Arrested Maturation in Ibrahim Alhumaidan's Novel

A Hole in the Cloak of Night

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Abstract. In Ibrahim Alhumaidan's novel's *A Hole in the Cloak of Night*, the journey to adulthood is troubled and incomplete, as the protagonist, Issa, embarks on a turbulent path of self-discovery, filled with obstacles and setbacks. In this context, the concept of "arrested maturation" symbolizes the complexities and challenges of growth faced by the protagonist. As a result, societal expectations, personal conflicts, and emotional traumas hinder Issa's psychological and moral development. Instead of reaching a clear and stable adult identity, Issa experiences moments of arrested growth, forcing him to confront the limitations of his ambitions. This research paper discusses how Alhumaidan portrays these moments of stagnation and how they shape Issa's fragmented journey toward maturity. By focusing on key themes such as reciprocal rejection between Issa and society, spiritual crisis, and emotional trauma, the analysis seeks to reveal that the protagonist's failure to mature is not merely a personal shortcoming, but also a reflection of broader societal and psychological conflicts. Ultimately, this study presents a modern interpretation that demonstrates how these factors contribute to a narrative of arrested growth, complicating the traditional framework of the Bildungsroman.

Keywords: Bildungsroman, self-formation, coming-of-age, Saudi Arabia, arrested maturation, interrupted growth, Ibrahim Alhumaidan.

1. Inroduction

Ibrahim Alhumaidan (1933–2013) was a Saudi novelist and short story writer who was born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Due to his father's occupation, he relocated with his family to Az-Zubayr, a city in southern Iraq. While residing in Az-Zubayr, he pursued his education, attending intermediate school and ultimately completing his formal education there. Alhumaidan committed himself to self-education through extensive reading of literature, primarily focusing on Arabic, French, and Russian works. He produced a substantial body of work, consisting of numerous novels and short stories, which collectively formed his literary repertoire. Including *A Hole in the Cloak of Night*, *Our Mothers and the Struggle*, *Land Without Rain*, and *Wind Walls*, each piece served as a testament to his lasting contribution to Saudi literature and solidified his position as a prominent figure in the field (Editorial Board, 2005, 8). Despite Ibrahim Alhumaidan's recognition as one of the pioneers of modern Saudi literature, there remains a significant gap in the critical scholarship regarding his literary contributions. To date,

only two studies have focused on his works. The first, titled "Features of the Saudi Environment in Alhumaidan's Novels", was conducted by Noura Al-Mari, while the second study, by Iman Al-Hazmi, is titled "The Impact of Environment and Culture on the Narrative Structure Between the Novels *The Price of Sacrifice* and *A Hole in the Cloak of Night*". However, there has been no examination of the theme of arrested maturation in Alhumaidan's *A Hole in the Cloak of Night*. To address this gap, this study examines how Alhumaidan's narrative portrays the concept of arrested maturation. By analyzing the protagonist Issa's journey, this paper argues that the obstacles he faces not only hinder his personal growth but also reflect a deeper societal constraints and psychological struggles, highlighting the interplay between individual experiences and collective realities. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Alhumaidan's literary work and its significance within the context of modern Saudi literature.

2. Literature review

Despite the extensive discourse on self-development or coming-of-age stories, the specific examination of its failures in non-Western contexts remains underexplored. While studies have addressed themes of identity and maturation in global literature, the cultural nuances of failed self-development, particularly in Saudi literature, requests deeper investigation. Due to the lack of existing research on failed self-development or arrested maturation in Ibrahim Alhumaidan's novel *A Hole in the Cloak of Night*, this study draws on theoretical frameworks, primary texts, historical records to establish a foundation for analysis. This approach allows the study to navigate uncharted territory while contributing to the development of new insights in this area.

This study employs a qualitative approach to examine Ibrahim Alhumaidan's novel *A Hole in the Cloak of Night* by focusing on the arrested maturation of the protagonist, Issa, and his fragmented journey toward self-awareness. Grounded in cultural and psychological analyses, the methodology explores themes of reciprocal rejection between the protagonist and society, spiritual crises, and emotional trauma, which impede Issa's attainment of an integrated sense of self. The title of the novel serves as a central metaphor. The "cloak of night" symbolizes ignorance, existential confusion, and the oppressive constraints of societal expectations, while the "hole" signifies an incomplete attempt to transcend these limitations. This metaphor reflects Issa's partial escape from darkness; although he briefly glimpses the possibility of self-awareness and liberation, his journey remains constrained by internal frailties, external pressures, and tragic circumstances. Through close textual analysis, this study examines how Issa's failure to reconcile his fragmented psyche reflects broader cultural and psychological complexities. By drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, it seeks to elucidate the multifaceted obstacles that hinder Issa's self-development, offering insights into the forces that prevent his personal growth and intensify his struggle to reconcile his fractured identity.

Traditionally, the Bildungsroman follows a structured pattern that emphasizes the practical significance of the protagonist's growth. In literary theory, the term Bildungsroman or a coming-of-age story, refers to a novel of formation or education that traces the psychological and moral growth of the protagonist from youth to adulthood. Such novels center on a young protagonist - often characterized by heightened sensitivity and intelligence - who embarks on a journey of self-discovery shaped by formative experience, including trials, crises, and

relationships. These experiences, portrayed as pivotal, contribute to the protagonist's internal development and maturation, ultimately influencing his or her character and worldviews (Cuddon, 1991; Gohlman, 1990; Graham, 2019).

