

# Death and Dying in the Fiction of Abdo Khal

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**Abstract**—The fiction of Abdo Khal has received critical treatments in the Arab world focusing on gender, sexuality, moral collapse, village life, and mores. However, Khal’s engagement with death in his novels has been overlooked. This study turns to the conception of death in Khal’s fiction to add to the scholarly understanding of how Saudi fiction tries to construct the subject of death. This research aims at showing the great potential of Arabic fiction to provide ways of investigating the death element as an unavoidable human reality and filling the void formed in Arabic studies by the lack of critical treatments of the subject of death.

**Index Terms**—Saudi literature, Abdo Khal, death and dying, Arabic literature, Saudi fiction

## I. INTRODUCTION

The experience of death is a mysterious event, leading people to try to understand it in forms such as watching others die or imagining it in fictional narratives. The literary critic Walter Benjamin argues that fiction provides an understanding of death that is hard to obtain in real life.<sup>1</sup> The portrayal of death and dying in literature has received a myriad of critical treatments. The literary critic Sorensen (2002) notes, “Death has been treated fully, even enthusiastically, in literature and philosophy” (p. 116). Strubel (2014) echoes the sentiment: “Since the beginnings of what we call literature, death has proven to be its most successful producer. It is that void which needs to be interpreted, the fundamental mystery of existence, which underlies every literary text”. Hence, death in literature is a major driving force, if not the most powerful theme, because death, though it can be seen as an individual experience, is not devoid of a social and cultural framework. It is an essential human condition that literature, as Vovelle (1983) notes, “attempts to respond to in its own way”. Representations of death in literature come in many forms. For example, it opens some stories in an attempt to weave the plot; it creates a reason for the story, such as in crime novels; or it ends the narrative, with the death of a major character bringing closure. Thus death can be, as Hakola and Kivistö (2014) argue, “very useful in literature”. Characters in fiction experience death as a necessary part of life, and in many works, they perish at the end. Regardless of the part death plays in the story, the theme of death has fascinated scholars who have attempted to understand the human condition. Bronfen and Goodwin (1993) note that death “is genuinely of universal interest and every discipline, scholar, and reader have something relevant to add”. And death is not removed from the culture it arises from. The discussion of death would be rather fruitless without understanding its relation to the culture because death, as Bronfen and Goodwin (1993) argue, is culturally constructed.

Writing about death is a “genuine attempt”, as Doig (2014) notes, to “experience death—both the moment and the state—before its arrival” due to the power of literature to use the imagination. Saudi literature, like any literature, embraces death and offers representations that aim to provide new understandings of our mortality. However, critics who have approached Saudi literature have paid little or no attention to this subject. Because research has shown that literature “models life, comments on life, and helps us understand life” (Mar & Oatley, 2008), and that it trains us to extend our understanding toward other people, this study attempts to show how literature offers a vessel through which authors design characters that provide insights into death, dying, and mortality. This reading offers new insights into the understanding of how death is depicted in the Saudi novel, through the example of Abdo Khal’s fiction. The reason for choosing Khal is twofold. First, Khal is a prominent, highly celebrated writer in the Saudi literary scene who has produced several works, mostly translated into English, that operate largely on the themes of death and dying.<sup>2</sup> Second, Khal, unlike other Saudi authors, shows death in an uninhibited manner, creating an unpleasant experience for the reader due to the way he weaves death throughout the plot. Albalawi notes that in Khal’s (2022) fiction, “the atmosphere is crammed with tragedies structured by the dualism of life and death”. Khal’s fiction has yielded to the presence and perceptibility of death and shown all death’s consequences, from its disruption of life and creation of pain to its unavoidability that causes suffering. The appearance of religious practices and cultural norms is also manifest in the fundamental personal experiences within his works, which this study seeks to exhibit.

## II. DEATH SYMBOL IN *DEATH PASSES FROM HERE* (1995)<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Benjamin (1968).

<sup>2</sup> Many critics have hailed Khal’s artistic creations of stories that touch people’s daily lives and suffering. To read more, see Alkhazim (2006); Alnaami (2009); Almash’hory (2020); Albalawi (2022).

<sup>3</sup> Khal took 11 years to write this novel.

Khal's first and most famous work, *Death Passes from Here*, deals directly with death, and its representations are violent and powerful.<sup>4</sup> The novel focuses the reader's attention on a plethora of fundamental individual experiences with death that make the novel, as argued here, the richest work in Saudi fiction in which death plays a significant part. The novel is exceptional, and critics have celebrated the 512-page work due to its construction of complicated themes such as death, injustice, superstition, and torture.<sup>5</sup> The specificity with which Khal paints the suffering of the characters can lend the book a distressing feel for some readers. In *Death Passes from Here*, Khal does not indicate a time or specific place for the events. Therefore, the reader has to identify the setting from the political and cultural references. Khal develops his characters in depth, trying to understand the duality of life and death. There are nearly 60 characters in the novel, and each has a weighty presence. The novel tells the story of a group of villagers who experience death at the hands of an evil man called Alsawadi, who is a symbol of injustice, torture, suffering, and most importantly of death.

