoolbooks – or magazines or newspapers, but we knew how to sing. (p. 97)

It is worth mentioning the contrast that Abodehman alludes to here, between the noisy and somewhat aggressive ringing sound of an alarm clock and the soft and innocent sound of (children) singing.

Writing in French, responding to the spirit of the Saudi village

It was only after a fairly long period of time, nearly forty years since he had left, that Abodehman was able to return to the village – not physically, but through his writing. But it seems that the distance of time was not enough, that he also needed the distance of space and language, for *Al-Hizam* was written in Paris and in French.

Why did Abodehman choose to write this novel, which is so deeply rooted in the soil of the southern Saudi village, specifically in French – a language he only started to learn when he was in his thirties? There are several answers to this charged question. The simple one is that the novel was originally written by Abodehman as some sort of personal memoir for his wife and daughter who do not speak or read Arabic. 'I wrote Al-Hizam for my French daughter and wife,' Abodehman said at a literary event held in his honour in Saudi Arabia, 'because I wanted them to get to know me better, to know my father, my grandfather and all the people of my village.'[15] Although he waited for nearly forty years to put his memories to paper, when Abodehman started writing, the words just poured out of him and he completed the novel in only seven months. His working process involved writing every morning and reading what he had written to his wife and daughter every evening. He claims that he did not intend to publish it, but eventually acceded to his friends' and colleagues' pleadings.[16]

Another more complicated answer is that Paris provided him with the freedom and distance he needed to write about his village. 'Paris is a poem, Paris is a woman, Paris is freedom,' Abodehman said once in an interview. The freedom, or rather freedoms, he referred to in that context are the freedom of speech and the freedom to read, which were and still are lacking in Saudi Arabia, as he said.[17] In another interview, he explained that Paris had enabled him to grow as an individual, whereas in Saudi Arabia he was merely a cell inside a body. That is why it was only in Paris that he could have truly discovered Saudi Arabia. His soul was formed and shaped in the village, but in Paris he discovered his (individual) mind and rediscovered the village.[18]

To that, one may add the distance and freedom that the French language provided him. Writing in French was 'responding to the spirit of the village,' according to Abodehman, because French had the flexibility and simplicity through which it was possible to convey the village to the rest of the world. The advantages of French, as Abodehman describes it, have also contributed to his ability to grow as an individual and find his personal and private place: 'The French language is neither restrictive nor restricted. It is not the language of official institutions but a language of individuals. It is not the language of a tribe but of the individual, through which he can evolve and find himself.'[19] The combination of personal social evolution and freedom allowed him to write about his village the way he wanted to. French suited the time and place in his life, more than Arabic, which he sees as too formal and as a language that carries a certain baggage of holiness that prevents the writing of free texts.

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[15] Ḥasan al-ʿAāmir, "Abū Dehmān yughliqu al-ḥizām ʿala alḥān al-khaṭwa," [Abodehman tightens the belt to the sound of the Khaṭwa dance], *Al-Watan (Saudi Arabia), June 28, 2013.*

[16] Saʿīda Sharīf, "Aḥmad Abū Dehmān: lā yūjad mashruʿ faransī li-taḥwīlinā ilā khadam al-lugha al-faransiyya," [Ahmed Abodehman: there is no French project to turn us into servants of the French language] *Al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* (London), November 1, 2003.

[17] "Al-katīb wa-l-riwāʾī Abū Dehmān ḍayf barnāmij yāhalā maʿ Yaḥyā al-Amīr," [Writer and novelist Abodehman – guest of the Ya-Hala Show with Yaḥya al-Amīr] *Rotana Khalijiyya* (Saudi Arabia), January 26, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jg4Cen7W2tg

[18] Ṣāliḥ al-ʿAzāz, "Qaḥṭānī min qabīlat 'Gallimard' yuthīru al-fitna fī faransā," [Qahtani from the tribe of Gallimard stirring up a fuss in France] *Al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ* (London), June 15, 2000.