The Bildungsroman genre, originating in 18th-century Germany, expands significantly in 19th-century English literature, offering varied diverse depictions of personal growth of the central character. In Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*, David matures as he overcomes personal hardships, ultimately discovering his identity and purpose through resilience and self-reflection. Similarly, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* depicts Jane's journey from an orphaned and an unprivileged child to an independent woman, shaped by her resilience and moral convictions. Likewise, Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* depicts the coming of-age-story of the central character Ernest Pontifex, whose growth is marked by his struggle to break free from societal and familial constraints of Victorian society. As the protagonist navigates his or her formative experiences, the journey often culminates in social conformity, where he or she secures employment, marry, and assimilate into societal norms, thus reflecting the fundamental themes of the Bildungsroman genre (Swales, 1978, 20). For example, in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Pip's journey from humble beginnings to a gentleman's life ultimately leads to his reconciliation with his origins, symbolizing his acceptance of social roles and expectations. Similarly, in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Dorothea Brooke's personal growth is marked by her eventual marriage to Will Ladislaw, signifying her integration into the social fabric despite the obstacles she faces along the way. These resolutions highlight how the characters' maturation is often tethered to their eventual conformity to societal structures.

In some Bildungsromans, the protagonist does not attain maturity, often due external circumstances or internal limitations. In such narratives, the protagonist's development is interrupted or halted by insurmountable challenges, unresolved psychological conflicts, or tragic circumstances. For instance, in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus' quest for self-discovery is stunted by his struggle with religious, cultural, and familial constraints, preventing him from fully achieving the autonomy he seeks. Similarly, in Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, Jude Fawley's aspirations for intellectual and social advancement are thwarted by societal pressures and personal misfortunes, ultimately leading to a tragic end. These examples underscore how the protagonist's growth remains incomplete, highlighting the inherent fragility and unpredictability of the maturation process in the Bildungsroman genre.

The deviation from the conventional trajectory of the Bildungsroman, often referred to as arrested development, emphasizes narratives in which the protagonist fails to achieve the typical maturation or self-actualization that defines the traditional form. Such narratives frequently focus on characters whose developmental journeys are obstructed, leading to stagnation, disillusionment, or marginalization within society. For instance, in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette,* the protagonist Lucy Snow's journey toward self-discovery is characterized by isolation, unfulfilled desires, and unresolved ending. Lucy's inability to achieve a sense of belonging leaves her personal growth ambiguous, highlighting the fragility of her progression within the Bildungsroman framework. Similarly, in Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, Meursault's rejection of conventional morality and acceptance of life's of absurdity result in a sense of

existential stasis, rendering his development effectively arrested and alienate him further.

Arrested development is often attributed to factors as trauma, neglect, or chronic stress. This failure affects areas such as emotional regulation, identity formation, and independence. Psychologists often view these delays or stunted developments as a response to overwhelming situations in childhood, where normal psychological growth is interrupted (Judy, 2020). In J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield's arrested development is rooted in trauma of his younger brother Allie's death. This poignantly echoed in Holden's reflections: "I couldn't stand it. I know it's only his body and all that's in the cemetery, and his soul's in Heaven and all that crap, but I couldn't stand it anyway. I just wished he wasn't there" (Salinger, 2019, 140). Holden's profound grief manifests as emotional instability and an inability to regulate his feelings, evident in his erratic behavior and pervasive mistrust of adults. This arrested emotional growth leaves him unable to transition into adulthood, as he clings to an idealized view of childhood. Similarly, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* delves into Esther Greenwood's psychological crisis as the core of her arrested development. Overwhelmed by societal expectations and her struggle with mental illness, Esther's psychological growth is obstructed. Her inability to reconcile her ambitions with traditional gender roles leads to breakdown that undermines her independence and sense of self. Unlike the internalized struggles of Holden and Esther, Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* depicts the protagonist Alex's arrested development because of a violent and chaotic upbringing that shapes his inability to regulate his emotions or develop moral identity. Despite Alex's attempts at reform through aversion therapy, his emotional and moral development remains incomplete, leaving him estranged from both himself and the world around him. In this context, Holden, Esther, and Alex represent protagonists who struggle to attain psychological and social maturity and fail to fully transition into adulthood.

According to Nedal Al-Mousa the unique character of the Arabic novel is most clearly illustrated in what is termed the Arabic Bildungsroman. Its specific, culturally influenced themes and structure, along with its distinctive underlying tension and recognized literary conventions, indicate that at least this type of novel exists within the Arab literary tradition (Al-Mousa, 2006, 223). In Arabic Bildungsroman or coming-of-age stories, the exploration of identity often depicts the conflict between adhering to cultural traditions and embracing modernity. For example, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* focuses on the coming-of-age journey of Mustafa Sa'eed and his struggle to reconcile his dual identity, shaped by the cultural clash between his Sudanese roots and European colonialism. The narrative follows a fragmented trajectory, symbolizing Sa'eed's fractured dual identity and mirroring the broader struggle individual's face in postcolonial societies. Similarly, political instability encapsulates the complexities of some modern Arab countries, emphasizing how individual growth is frequently obstructed. For instance, Ghassan Kanafani's *Men in Sun: and Other Palestinian Stories* explores the disillusionment of three Palestinian men who migrate to Kuwait in search for better opportunities. Although Kanafani's work is not a classic Bildungsroman, the three characters confront the harsh realities of expatriation where external forces like colonialism and exile hinder their journeys into maturity. Abu Qais is trapped in the past of the 1948 Nakba, Assad resists societal expectations including the expectation to commit to marriage and establish a home, and Marwan is crushed by familial and financial burdens. Together, their

stories illustrate the profound impact of disillusionment and displacement to attain personal growth and fulfillment.