Death comes very early in the novel, and Khal places it there to set a dark tone for the reader and prepare them for what follows. Khal (1995) writes, "A crow stood on a patch of dry land filled with dead bodies and nested on their heads". Researcher Alkhawaji (2010) notes that this beginning lends the novel a horror-fantasy feel. Alsawadi is the (metaphorical) crowkills and tortures the villagers. Critic Aldhamen (2019) records that Alsawadi, being a representation of death, abuses the villagers and denies their existence, thus denying their lives. Throughout the remainder of the novel, the reader encounters treatments of death narrated by several individual characters. The horror of life, symbolized by Alsawadi with no sensation of guilt, troubles the villagers, and the reader, like the characters, looks forward to his demise. People meet and discuss Alsawadi's actions. They argue about how to stop him.<sup>6</sup> Critic Alkhazim (2006) notes, "we are waiting, like in most Arabic fiction for the evil to be defeated at the end, but our expectations are not met, and the evil is not stopped". Researcher Alshorfat (2021) echoes this view, adding, "Death does not pass, it stays".<sup>7</sup> Khal does not force his narrative to reach an expected resolution, one that is hoped for by most readers. Moreover, death in itself in the novel does not mean an end. It is represented as a part of life. Alshorfat (2021) explains, "It [death] reflects the reality of the marginalized people" and the embodiment of "abuse of power". Hence, Alsawadi goes unpunished, because it is not about an individual: it is a system that patronizes disadvantaged people. It is not surprising, then, that the villagers seek to remedy the system by confronting death—or Alsawadi—but they fail constantly. Alsawadi gives orders and punishes those who break them. For example, he orders that villagers must not take water from the well for five days so he can use the water for his fields, which are suffering from a drought. One villager is caught getting water, killed, and left in the desert without receiving a funeral. Alsawadi's men bury him and leave parts of the body visible to the crows. Another example is when a donkey enters Alsawadi's fields and Alsawadi shoots both it and its owner. If Alsawadi does not kill, he tortures. He finds a woman in his field harvesting and uses her sickle to cut her ears off. There is no shortage of violent deaths—most of the deaths in the novel are murders. The killing appears in line with each individual experience throughout the book. Many characters are killed, and many others are subjected to attempted murder. Even weapons and methods are specified elaborately. Khal even employs animals as killers in the story. For example, a snake attacks a villager. Khal (1995) writes, "a venomous snake saw him and stood up then flew to bite him with her fangs right in his heart".

Alsawadi lives in a large castle surrounded by his entourage and guarded by an army of people who, on his command, punish, torture, and kill. Some villagers try to stop him, challenge him, and call for rebellion, but they fail. There are several characters who narrate their own suffering and hell. One of the narrators, Abdullah, tells the story of how his father was killed by Alsawadi. This narrator promises vengeance: "I will bury my father and come back with my dagger ... and put it in Alsawadi's paunch" (1995). After the burial, he passes through Alsawadi's fields and attempts to butcher his animals but changes his mind at the last minute. The pursuit of vengeance is even augmented by his mother, who says, "I swear not to wash and put perfume until I see your father's killer is killed and nobody at his funeral but dogs ... your father is killed ... he is killed" (1995). Abdullah's father had challenged Alsawadi and lost; the narrator tells the reader about his father:

When he [Alsawadi] was in front of him, he poked his thumb aggressively in my father's right eye until the blood splattered and got on Alsawadi's face and beard, but this did not stop him from poking the eye out. My father screamed loudly. The birds flew away so they would not hear his screams. Suddenly, there was silence and my father collapsed into unconsciousness. Alsawadi lifted the eye high in the air in front of everyone and then threw it and stepped on it and left smiling (1995).

The novel's title offers the reader clues about the centrality of death in the events of the story. The title is significant because it creates suspense that, according to Alshorfat (2021), serves to attract the reader to the dark novel. *Death Passes from Here* is littered with dead bodies and deadly diseases. No one can leave because if they attempt to do so, they perish. "Whoever enters is dead, whoever tries to leave is dead" (1995). The village is appalling, and Khal does not hesitate to remind his readers of death and its horrifying nature throughout the narrative: "Death is close to us even if it

<sup>4</sup> In the novel's foreword, novelist and poet Qazi Alquasiabi points specifically to Khal's talent in navigating through the narrative concepts of suffering and human tragedy.