In the epilogue of *Al-Hizam*, Abodehman writes about how he returned to the village after he had finished writing the novel. When he met Hizam, he read him some excerpts in simultaneous translation (to vernacular Arabic). When he was done, Hizam commented on how he had been reading from left to right and not the other way around, like in Arabic. And even though he was the staunchest defender of village traditionalism, he understood that Ahmed had been 'granted an extraordinary opportunity to see things from both sides.' (p. 147)

It may be argued that the choice to write in French was indeed influenced by the advantages of the language, but maybe even more so by the disadvantages of Arabic. It is a well-known fact that Arabic 'suffers' from an acute problem of diglossia – a socio-lingual situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superposed variety. It is the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either from an earlier period or another speech community, which is learned largely via formal education and used for most written and formal spoken purposes. However, it is not normally used by any part of the community for ordinary conversation.[20] Put another way, it is a situation in which two languages (or two varieties of the same language) are used under different conditions within a community, often by the same speakers. The term is usually applied to languages, such as Arabic, with distinct 'high' (Modern Standard Arabic, or Classical Arabic, i.e., *fuṣḥā*) and 'low' (colloquial or vernacular Arabic, i.e., *ʿāmmiyya*) varieties.[21]

For Abodehman, who identifies himself first and foremost as a poet, the vernacular Arabic of his village is the language of poetry, his mother tongue, and the language of the village's memory. *Fuṣḥā* entered the village with the introduction of the school and the official education system. In the novel, in the chapter titled 'The Other World', Abodehman writes about how every single norm they had ever lived by was turned on its head when the school was opened in the village. The children were prohibited from carrying their knives, and were expected to trim their nails, wear shoes, take up frequent bathing, respect the teachers who came from Egypt, Jordan, and Syria, and so on. He refers to *fuṣḥā*, a perfectly new language which he studied at school, and which almost immediately expanded his horizons and imagination, in a very positive manner:

> There [at school], language became a different thing; all the fields in the world could not have amounted to its vastness, its richness. There I learned to touch words, all words, to read, write, and imagine them [...] School gave me a soul and a [new] language. I started compiling a dictionary of words I had never heard spoken in the village and of familiar words that until then had only had narrow meanings. Every word they taught us was a voyage in itself; the most beautiful words could be found in poems or in books of history and geography. *World* was one of those I liked best. (pp. 27–28)

Fuṣḥā opened before Abodehman a new, full, and rich world, but it was not his mother tongue. For that matter, it enjoyed the same status that the French language did for him. However, while French provided him with the distance he needed, writing in Arabic was like opening old wounds. Following the novel's great artistic and commercial success in France, the rights to its Arabic version were bought by the famous Dar al-Saqi publishing house. When they asked Abodehman to recommend a translator to Arabic, he replied that no one other than himself could write about his village in Arabic. But the task was very difficult for him, for the most part because he felt that things should be written or said in the vernacular Arabic of his village and not in *fuṣḥā*, as was expected and required of him. In an interview that Abodehman gave in French, he spoke about how he could not even look at the text for about six months after taking this task of translation upon himself. We further learn from his words that it was *fuṣḥā* that was more distant from his village than French was for him, but also that using *fuṣḥā* as a written language was like touching a raw nerve linked, in my understanding, to the personal trauma of leaving the village and to the collective, traumatic loss of rural-tribal identity:

> It was very hard for me to face the family in [Modern Standard] Arabic. This book tells my whole life [story] and to write it in [Modern Standard] Arabic is really like touching a gaping wound deep within my being. French was light; it allowed me to get away while remaining closer to the village than classical Arabic.[22]

In addition to all those mentioned above, I would like to offer another explanation for Abodehman's choice to write in French that is also related to the connection between language and place, but which also connects to Abodehman's experience as an emigrant. As I mentioned before, Abodehman needed to go as far as Paris to get away from the tribe and to find himself as an individual, which he indeed accomplished. Furthermore, in several interviews, especially those that were held in Arabic, he rejected out of hand any notion of foreignness or estrangement (*ghurba*) with regard to his stay in Paris or within French society.[23] But maybe writing his novel, writing about his life, in French was actually about answering his need to belong – to French society in general, and to the French writers' 'tribe' in particular, the 'Gallimard tribe.' It is possible that his writing in French was an attempt to shed his (repressed) sense of marginality, which sociologist Robert Park defined as 'a state of limbo between at least two cultural life-worlds.'[24]

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[19] Kāẓim Jihād, "Al-Kātib al-Saʿūdī Aḥmad Abū Dehmān: fi al-lugha al-faransiyya iktashaftu bilādī wa-nafsī."

[20] Charles A. Ferguson, "Diglossia," *Word* 15, 2 (1959), 325–40.

[21] On the stylistic impact of diglossia on modern Arabic literature, see: Sasson Somekh, *Genre and Language in Modern Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: O. Harassowitz, 1991).

[22] Angeline Joyet et Eloise Brezault, "Entretien avec Ahmed Abodehman," *Centre Régional de Documentation Pédagogique de Paris* (CRDP), March 6, 2006.