According to Al-Mousa, in the Arabic Bildungsroman, the hero's journey often takes him "to the West rather than to the capital city" (Al-Mousa, 2006, 224), where he experiences a cultural clash. In this context, some Arab novels depict this exposure to an unfamiliar culture as fostering a cross-cultural perspective, leading to experiences of "culture shock" and a profound sense of estrangement. This transformative journey ultimately allows the protagonist to gain a deeper understanding of the world, enriching his insights into both his native culture and the foreign culture he encounters (Al-Mousa, 2006, 224). However, rather than focusing solely on external experiences of culture shock, some Arabic Bildungsroman novels emphasize the inner psychological and emotional development of the protagonist. The journey may not necessarily require a dramatic shift in geographical or cultural space; instead, it can be rooted in the protagonist's engagement with local societal structures, personal identity crises, or familial dynamics. For example, Hanan al-Shaykh's novel *The Story of Zahra* depicts the psychological and emotional struggle of the protagonist Zahra, a young Lebanese woman. Beyond merely focusing on her experiences with external cultural changes, the narrative delves into Zahra's deeply internal conflict arising from her mental health problems, which ultimately impede her ability to achieve personal growth and reconcile with social expectations.

Furthermore, equating cultural enrichment with exposure to the West risks perpetuating a reductive view that places Western culture as the standard against which all others are measured. In many instances, the protagonist's maturation is achieved through a re-engagement with his native culture, rather than an assimilation of foreign values. Therefore, the protagonist's ultimate understanding of the world is not always contingent on a cross-cultural encounter but rather on the resolution of inner conflicts and the reconciliation of personal and communal identities within the local context. For instance, in Abdelrahamn Munif's *Cities of Salt*, the protagonist Miteb Al-Hathal's self-development is deeply connected to his belief in Bedouin cultural values of his land and tribe over foreign values. Miteb's resistance to assimilate into the rapid modernization is symbolized by his refusal to transform Wadi al-Uyoun into an oil field. Once cherished by Miteb and his people, Wadi al-Uyoun is ultimately destroyed by American machinery to convert the oasis into oil field. Before departing alone, Miteb's final words — "this is the end of your happiness" — (Munif, 1989,130) could be interpreted as a warning to his people about the loss of their identity and traditional way of life to foreign influence. His words serve as a prophetic lament for a simpler, more harmonious existence that is being overshadowed by rapid change.

Several novels within this genre illustrate Arab protagonists who migrate to other Arab nations, where they encounter cultures, customs, and traditions that differ markedly from those of their homeland. This phenomenon underscores the significant cultural and traditional diversity present within the Arab world, where even neighboring countries may exhibit contrasting social norms and conservative communities, thus offering a rich context for the exploration of cultural clashes and identity. While migration within the Arab world seems less disorienting than migrating to a non-Arab country, the Arabic genre frequently depicts a nuanced sense of alienation as protagonists encounter unfamiliar norms and customs. For example, Mourid

Barghouti's novel *I saw Ramallah* (*Ra'aytu Ramallah*) is a reflective memoir by the acclaimed Palestinian author, offering poignant insights into his coming-of-age journey in exile. Throughout his life, he moved to several Arab countries, reflecting the challenges of displacement and searching for a home. This sense of longing and identity is deeply intertwined with Palestinians symbols like olive oil, which represents not only a cooking ingredient, but also their resilience, connection to heritage and unwavering identity. This sentiment deeply resonated in Barghouti's musings:

> In Cairo I would not let olive oil into my house because I refused to buy it by the kilogram. We weighed our oil in jars. It looked ridiculous in small green bottles like Coca-cola. But when absence grew long and going back to Deir Ghassanah became impossible, I exercised the first simple and serious humiliation when I put my hand in my pocket in a grocer's shop and bought my first kilogram of olive oil. It was as though I confronted myself, then, with the fact that Deir Ghassanah had become distant (Barghouti, 2003, 72).

Similarly, Ibrahim Alhumaidan's *A Hole in the Cloak of Night* aligns with Arab literature that navigate displacement, identity and coming-of-age in exile. Alhumaidan's Saudi protagonist Issa moves with his family to Iraq during WWII, where he is immersed in a new cultural and social milieu that profoundly shapes his identity and personal aspiration. Growing up away from his homeland Saudi Arabia complicates Issa's journey of development, as he must explore the duality of upholding to his Saudi upbringings and heritage while adapting to the Iraqi society and culture. Alhumaidan's *A Hole in the Cloak of Night* will serve as the primary subject of this paper, where I will situate the discussion within the novel's literary and historical contexts, demonstrating the factors contributing to Issa's arrested development and the demands imposed by his new environment.

3. A Hole in the Cloak of Night

The novel opens with an omniscient narrator's first encounter with Issa, the protagonist, situating the meeting within the evocative and symbolic landscape of Az-Zubayr:

> I met Issa in Az-Zubayr, a small town cradled by a vast desert. The town was filled with ancient mud houses, their surfaces covered in dust like the face of an aging crone. Despite this, the townsfolk painted their homes in vibrant colors to beautify the otherwise artistically barren landscape. Our home was in a neighborhood called 'Al-Maragha,' located on the outskirts of the town where the desert met the village, creating a scorching heat in their convergence[1] (Alhumaidan,2010, 7).

This initial meeting, though understated, allows the setting to dominate and subtly mirror the complexity of Issa's character. More than just a backdrop, the setting takes precedence and becomes an active participant in shaping the narrative and reflecting Issa's inner world. Az-Zubayr's "ancient mud houses, covered in dust like the face of an aging crone," echo themes of decay, resilience, and the oppressive weight of tradition — elements that resonate deeply with

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(1) All the selected quotations are the researcher's translation, as the novel was written in Arabic and remains untranslated.

Issa's personal struggles. Similarly, the detailed portrayal of Al-Maragha neighborhood, where the "desert met the village," emphasizes the hostile interplay between nature and civilization. The wild frenzy of dust and the extreme climate symbolize the challenges and hardships of life in such a harsh environment.