<sup>5</sup> See Alnaami, (2009) and Albalawi (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Critic Mohammed Almash'hory hails the novel as a great example of argumentative discourse in fiction due to its inclusion of many argumentative speeches (2020).

<sup>7</sup> Alshorfat labels *Death Passes from Here* as an epic in need of critical investigation (2021).

seems far; it comes very fast”; “It’s a village that has known death since its birth” (1995). Not only do the villagers experience death in its natural form, but they also see the deceased get eaten during times of drought. It is unusual for Saudi novelists to include cannibalism in their fiction.

Khal details a funeral event in a way that adds more depth to the theme of death. Khal describes an Islamic funeral in his narration of the burial of one character. The body is transported to a mosque, where the village people gather to pray. After the prayer, the body is taken to the burial site in a silent procession. When they reach the graveyard, the body is carried by a group of men in rapid movements. The narrator describes the scene: “The road to the graveyard is deserted and horrifying. It is filled with thorns, and I was walking barefoot, and the thorns got into my feet ... people were running and I was running after them trying to carry the body” (1995).

In summary, the novel presents death in an uninhibited manner and the reader encounters a wide range of deaths in the course of the narrative. The word “death” and its variations (die, dying, dead, died) are mentioned over 100 times in the book. Alkhawaji notes that observers of Khal’s fiction can see that death, sadness, and injustice are crucial to his narratives and that there is “no relief, hope, or safety” (2010). The novel upholds a view of death that is part of a structure of meaning that characters face and challenge.

### III. IMMINENCE OF DEATH IN KHAL’S WORKS (1998–2019)

The fascination with death and dying continues to appear in Khal’s subsequent works. There is violent death in almost every novel he writes. People commit suicide, are killed in fires, are drowned or murdered, and there is often death by natural causes. Hence, death becomes a traditional tool with which Khal weaves his narrative, such as in his second novel, *Cities Eating Grass* (1998). The narrative is dark and contains different episodes of death, but the most significant one is the death of the narrator’s grandmother, which is central to the story. The novel takes place in the 1960s during the Yemeni Civil War and revolves around the experience of a young boy, Yahya, whose grandmother takes him with her from a remote village close to Yemen so they can go to Mecca for *Hajj*.<sup>8</sup> The grandmother dies en route and the boy is left destitute. To survive, Yahya is forced to work despite his young age. To give some context: in the past, thousands of pilgrims used to gather in caravans to go to Mecca on foot and camel, but they were subject to natural risks, dangers, or illnesses. Many could die of thirst and hunger, much like Yahya’s grandmother and many others. Yet irremovable from the spiritual journey is the centrality of death. It is a journey of death, as the Arab critic Hamdan (2001) argues. Khal shows how death harvests those pilgrims during the journey. For example, a mother and her son fall into an open well and die; the narrator tells us, “We spent the whole night by the well and no one was brave enough to go down and help them ... when the sun rose, the well owner came to drag two bodies out of the well” (1998). Khal indulges a sense of helplessness and absurdity in their death as if there is no escape from its reality.

Yet the death of Yahya’s grandmother is heartbreaking, and it is not sudden. Yahya tells the reader, “I hear her weak voice beg the caravan leader for a drop of water, but he ignores her. I sympathetically say, ‘My grandmother will die!’ and he carelessly responds, ‘and if we give away water, we all will!’” (1998). The grandmother is dying, and Yahya knows this; she tells him, “I feel my guts on fire” (1998). She suffers from the heat and her thirst for a few days and dies eventually. Yahya witnesses this suffering but is helpless. The thematic setting of this episode of death is significant in that it shows the brutality of life and the inevitability of death, especially of loved ones. Eventually, Yahya settles in Jeddah and grows up in hardship. He spends years looking for his mother, and she looks for him. But each thinks the other is dead. Mohammed Al-labbani notes that by having each character assume the death of the other, Khal (2010) employs a game of fate that is necessary to build up narrative suspense. Hence death here is a useful narrative tool and continues to be useful in Khal’s narratives.