[23] The term *ghurba* is a difficult one to translate, if only for its many and nuanced meanings. Modern Arabic-English dictionaries provide such translations as: absence from the homeland; separation from one's native country, banishment, exile; life (or place) away from home; foreign country; diaspora; strangeness, foreignness; alienation, separateness; and loneliness. In the Saudi novel, this term is often used in relation to Saudi students who leave the country to study abroad, mainly at Western universities. For a discussion on the subjects of Saudi students in the West and the evolution of the treatment of the

Jacques Derrida claimed that one can enter French literature only after losing one's accent.[25] However, Abodehman (or rather, his novel) was received with open arms by French society and its literary community, mainly because he managed to preserve his unique accent. But, since he failed to produce any other works, public interest faded, and he was not granted 'permanent residency' within this community. At the end of the day, Abodehman was not a French writer, but a Saudi who wrote in French. Researchers Hokenson and Munson have observed that 'the bilingual writer is strange, both a foreigner and a local, an intercultural, using two languages rather bizarrely to say the same thing differently.'[26] One may say that Abodehman is even stranger, since he actually juggled three languages.

But did he really say the same thing differently in the French and Arabic versions? The answer to this question is complex and exceeds the limits of this paper. However, two short observations can be made here. First, the front matter of the Arabic version of *Al-Hizam* contains a rather unusual declaration (albeit in French) that the novel was written and published in French and then rewritten (réécrit, i.e., not *translated*) by the author in Arabic for the present edition.[27] And while the structure and most of the content remained unchanged in the Arabic version, the nuances make all the difference. After all, one must bear in mind the different audiences that the two versions address. A good example can be seen in Abodehman's dedication, which looks apparently identical in both languages but is actually not so. The French version of the novel is dedicated 'to my Arabia, and to all the villages in the world' (À mon Arabie, et à tous les villages du monde). Focusing on the first part of this dedication, it is interesting to see that Abodehman dedicated his novel to *his* Arabia which can mean a symbolically different Arabia than the Saudi one, i.e., an Arabia that predates the Saudi conquest/unification, or at least one that predates the changes brought about by modernity and Islamism. The Arabic version presents a rather neutral and insignificant translation of the French dedication: 'To my country. To all the villages in the world' (*Li-bilādī. Li-kull al-qurā fī al-ʿālam*).

Second, in my impression, while the French version of the novel projects a certain lightness and cheerfulness, the Arabic version seems to be brimming with sadness and heartache. Abodehman's reference to the aforementioned term *ghurba* in the Arabic version of the novel is a case in point. In the chapter called 'The City of Clouds,' he describes how, every Friday, he would go with one of his friends outside the city (of Abha) to a little stream to wash their clothes and bathe while the clothes were drying in the sun. This little stream was surrounded by villages that were 'achingly reminiscent' of their village (p. 89). In the Arabic version, however, he meaningfully adds that these villages reminded them of the distance from their own village and of 'the bitterness of their strangeness/foreignness/alienation/loneliness' (*marārat ghurbatinā*).[28]

Abodehman returned eventually to Saudi Arabia, not to his village but to Riyadh, where most of his friends reside. I am a little baffled by this specific choice in light of a very clear testimony he once gave in one of his columns in the *Al-Riyāḍ* newspaper, stating that whenever he went to Riyadh, he was reminded of a line from a poem by the Portuguese poet Álvaro de Campos: 'I'll always be the one waiting for someone to open the door at the foot of a doorless wall.'[29] Is he still waiting?

After time runs its course and our year in Berlin ends, my family and I will return to 'our village', to Israel, which we know inside and out. In light of the current political and social climate, I can only hope that no wall will surround it by then. At least, let there be someone to open the door. At least, let there be a door…

Western 'other' in the Saudi novel, see: Elad Giladi, "'And never the twain shall meet'? The Western other in the Saudi novel and the contrastive construction of Saudi identity," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2022), DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2022.2041400.

[24] Robert Park, "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," *American Journal of Sociology* 33 (1928), 881–93.

[25] Jacques Derrida, *Le monolinguisme de l'autre ou la prothèse d'origine*, (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 77.

[26] Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson, *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Literary Self-Translation* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2007), 183

[27] Abodehman, *Al-Ḥizām*, 4.

[28] Ibid., 103.

[29] Ahmed Abodehman, "Lughat al-Riyāḍ," [the language of Riyadh] *Al-Riyāḍ* (Saudi Arabia), June 2, 2005; this line is part of the poem 'Tobacco Shop', translated by Chris Daniels. Álvaro de Campos is one of the heteronyms of the Portuguese poet, writer, translator, and philosopher Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935). Interestingly, Pessoa, who was one of the greatest poets in Portuguese, also wrote in English and French.

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