Alhumaidan's novel, focuses on the relocation of a Saudi family from Najd region of Saudi Arabia to Az-Zubayr, a small town in southern Iraq, during World War II, as they navigate historical and social upheaval. Their move is prompted by several critical factors, including drought, deadly diseases, and the spread of tribal conflicts to nearby areas. These challenges compel many families from Najd to seek refuge in neighboring countries. Southern Iraq, particularly Az-Zubayr, becomes a prominent destination, absorbing a significant influx of migrants from across the Arabian Peninsula. Historical records indicate that between the 16th and 20th centuries, Az-Zubayr's population was largely composed of Arab migrants, with a significant portion originating from Najd. These Najdi nomads, primarily involve in commerce, play a crucial role in the economic and commercial expansion of the region. Their efforts to establish permanent settlements in Az-Zubayr results in the construction of residential areas and markets, which become central to the town's burgeoning trade network. Through these markets, trade caravans navigate land and sea routes, linking Az-Zubayr to distant markets in India and Europe, and bringing back valuable goods that further stimulate the local economy (Alnasser, 2016, 40).

Issa, the protagonist of the novel, is the eldest of five siblings raised in a family structure dominated by a strict and irascible paternal figure, juxtaposed with a nurturing and benevolent maternal presence. Issa's mother embodies the role of a self-sacrificing housewife. She shoulders the burdens of domestic labor with minimal complaint and shapes her identity around the concept of personal sacrifice for the sake of maintaining peace within the household. Her role is characterized by a quiet endurance, as she relinquishes her own needs and desires in deference to her husband's authority. Issa's father, Haj Ammar Alnajdi, by contrast, is a well-respected merchant who runs a centrally located shop on the bustling main street. His establishment serves as a cornerstone of the local economy, offering essential goods like rice, sugar, cigarettes, flour, dates, and sweets. Through his commerce, Alnajdi sustains the community's economic vibrancy, emphasizing the importance of small businesses in shaping the region's socioeconomic landscape. Haj Ammar devotes most of his time to his business, returning home briefly for meals and rest before resuming work. As a patriarch, he exerts significant influence over his household, raising his sons with a stern, uncompromising discipline. His approach, though rigorous, stems from deep emotional investment, as he reacts strongly to any disobedience or deviation from the values he upholds. When Issa is punished by Sheik Ibrahim, Haj Ammar's response is one of intense anger, immediately vented through yelling and verbal aggression at both his wife and son, without giving Issa the chance to explain.

Haj Ammar deeply desires for his sons, especially his eldest, Issa, to follow in his footsteps and become a merchant. He often "extols the virtues of this occupation, which, in his view, embodies the essence of masculinity" (Alhumaidan, 2010,35). To Haj Ammar, being a merchant is more than an economic pursuit; it symbolizes masculinity, responsibility, and societal respect. Growing up in a generation where formal education was not prioritized, Haj Ammar did not

attend school. He and his peers believe that true education comes from embodying traditional masculine values and taking risks, rather than through academic institutions. This viewpoint values practical, experience-based knowledge over formal schooling, emphasizing physical resilience, autonomy, and experiential learning as key to personal development and success.

Expanding the analysis beyond external factors such as social rejection and familial expectations, Issa's psychological divergence from his father further emphasizes his struggle for self-definition. His aspiration to become a writer, in stark contrast to his father's occupation as a tradesman, reflects a desire to pursue intellectual and artistic endeavors rather than conform to traditional societal roles. This yearning for self-expression parallels the journey of Dickens' David Copperfield, who similarly seeks to transcend familial expectations and define his own identity. Both characters exemplify the universal tension between individual aspirations and external constraints. Issa's ambitions highlight his internal struggle and the broader challenge of achieving a cohesive sense of self. Similarly, David and Issa's pursuit of creative careers places them in conflict with personal and familial challenges. Issa's decision to defy personal and familial expectations further intensifies the conflict. This struggle aligns with a common trope in coming-of-age narratives. Jerome Buckley, in *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*, notes that the family—particularly the father—often opposes the protagonist's artistic ambitions, creating a significant obstacle to his growth (Buckley,1974,18). This tension between tradition and self-expression underscores Issa's developmental journey and reflects broader themes typical of growth stories, emphasizing the importance of external support in overcoming generational conflict. Issa's grandfather, Haj Abdullah, serves as a pivotal mentor, fostering Issa's literary ambitions by surrounding him with an extensive collection of books across a range of authors and genres. Unlike his parents, Haj Abdullah actively supports Issa's creative pursuits. Issa, deeply passionate about literature, frequently visits his grandfather's library, where he immerses himself in works by prominent Arab writers such as Almanfalooti, Alrafi, Alzayat, and Taha Hussein. His grandfather also introduces him to European authors like Victor Hugo, Anatole France, William Shakespeare, and Leo Tolstoy. This exposure significantly enriches his intellectual and cultural understanding. Issa's dedication to writing yields success when he wins a school prize for the best fictional work with his short story, "A Hole in the Cloak of Night".

Issa exhibits a profound fascination with narratives of heroism and chivalry from the books he finds in his grandfather's expansive library, frequently immersing himself in accounts of knights and adventurers who exemplify bravery and honor. His readings include legendary Arab warriors such as Abi Zaid Alhilali and Anter bin Shaddad, who valiantly participated in battles, defended the vulnerable, and adhered to a code of ethics marked by courage, loyalty, and respect. For Issa, these stories serve as a catalyst for personal inspiration. He aspires to model his conduct on the bravery and honor of the heroes he admires. At one point, Issa even expresses a desire to enlist in the Iraqi national army to combat Western colonization, inspired by the values of courage and justice he associates with his historical heroes. However, this request distresses his mother and angers his father, who admonishes him by reminding him that they are guests in this country and have no involvement in the alleged colonization. Despite his father's explanation, Issa struggles to grasp the rationale behind it, perceiving it merely as

another instance in which his father thwarted his aspirations. This moment underscores the tension between Issa's idealized vision of heroism and the more complex, pragmatic realities imposed by his familial and socio-political circumstances.