In *Days Don’t Hide Anyone* (2002) we see episodes of violent death. The narrator tells the story of two prison mates, Bandar and Abdullah. The first loves a girl, Amna, whom many men love and want as a wife. He competes with a wealthy man for the love of Amna and they get into a fight; Bandar is beaten, which leads him to flee the neighborhood. Amna sends after Bandar, assuring him of her love for him, and they get married, but he finds out on their wedding night that she had lost her virginity to another man, Khalid, who had traveled to Egypt to study. Bandar forgives Amna but promises to take revenge against Khalid. When Khalid returns, he has an affair with Amna and she becomes pregnant. When Bandar finds out the child is not his, he kills Amna and her daughter and buries them in his yard. In *Days Don’t Hide Anyone*, Khal employs a different form of death—honor killing—as a narrative event that affects the characters and leads the story toward its climax. Although it is widely recognized, honor killing is rare in Saudi fiction. The death of Amna and her daughter is sad but, in some sense, it provides narrative closure or even catharsis for Bandar. Hence, death here confers meaning much like the story of the second inmate, Abdullah, who loses his family in a fire. Abdullah is with his beloved and when he returns, he finds the whole family dead.

Khal describes the death of Abdullah’s family in a graphic manner. The neighborhood men try to fight off the fire to save people, but the fire is fast: “The whole neighborhood stood in shock watching three dead bodies turned into burned skeletons. The bodies of the wife and daughter were attached to each other. The residents could not separate them, so they decided to bury them together” (2002). Khal’s obsession with death scenes transforms his narrative from a normal depiction of death to a spectacle of catastrophic loss. The occasion of death has a strong influence on society, and Khal

<sup>8</sup> The Yemeni Civil War started with a military rebellion and lasted six years; it led to the establishment of the Yemen Arab Republic.

gives the reader a sense of vision and visual representation to address the trauma. There is a vivid picture of the aftermath of the tragedy from the washing of the bodies to the grave and burial experience, with another horrible image when the narrator writes, “I held their skeletons, and I could hear the cracking of the burned bones while we inserted them in the *lahad*” (2002).<sup>9</sup> However, the impact of one particular death does not resonate on the same level as the other deaths in the novel. The death of the narrator’s mother receives little emotion from him; the narrator declares, “I felt no sadness over the death of my mother. However, this sudden death disturbed the happy moments I spent with Amna” (2002). It is a private experience that does not affect him. The narrator does not even like hearing kind words about his mother from funeral attendees. When one visitor honors her, he flaps, “Did you forget that the dead person is my mother? I am irritated to hear the many stories you tell of my mother” (2002). There is certainly no pain coming from this death, as it does not trouble the narrator.

Khal continues to invoke the theme of death in his subsequent work, *The Mud* (2002), but his treatment is unique. The novel is about a psychiatrist, Hussein, who tells the story of a strange, nameless patient who pretends that he has come back from the dead. Hussein becomes obsessed with his patient; that obsession leads him to visit the patient’s village and write long letters to colleagues in an attempt to better understand his illness. Hussein thinks he has encountered a rare case, thus his obsession is justifiable. But the story is not about Hussein—he is merely the voice that tells the reader all the misfortunes of his patient, and this telling takes up most of the narrative space. In every session, the patient starts by saying the words, “I remember I was dead. I remember it very well. And I am not delusional!” (2002). This kind of death defies any clear categorization, but it is crucial to the construction of the story.

In the narrative of the patient’s story, death appears in almost every part, but most notably in describing the events that occur in the patient’s village, especially the epidemic that kills many animals and people. The patient notes, “Everything dies here” and contends, “Death is the only thing that doesn’t allow you to welcome it as you like” (2002). Khal provides a clear description of the demise of one character, Yousuf, because of the epidemic, and does not hesitate to use multiple passages to describe his dying: “The villagers watched the swelling of different parts of Yousuf’s body. Worms passed out of various holes in his body and went back inside. Yousuf spent six days in agony before he died” (2002). Yousuf’s body was then dragged and thrown away, along with the carcasses of dead animals. In describing Yousuf’s death, Khal paints a revolting picture of death, one that is connected with animals, losing the typical associations of human death.

The critic Alqurashi (2002) believes *The Mud* presents a different approach to death, in that it becomes life. People do not actually live life, but die in it when pursuing material possessions. This is clearly evident in the example of the patient’s father, who, according to his son, died when his dreams did not come true. However, the alleged death of the patient seems to occupy a pivotal role in the narrative and is the most problematic one, because it suggests that death has occurred. The patient gets a fever and falls very ill. His mother seeks the help of a traditional healer, Aunt Misa’da, who tries to treat him using medical superstition. Aunt Misa’da believes that he is possessed and suggests he is exposed to the smell of a woman’s menstruation in order to free himself from any evil spirit. He gets well the first time but then falls ill again and dies. He describes his own death: “Something was taken out of my chest and rose like steam from boiling water. It stayed in front of my eyes for some time but then went up and up. I went up with it ... and before I went up further, my mother came with Aunt Misa’da, who wept. My mother cried loudly ‘Did he really die?’” (2002). The patient continues to detail the aftermath of his death, washing his body, his funeral, people’s reactions, and even his burial. In all Khal’s narratives, the dead stay dead. Yet here the death of the patient does not mean his life is over anyway.

It appears that Khal’s fiction is an attempt to explore death. Death and Khal’s fiction are intertwined, and the text brings acknowledgment of some experiences of death with all its passivity, as seen in Khal’s next novel *Immorality* (2005). The story centers on a poor girl called Jalila who loves a poor man, but whose father refuses to allow her to marry him. Jalila secretly meets this man, but is caught and killed by her family. After she is buried, her body disappears, causing a stir in her neighborhood. People and the police begin searching for the body, and in the process, the reader learns more about her life. Eventually, the body is found in a freezer owned by the gravedigger Shafeeq, who has been secretly in love with her. Shafeeq has a romantic relationship with the corpse, and the transgression is explicitly narrated.

The representation of death in *Immorality* is unique, as Khal attempts to show a type of death that no one embraces. There is certainly no closure in Jalila’s death. The father repeatedly utters “you killed me, Jalila” (2005). It should be noted that Jalila’s death is the most distinctive representation of death in Khal’s fiction because Khal employs a juxtaposition of honor killing and necrophilia in one death. Jalila dies because she has brought dishonor upon the family. And her death brings pleasure to her long-time secret admirer. Shafeeq dresses up the corpse and sprays perfume on it. Khal devotes many passages to Shafeeq’s peculiar relationship with the corpse, which is ultimately found out by the police, resulting in Shafeeq being sentenced to death. Using necrophilia in literature is unprecedented in Saudi fiction and even Arabic fiction. In his critical reading of *Immorality*, Awad (2015) claims that necrophilia has not been explored in Arabic literature in the depth that Khal does in the novel. No one in *Immorality* is haunted by the terrible fear of death. The constant presence of death is seen everywhere in the novel because the graveyard is in the

<sup>9</sup> A *lahad* (niche) is a place dug at the bottom of the grave to the side, in which the deceased is placed.

neighborhood. The neighborhood people and even children are used to the regularly passing funerals. Khal writes, “This neighborhood is used to talks about death ... children are used to watching dead bodies and women have given up watching them from their windows ... even the men stopped walking behind the funerals” (2005).

Khal’s most famous work, *Throwing Sparks* (2010), contains no shortage of representations of death, including its share of violent death, much like its predecessors.<sup>10</sup> The novel takes place in Jeddah and narrates the confessions of a poor hitman, Tariq, who is hired by a rich businessman living in a palace. Tariq’s job is to punish his employer’s enemies in the palace by sexually assaulting them. The nameless businessman, using his absolute power, forces people to perform indecent tasks. At first, the novel does not describe deaths directly but uses death in passing, for example against the businessman as a wish or as a prayer character’s hope will be answered. Tariq says, “I came to the realization that nothing short of death would slow him down, and judging by his good health, that eventuality was a long way off” (2010). Moreover, a few seamen die but the novel does not give their death a meaning. It is just mentioned in passing; the narrator explains, “Death doesn’t cause a stir sometimes. The death of a dog, a cat or an anonymous person does not cry out for the attention of the living” (2010).

One violent death appears in the novel and occupies a significant portion of the narrative space: the death of Tahani, Tariq’s lover, who is another victim of an honor killing to appear in Khal’s fiction. Tahani loses her virginity to Tariq; her family kill her and tell people she has moved to another city in an attempt to cover up the disgrace they feel. Although she is physically gone, Tahani’s presence is still manifest in the text through Tariq’s recollections of her: “I couldn’t free myself of Tahani’s memory. It would come back to remind me of the first delectable taste of a fruit in season that lodges itself deep inside” (2010). Clinging to these memories is important because, as the critic Farah (2021) argues, losing her memory means Tariq’s own imminent death. These recollections offer him a way out of thinking about his own mortality.

In *The Seducer Agony* (2012), we see heavy rain damaging houses and people dying. One man is killed because a balcony falls on his head. The novel chronicles the narrator’s life and search for his lost love during the ongoing Houthi–Saudi conflict.<sup>11</sup> The narrator, Mabkhoot, leaves his town unwillingly and wanders for years in the southern Saudi region in search of his beloved. In the story, death is central and important for the events to progress. For example, the circumcision festivity must be one of the most powerful passages in the novel and shows the centrality of death. To celebrate a circumcision, people gather to dance, and celebratory gunfire goes up. Khal describes the scene: “Smoke was everywhere and the smell of powder was pungent as tens of firearms were fired at once” (2012). However, stray bullets lead to the deaths of several attendees. The bodies of five women and one child are laid down, and the scene is hard to watch. Khal mentions some names in his narration of the tragedy to give it more depth: “Hafsa was bleeding to death and her mother was weeping as men hurried to check the remaining bodies ... Zahra was dying and people hurried to tell her to say the *Shahada*” (2012).<sup>12</sup> But even death surrounds the narrator in his quest. The Arab critic Ismael (2012) notes that the story of Mabkhoot is one about being close to death on many occasions and surviving, but eventually, death prevails and Mabkhoot dies. Moreover, the death of the narrator’s grandmother affects his mother intensely: “My mother collapsed and when she saw my grandmother’s body, she fainted several times and neighbors couldn’t calm her down ... later she was taken to the hospital for stabilization and treatment” (2012). Hence, death is a structure.