This struggle reflects themes within identity formation, wherein individuals navigate between personal ideals and socio-historical forces that shape their self-perception. Contemporary scholarship widely acknowledges that cultural identity is non inherent or static attribute but rather a dynamic and historically contingent construct. It is continuously shaped by social, political, and economic forces, including globalization, migration, and power structures that influence the ways in which identities are formed, negotiated, and redefined over time (Hall, 1990; Anderson,1983). These perspectives underscore that identity is a site of continuous transformation and negotiation resonate deeply with Issa's struggle in negotiating his identity as an immigrant trapped between his own idealism and his father's pragmatism. This conflict emphasizes that Issa's identity is in a state of becoming, shaped by the tension between his native heritage and the challenges of navigating a different cultural and social milieu. For example, Issa's idealized vision of heroism reflects an identity connected to his native Saudi roots, constructed by the cultural histories and values of his homeland. Conversely, Issa's father's admonition aligns with survival mechanisms. It serves as a reminder of their present realities as Saudi migrants in a new country, where practical integration in this new environment takes precedence over personal ambitions. In this context, Issa's personal struggle represents a broader diasporic reality. His disappointment by his father's response emphasizes the difficulty of preserving connection to his native culture while adapting to realities of displacement.

4. Reciprocal Rejection

Issa's failure to achieve self-development is fundamentally rooted in a dynamic of reciprocal rejection, characterized by his deliberate defiance of societal conventions and society's consequent alienation of him. Societal conventions encompass the norms, customs, and practices that govern social behavior and interactions among individuals and groups. This can be understood through Max Weber's three dimensions of social stratification: economic class, social status, and political power. Each dimension encompasses its own form of stratification: the economic dimension is indicated by income and the possession of goods and services; the social dimension is characterized by the prestige and honor an individual enjoys; and the political dimension is defined by the power an individual exercises (qtd. in Pyakuryal, 2008, 14). In this context, Issa's rejection of societal conventions manifests as a refusal to engage with these aspects, ultimately leading to his marginalization. His rejection of opportunities for material success, refusal to conform to social expectations, and similarly defiance of authority and political powers deepen his isolation and exemplify the reciprocal relationship between individual agency and societal exclusion.

The social hierarchy in Az-Zubayr town is deeply embedded in the recognition of prestige and honor. Prominent groups such as religious leaders, like Sheikh Ibrahim and his assistant, hold significant authority due to their religious roles. Authority figures, including the policemen who maintain order, also enjoy elevated status. Tradesmen, particularly those from Najd region, such as Hajj Ammar Alnajdi, occupy influential positions within the community. This social stratification shapes the town's power dynamics and reflects the varying levels of respect

granted to different individuals. Hajj Ammar enrolls his son, Issa, in al-Katātīb[3] to ensure his literacy, underscoring the importance of education in maintaining social standing. This decision places Issa within a broader context of a conservative community governed by strict cultural and religious norms, where he is shaped by traditional values that define acceptable behavior. This rigid framework influences all aspects of Issa's life, scrutinizing interactions through a moral lens of virtue and sin (halal and haram). For example, Issa experiences acute anxiety, including physical symptoms such as "sweating and panic", when encountering a woman who does not adhere to the prescribed dress codes, such as "uncovering her head" (Alhumaidan, 2010, 10). This reaction highlights his internalization of societal norms and the pressure to conform. On top of that, Issa's affection for Mofeedah, the daughter of his Zubayri neighbor, constitutes a compelling narrative thread that suggests a significant deviation from the prevailing societal expectations. His conduct is notably inappropriate; he often withdraws into the confines of his room, where he engages in the clandestine act of observing Mofeedah through a hole in the wall. This behavior not only violates her privacy but also underscores a disturbing breach of social and moral boundaries. Issa's repeated isolation and secretive actions reveal a deeper, more unsettling dimension of his character, highlighting the tension between his private desires and the ethical standards of his community.

In stark contrast to Issa's defiance of societal norms, the teacher at al-Katātīb Sheikh Ibrahim embodies the very principals of discipline and conformity that dominates the community in Az-Zubayr. Serving both as the imam of the town mosque and holds the positions of headmaster of the local Katātīb, his esteemed social standing is attributed to his prominent role in representing and disseminating religious values and teachings within the community. Sheikh Ibrahim always carries a stick with a thick top, which he uses to punish boys who misbehave during lessons, claiming that his teaching methods instill discipline and masculinity in the students. Assisting him is Mowla Mahfouz, an elderly man with a grey head, sparse hair, and a wrinkled face. Mahfouz's eyes burn with intensity when he becomes angry, however, his anger is slow to subside.

In this environment, Sheikh Ibrahim's harsh methods are not seen as cruelty, but rather as a means of preserving order and reinforcing religious values. Sheikh Ibrahim is not known for his kindness; rather, he is harsh and tough on the boys at al-Katātīb, drawing a parallel to Charles Dickens's character Mr. Creakle in *David Copperfield*, always resorting to punishment for an unknown reason. When Issa becomes a victim of Sheikh Ibrahim's disciplinary measures, he returns home limping to face his father's rage, who refuses to believe in his son's innocence. Although intended as a place of learning, al-Katātīb transforms into a source of terror for Issa due to Sheikh Ibrahim's arbitrary punishments. Issa endures physical discipline without understanding the reasons behind it, "feeling the sudden coldness of his feet after the fire on their edges has ignited" (Alhumiadan, 2010, 11). This lack of explanation and the arbitrary

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[3] Before the invention of schools, al-Katātīb were ancient places where children learned the Quran and principles of Islamic education. These were simple buildings, usually consisting of a single room attached to a mosque, where the teacher would sit on a wooden platform, and the students would gather around him. The teacher used a small wooden board and writing tools to instruct the students, who would then write their lessons and erase them after confirming their understanding (Abo-Amsha, 2023).

exercise of power create an environment where fear overshadows learning, ultimately undermining the institution's moral and educational goals.