The relationship between Khal and death goes in another direction in his next work, *Night Coincidence* (2016). The novel narrates the story of Faiz, who works as an executioner and carries out public beheadings in the city of Jeddah. Faiz is Black, of African heritage, and his father was a formerly enslaved person. The story revolves around major issues such as love, race, terrorism, slavery, fundamentalism, and the Islamist–liberal dichotomy. It records major events that have bothered Saudi society in the past few decades, such as domestic terrorism, which is represented by the character of Faisal (distinct from Faiz), who wants to carry out terrorist attacks in Jeddah. Faiz marries a gorgeous Arab woman, Qottouf (Arabs—members of the majority group in Saudi Arabia—are racialized as “white” in the novel, in contrast to Faiz’s Blackness), and makes the whole neighborhood jealous. The novel is interesting due to its sense of the ubiquity of death as it is symbolized in the protagonist’s profession. Khal describes how the public gathered to watch the executioner carry out death sentences. “The heads were distant but connected with blood streams, the eyes were startled” (2016). The public beheading is described vividly and the process that follows is elaborated upon. Khal writes, “The beheaded is taken to the morgue to be examined by a coroner.” The reader sees Faiz’s performance as an executioner: “The sword cut the shoulders ... the sword cut the skull ... The belly was cut” (2016). Moreover, the execution agitates Faiz. In the execution arena, the blood troubles Faiz and the police try to steady his hands and prevent him from harming anyone. *Night Coincidence* constructs a form of death that aggravates some of the fear, pain, and loss traditionally associated with death and dying by showing the impact of capital punishment through the portrayal of the executioner, who lives, and the beheaded, who dies.

<sup>10</sup> In 2010 the novel won the most prestigious literary award in the Arab world, the International Prize for Arabic Fiction.

<sup>11</sup> This armed conflict is between the Saudi armed forces and Iran-backed Yemeni Houthi forces, and has been ongoing in the southern Saudi regions and northern Yemeni governorates since 2015.

<sup>12</sup> According to Islam, if death approaches and the person is able to speak, he or she should say the *Shahada*, or the declaration of faith: “I bear witness that there is no god except Allah and that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.” It is a statement that the speaker believes in the oneness of God. If the person is not able to speak, then anyone who is attending should instruct them to say it.

The novel is separate from traditional treatments of death found in many works of literature, and closer to the realities of death, as some characters are highly afraid of dying. This reality is also shown when one character, Jamal, is dying. Jamal gets very sick to the point he is unable to talk. Jamal's muscles are relaxed, his face is paralyzed, and people surrounding him know that he is dying. People gather to bid farewell to Jamal, knowing of his impending death. Khal describes these moments vividly: "He is leaving tonight," to which the narrator asks, "How long do we wait for his soul to leave? He is tired even in his dying" (2016). Although the image of dying people is visible in reality and most people are familiar with different forms of death, the conception of a dying person is not often examined in Saudi fiction because the focus has largely been on death rather than character. Khal even utilizes Quranic verses to remind people of the dying agony: "Yea, when [the soul] reaches to the collarbone [as it exits the body], and there will be a cry, who is a magician [to restore him]? And he will conclude that it was [the Time] of Parting, and one leg will be joined with another" (Qur'an 75:26–29). This scene of Jamal's deathbed with family and friends gathered around is significant because Khal shows that death is not so far removed from daily life after all. Khal proceeds to describe the funeral, including the washing of Jamal's body, to offer a much darker vision of his death.

But Khal goes even further and brings a violent death into the narrative when Faiz smashes Faisal's head with a piece of metal then uses his knife to cut his throat. The scene is startling: "Faiz appeared, and with all his power, he hurled a metal rod, smashing Faisal's head, throwing sparks from his eyes at Qottouf's face. It didn't take long; he grabbed the bangs of Faisal's hair with his left hand and passed the sharp knife across his neck. Blood splattered from the throat, which widened to let out a gurgling. Due to the violent death, the victim did not even have time to look at his killer" (2016). In her interesting reading of the novel, the Arab critic Amal Almughaizewiya argues that the conflict between Faiz and Faisal is a conflict of colors, black and white, and that by killing Faisal—a symbolic representation of white—Faiz (2018) avenges the black color that has been tied to all things evil and bad. But even if there is a symbolic significance behind the killing of Faisal, the reader becomes aware that the character's death was imminent and inevitable.