However, despite Sheik Ibrahim's revered status, he is known to accept bribes, which undermines his moral authority and casts a shadow over his integrity. He leverages his social standing as a religious leader to exert power over others, extorting money and exploiting his position for personal gain. When Issa's father converses with Sheikh Ibrahim about Issa's behavior during the lessons and offers him a bribe, Issa becomes Sheikh Ibrahim's favored student. This favoritism, however, alienates Issa from the other boys at al-Katātīb. Although Issa's mother tries to entice the neighborhood boys to play with her son by offering them candy, hoping to encourage social interaction, her efforts fall short. Meanwhile, the combined influence of his father and Sheikh Ibrahim in attempting to guide his decisions only deepens Issa's frustration. The well-meaning attempts to manage Issa's social life and choices feel intrusive and controlling to him, fueling his anger. Rather than fostering connection, these actions exacerbate Issa's sense of being misunderstood and manipulated, intensifying his desire for autonomy and personal agency. This inadvertently worsens social divisions and hinders Issa's integration into his peer group, ultimately affecting his emotional well-being and sense of agency.

In a similar vein, Issa's rejection of traditional arranged marriage underscores his resistance to societal expectations. The Najdi community is characterized by a notably conservative and deeply religious orientation, especially when compared to the broader environment of Az-Zubayr community. The Najdi community's commitment to upholding its distinct societal structure, customs, and cultural practices reflects a conscious effort to preserve its identity and avoid assimilation into the wider societal fabric of Az-Zubayr community. One of the clearest manifestations of the Najdi's cultural preservation is seen in their marital practices, where intermarriage with non-Najdi families is generally avoided. Matrimonial unions, instead, are predominantly arranged within the Najdi community (Aljarallah, 2003, 119). This preference for intra-community marriages stems from the Najdis' desire to maintain strong kinship ties, particularly in a context where they are geographically removed from their ancestral homeland. According to Ahmed Aljarallah, fostering marriage within the community allows Najdi families to strengthen these bonds, facilitating collaboration and ensuring the continuity of their cultural heritage. This approach to marriage serves as both a practical strategy for social cohesion and a means of preserving the cultural integrity of the Najdi community in a foreign environment (Aljarallah, 2003, 120). Similarly, Suad Joseph, a renowned anthropologist and scholar, asserts that kinship, marriage, gender dynamics in Arab societies are deeply intertwined with both familial and societal structures. Her research highlights how these structures, particularly in patriarchal contexts, prioritize collective identity and reinforce familial obligations over individual aspirations (Joseph,1993, 469). Joseph explores the ways in which patriarchal norms dictate social roles, with an emphasis on the responsibilities assigned to men and women within the family unit. In this system, filial duty—especially for sons — is closely tied to maintaining family honor and lineage, often compelling them to adhere to traditional expectations particularly in marriage arrangements (Joseph,1993, 470). This dynamic highlights the broader cultural emphasis on continuity, stability, the transmission of values across generations. In this

context, Issa's love for Mofeedah and his refusal to accept the arranged marriage proposed by his father, viewing it "as an impediment to his personal freedom" (Alhumaidan, 2010, 134), defy Najdi's social conventions by challenging norms of maintaining close-knit familial alliances.

5. Spiritual Crisis

Issa's journey of self-development is further complicated by a profound spiritual crisis, which arises from an increasing disillusionment with the religious and cultural values underpinning his community's traditions. This internal conflict represents a critical dimension of his existential struggle, as it challenges not only his sense of identity but also his connection to the collective ethos that has historically provided him with a sense of belonging and purpose. As Issa struggles with the erosion of these foundational beliefs, his spiritual crisis becomes a pivotal moment in his broader search for meaning and personal autonomy.

Al-Mousa posits that, within the framework of the Arab Bildungsroman, the theme of spiritual crisis frequently emerges as a central motif, typically illustrated through the young protagonist's initial fascination with the liberal ideas propagated by progressive thinkers. However, this engagement with liberal thought is generally portrayed as a transient phase in the protagonist's overarching journey of education and personal development. Such ideological exploration is conceptualized as an essential step in the protagonist's process of self-discovery and maturation, rather than as a definitive break from traditional values (Al-Mousa, 2006, 226). In contrast, Issa's spiritual crisis does not stem from an affinity for liberal thinkers; instead, it arises from his profound questioning of the moral and spiritual frameworks that govern his life. Issa is raised in a family where religion constitutes a fundamental aspect of existence. From an early age, he is deeply immersed in religious practices, teachings, and values, with a strong emphasis placed on religious education. As previously discussed, Issa's life is deeply influenced by the religious values of his conservative community. For example, his attendance of al-katātīb reflects this, where he learns to read the Qur'an and is taught the historical and doctrinal foundations of Islamic faith. Daily rituals, such as attending the mosque for prayers, are integral to his routine, further reinforcing the values of piety and discipline that permeates his upbringings. These practices not only shape Issa's worldview but also create a sense of religious duty that becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile with his emerging personal autonomy.