Khal's literary work *Souls* (2019) represents a shift from his earlier works in the way death is represented. The novel tells the story of Waheed, an aborted embryo that is about to be buried until his grandmother hears a voice talking about his holiness so decides to keep him. He comes alive, causing a stir among the people, who think he is specifically chosen by God and endowed with exceptional gifts. Death in *Souls* is not significant because the novel does not deal with death directly but offers attitudes toward it and the characters' reactions to its inevitability. For example, the narrator reflects, "Love is a machine that only stops with death" (2019). The novel lacks clear episodes of violent deaths found in earlier works. *Souls* can be seen as a book of life. The miraculous birth of Waheed is an attempt to defy death. Critic Yahya Matalgeh believes that *Souls* is appealing not because of the beauty of its composition or the uniqueness of its storylines, but because Waheed (2019) questions his existence and the nature of death. Waheed states, "As I go on in this life, I realize that the sand we walk on is merely a universe filled with those who passed away ... It's billions of people who died to pave the way for another life to happen. If there were only a way for them to return!" (2019). The story moves deftly to show Waheed's struggle to understand both life and death.

#### IV. DEATH AS A COMMODITY IN KHAL'S *WATER TIES* (2022)<sup>13</sup>

The relationship between Khal's fiction and immortality is so powerful that readers cannot escape its centrality in the narrative. The interconnection between the discussed novels and death is notable and the exploration of the notion of death receives significant narrative space. And of course, death is central to Khal's new novel *Water Ties* (2022).<sup>14</sup> The novel addresses death in such a manner that it seems pertinent to give it its own section. The novel centers on Ameen and his family and the unusual events that transpire in their lives. Not only does Ameen narrate his own story but he also includes the stories of many other characters. The mysteries that surround the events that Ameen recounts are revealed in a delayed exposition narrated by another major character toward the end of the novel. Ameen's great-grandfather dies at the beginning, and Ameen's grandmother, Halima, decides to bury the man—her father—in their house. The great-grandfather is believed to be a holy man; therefore, Halima keeps the body indoors and prepares a shrine for his prospective visitors that seek blessings.

One of the unusual aspects of *Water Ties* lies in the early exposition of death, as it emerges in the first lines of the story. Khal depicts the last minutes of the old man's life with specificity, and even details the washing of the body in an unprecedented manner. Halima leans over her father and asks, "Why do you insist on leaving us?" (2022). Her father cannot speak, unaware of what is happening, and eventually dies. However, his death does not disrupt the family's life because it is not sudden. In fact, Halima asks her daughter, Arwa (Ameen's mother), to help her wash his body without showing any signs of distress. Khal provides a vivid description of the washing process, which he does not do in his earlier works. It is unusual and unprecedented because it is carried out by a woman. In Muslim culture, the washing of the body after death is usually done by those of the same gender as the person who has died. But in this narrative,

<sup>13</sup> The novel's first edition had the title *Umbilical Cord*. After a Syrian novelist mentioned on social media that she had published a novel with the same title, Khal changed the title to *Water Ties*.

<sup>14</sup> The novel was published during the writing of this study. Therefore, the novel has not had sufficient critical reception. However, due to the way it presents death, it seems important to include it in the discussion.

Halima washes all parts of her father's body with water, and perfumes him with musk and agarwood. She even shaves his armpits and grooms his beard. She believes, "This body will never decompose because he is a holy man" (2022). After she finishes washing him, Halima removes his navel so she can preserve it in a jar, and has the body buried in the backyard. Khal paints Halima as a strong woman who is not afraid of death or dead bodies. Halima saved her grandson, Ameen, from death when his umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck at the time of his delivery. "I will not let death steal you from me," she whispers (2022). The scene is frightening to Somaya, Ameen's aunt because blood is everywhere as Halima tries to cut the umbilical cord. Yet Halima appears calm and confident. Ameen must be saved; his great-grandfather must die, because it is crucial to the construction of the story. The deployment of both mortality and immortality in the same context carries some aesthetic allure in the text.