Moreover, Issa's spiritual crisis is exacerbated by a combination of guilt, anxiety, and religious fear, which further complicates his emotional state and illustrates the escalating inner turmoil that obstructs his personal development. Although Issa is depicted as a shy and quiet boy, his experiences at al-katātīb gradually erode his self-control, particularly over his temper. Each time he engages in actions that contradict his religious upbringing, he feels overwhelmed by guilt and regret. For example, when the boys at al-katātīb label him a deceiver and ostracize him, Issa channels his frustration toward his younger brothers, beating and kicking them while they cry and plead for mercy. At times, he derives a disturbing sense of satisfaction from witnessing his father's violence against his mother, though he immediately feels profound regret and seeks solace in reading the Qur'an, hoping for divine forgiveness. This persistent sense of guilt exacerbates Issa's anxiety, perpetuating a cycle of self-reproach and inner conflict. His obsession with guilt drives him to immerse himself in stories of sinners tormented in hell,

further deepening his emotional distress. Because of this, Issa experiences severe nightmares, which alarm his mother and heighten her concern for his mental and emotional well-being.

Issa undergoes another significant spiritual crisis, evident in his questioning of predestination, marking a profound shift in his beliefs. This transition indicates that he is moving away from a passive acceptance of predetermined events and beginning to explore the possibilities of free will and alternative explanations for existence. This new perspective creates further internal conflict, as it contrasts sharply with the religious teachings and values he is raised with. In Islam, predestination, or al-Qaḍāʾ, refers to "the perfectly precise execution and accomplishment of all things predestined to occur exactly in accordance with Allah's previous knowledge, writing, and will" (Alsaleh, 1995, 10). Belief in al-Qaḍāʾ requires Muslims to accept and submit to the divine will, trusting that everything happens for a reason and according to God's plan. Islamic scholars contend that "the actions done by a mature person are based upon his free will. He has a will, and he has an ability" (Alsaleh, 1995, 105), humans possess free will and are responsible for their actions.

Issa's questioning of predestination arises from struggling with the intricate balance between divine will and personal agency, deepening his internal struggle as he seeks to reconcile these competing beliefs. Issa identifies a notable discrepancy between individuals' espoused beliefs and their actual practices, suggesting a manifestation of hypocrisy or inconsistency. This phenomenon occurs when individuals articulate certain values or principles but fail to align their behaviors with these professed standards. In the context of Az-Zubayr town, there is a prevailing belief in seeking divine assistance and guidance during times of adversity, a principle shared by many religious and spiritual traditions. However, contrary to this expressed belief in divine intervention, the townspeople are actively engaging in efforts to appeal directly to European colonizers for solutions to their problems. For example, while the town square buzzes with the cries of the masses, fervently shouting, "we want white bread, not black," Issa innocently wonders to himself: "who holds the power to give and withhold? Is it not the divine who wields such authority? Yet here, the people turn to another realm of control for their needs. Is it not the foreign overlords and the monopolists who deny them sustenance?" (Alhumaidan,2010, 65). This shift indicates a preference for tangible human action and negotiation over spiritual or divine intervention.

Furthermore, Issa observes a behavior that seems incongruent with traditional Islamic teachings and cultural norms. Specifically, he notes that Muslim women in Az-Zubayr town are participating in activities that, according to his interpretation of Islamic teachings, should be discouraged or prohibited. As he reflects, "In this town, it is forbidden for a girl to raise her voice so that strange men do not hear her, lest she be deemed a pagan. Yet, the girls present in the square are no pagans, they are Muslims" (Alhumaidan,2010, 65). Traditional Islamic guidelines often emphasize modesty for women, encompassing dress, behavior, and interactions with unrelated (non-mahram) men. Issa's observations lead him to question the reasons behind the acceptance of such activities in this cultural context, contrasting them with the stricter norms he is familiar with in his own country. This contemplation raises questions about the influence of cultural and geographical contexts on the adherence to or deviation from religious and cultural norms.

Consequently, Issa's spiritual conflict is compounded by the responses he receives from those around him. His father warns that persistent questioning may lead him toward atheism, creating a sense of fear regarding the consequences of his doubts. Meanwhile, his mother expresses concern that such skepticism could result in sinfulness, further intensifying Issa's emotional turmoil and deepening his spiritual crisis. Additionally, his peers at school react to his inquiries with sarcasm, implying that his thoughts are corrupt and require purification (Alhumaidan,2010, 75). Such responses contribute to Issa's growing sense of alienation and isolation, exacerbating his feelings of disconnection from his surrounding environment and reinforcing his perception of not belonging.

Issa retreats to a hill outside the town, where he spends extended periods contemplating the nature of God, the creation of the universe, and existential questions. He finds solace in the tranquility of the wild, which contrasts sharply with the incessant noise of his father's yelling and his brothers' bickering. The stillness and silence of the hill provide a sanctuary for Issa to explore his thoughts and wrestle with his spiritual dilemmas. Issa envisions himself as "a nightingale, a creature of unfettered song and boundless flight, flitting gracefully from branch to branch in a symphony of freedom" (Alhumaidan, 2010, 37). The nightingale, symbolizing beauty and liberation, embodies Issa's desire for a harmonious existence of unrestrained joy and creative freedom. This metaphor reflects his aspiration for a life free of constraints, fostering spontaneous expression and effortless exploration. Issa's inclination toward solitude serves as a defense mechanism to avoid further disillusionment and disappointment. In this context, Anna Freud posits that defence mechanisms serve to protect the individual from threats to their self-esteem and emotional well-being, allowing them to function without being overwhelmed by anxiety (Freud, 1966, 93). In Issa's case, the external world, including places like home, school and al-katātīb, represent a source of emotional distress, failure, and unfulfilled expectations. Issa's inclination toward solitude, then, is seen as a protective measure — specifically, a form of avoidance or withdrawal as one of the strategies the ego employs to defend itself from harm.