Khal does not use the death of the old man in *Water Ties* to advance the plot or create emotional anxiety. It is placed there from the very beginning to be part of his characters' daily lives. In most of Khal's stories, death is related to an ending, perhaps a closure. Here it provides alternatively a new narrative, a new beginning. The community does not return to its usual equilibrium after Ameen's great-grandfather's death. People visit his shrine and ask for blessings and fulfillment of their needs. It seems that Khal is experimenting with a new technique in this narrative and refusing to close this death in a conventional way. Moreover, the decomposition of the man's body is another striking aspect of death that is not shown in Khal's other works. It brings a lot of attention, and the family keeps having to move from one house to another when people complain about the smell. Ameen wonders, "How was my grandmother able to bear that pungent smell?" (2022). Khal indulges a sense of absurdity and irrationality in depicting Halima. She shows no sign of disgust over the smell of the decomposed body or discontent when the family is asked to leave the house. Every time she moves to a new house, she wants to ensure her father is well buried and discusses the blessings his dead body will bring to the world.

*Water Ties* seems explicit in its depiction of the decay of the dead man's flesh and narration of people's reactions. What is unique in this story is that although death and dying have a pivotal space, Khal does not include any aspects of mourning or grieving. There is not even a funeral. Readers do not experience fully, or really to any degree, the loss and pain of death. Khal employs the man's grave as a narrative tool with which the author manipulates the events in the first two-thirds of the novel. But after Halima dies, her father and his grave seem insignificant to the remainder of the story. Over the course of the narrative, Ameen asks, wonders, and reflects on his great grandfather's life and death; he says, "A body is a ruined vehicle once dead" (2022). But after the death of Halima, the narrative changes its course to focus on other minor stories, such as that of Ameen's aunt.

Somaya is not a major character in *Water Ties* but there is a symbolic significance in the telling of her story. Khal devotes fourteen short chapters to narrate her story. Somaya has been divorced six times. Men desire her and after each of her divorces, they go to her usual marriage officiant, Sheikh Tawfeeq, in the hope that she will accept one of them. The desire of men to win Somaya's affections ignites a sense of yearning in Sheikh Tawfeeq, but Somaya refuses his marriage offer. Sheikh Tawfeeq stalks her and finds out she is secretly meeting with a man and having sex with him. Not knowing that she is married in secret, and filled with hatred, Sheikh Tawfeeq shows her 18-year-old son a video recording of his mother having sex with the man. The son, filled with blind rage, agrees with Sheikh Tawfeeq to punish her by stoning her to death. The son takes his mother on car ride to a deserted area where they meet Sheikh Tawfeeq. Khal writes, "Somaya started screaming and crying out for help, but her voice was unable to reach the distance to the closest ear that could hear, and she quickly became mute ... a handkerchief was stuck in her mouth ... and her hands and feet were taped" (2022). She is then thrown into a pit, and they stone her to death. Somaya's death is a shock and a first of its kind in Saudi literature, and the reader is bound to empathize with her. However, her death is not rewarded with a continuing existence through grieving or public reactions. Her story ends with her death and Khal does not offer any contemplation.

## V. CONCLUSION

Thus far, this article has shown how Saudi fiction takes up the themes of death and dying through examples from Khal's fiction. Critics have long recognized Khal's craftsmanship and his courage to address sensitive issues in his fiction. However, Khal's preoccupation with death has not been decoded. The above discussion shows that death shadows Khal's art and drives his fiction. The reader cannot escape the constant presence of death and the fear of it in Khal's literary works. The narrative merges seamlessly with episodes of death that do not disturb the flow of events. Khal's representations of death change throughout the years, parallel to his development as a creative artist. These changes can be seen as a natural result of his attempt to find new understandings of death and take action when death approaches. In his works, death appears in many forms. There are natural deaths (starvation, fire, epidemic, flood); homicide (murder and honor killing); accidental deaths (stray bullets), and deaths by punishment (execution, stoning). However, there are several aspects of death that Khal avoids in his fiction. First, Khal does not include the last words of the dying in his death scenes. Khal strips the literary experience of these death scenes of any exposition of secrets or mysteries—that is, there is no revelation in his death scenes. A weightier aspect is that though Khal furnishes death with superstition and religious beliefs, no character dies for a political cause or as a sacrifice. Also, one can question the fact that there is no encounter with suicide in his death scenes. There is a myriad of violent deaths, of course, but suicide, while it is a dominant tragic element found in literature, does not have a place in Khal's representations of death.

Moreover, the causes of death are elaborated and Khal leaves no room for anonymity. Another important aspect is that no death is caused by a woman. Khal does not let women take charge of violence, even for revenge. And finally, in the context of dealing with death, Khal presents characters that exhibit denial or acceptance or even challenge death. Yet he overlooks grievances brought about by death. Mourning is eliminated and the feeling of pain following any experience of death is undermined. These notes call for further investigations and invite scholars to analyze representations of death in Arabic literature to add more depth to death studies.

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