6. Emotional Trauma

Building on this, it is important to consider how adverse or emotional trauma often serves as a significant impediment to Issa's growth and self-discovery. Traumatic experiences can fracture the individual's sense of identity, creating inner conflict and feelings of inadequacy and isolation. In the face of trauma, the protagonist may struggle to reconcile past wounds with the desire for personal evolution, often leading to emotional paralysis or regression. Trauma is defined as "stress or blow that may produce disordered feelings or behavior and a state or condition produced by such a stress or blow" (Erikson, 1995, 184), arising from a combination of ongoing situations and sudden events (Erikson, 1995, Wilson 2004). Consequently, trauma results from a blend of experiences. Its impact can significantly alter an individual's developmental trajectory, leading to profound changes in identity, worldview, and relationships (Van der Kolk, 2014, Dalenberg et al., 2012).

According to Steven Berman, traumatic experiences and identity development mutually influence one another, with trauma disrupting plans and altering lives in unpredictable, often permanent ways. For those who define themselves through relationships and roles—such as

being a wife, mother, or caretaker—the sudden or violent death of loved ones necessitates a reevaluation of these roles (Berman, 2016). Similarly, Oona Frawley argues that trauma "disrupts the kind of identity-forming narratives that we construct about ourselves; it disturbs the coherence of self, defies narrative expectations, and does not follow convention" (Frawley, 2014, 5). Trauma, therefore, interferes with self-narratives, undermining the consistency of these stories and complicating the maintenance of a unified sense of self. Issa's trauma manifests through violent outbursts and profound grief, reflecting the deep emotional scars left by his experiences. His exposure to trauma, encompassing both violence and grief, constitutes significant barriers to his emotional and cognitive development. The intensity of these experiences disrupts Issa's ability to process emotions, establish adaptive coping mechanisms, and attain psychological maturity. One such traumatic event is his exposure to violence, particularly during the police chief's brutal assault that leaves a lasting imprint on Issa, instilling deep fear and a profound sense of insecurity. During his detention for participating in the student protest, Issa endures relentless beatings and kicks, followed by a solitary confinement which he describes as "a dark and claustrophobic chamber where the rain taps against the windowpane like a mournful clock" (Alhumaidan, 1961, 222). Sigmund Freud's observation that "the ego is not master in its own house" (Freud, 1955, 285) highlights the ego's collapse when unable to mediate between the id's primal fears and the superego's moral demands. Issa's helpless collapse symbolizes a critical breaking point, reflecting the disintegration of the ego under overwhelming internal and external pressures. Issa's breakdown can thus be seen as the culmination of his internal conflict, where the balance between his conscious and unconscious mind is irrevocably disrupted.

Issa's experiences of violence resurface unresolved childhood trauma from the unjust punishments inflicted by Sheikh Ibrahim at al-Katātīb when he was nine. This psychological violence parallels his physical suffering, fragmenting his sense of self and blurring the lines between his conscious and unconscious mind. His trust in authority figures—his father, the police, and religious leaders—is shattered, preventing him from forming a stable identity. The cruelty becomes a symbolic chain crushing his dignity, fueling his resentment and desire for vengeance to reclaim his lost honor. Grief adds to this psychological fragmentation, further complicating his development. Traumatic experiences intertwined with profound loss exacerbate the emotional burden, potentially leading to self-neglect or suicidal ideation. As defined by the APA, grief is "the anguish experienced after significant loss, usually the death of a beloved person," and it encompasses physiological distress, separation anxiety, confusion, obsessive dwelling on the past, and apprehension about the future (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2015, p. 470)This immense emotional weight can become life-threatening, disrupting the immune system and leading to self-neglect or even suicidal ideation.

The intensity of grief corresponds to the significance of the loss, with profound losses triggering stronger emotional responses. When unprocessed, such grief can hinder emotional and cognitive growth, affecting relationships, self-esteem, decision-making, and coping skills (Charleston-Green, 2021, Bonanno et al., 2002). Issa's psychological development is deeply impacted by the overwhelming grief following the sudden, terrifying death of his friend Fouad, Mofeedah's brother, under harrowing circumstances. After being released from prison, Issa,

along with Fouad and Ismael, decides to flee their town and seek refuge in Saudi Arabia, Issa's homeland. Without passports, they enlist the help of a truck driver who regularly smuggles goods across the desert. Their journey through the desolate desert is tense and isolating. Crammed in the back of a massive transport truck filled with smuggled goods, the vehicle rumbles to life, "lurching forward as it cuts a path through the night-shrouded desert... the engine growls softly, a muted beast swallowing the endless darkness... nothing around them but the low, steady groan of the truck and the eerie howls of wolves" (Alhumaidan, 2010, p.226). The personification of the truck and vivid descriptions of the desert immerse the reader in the scene's tense, foreboding atmosphere. The language conveys unease, danger, and the unknown, emphasizing the vulnerability of Issa and his companions as they move through the desert with only the truck and each other for protection.

During their escape, guards ambush the group, opening fire. In the chaos, a bullet strikes Fouad, killing him instantly. The brutal loss leaves Issa traumatized, his grief numbing him emotionally. Staring at Fouad's lifeless body, blood pouring from his head, Issa is consumed with rage, screaming, "The murderers, the butchers!" (Alhumaidan, 2010, p.227). But as shock sets in, it drains all feeling from him as he realizes Fouad, once so full of life, is now still. The narrative highlights the recurring, haunting memories of the event, filling Issa with despair and guilt as he struggles with his own mortality. Every search for solace deepens his isolation, with his friend's voice becoming distant and meaningless. Routine brings no relief, only a suffocating reminder of his loss. His nights are restless, filled with dreams that blur reality and nightmare, leaving him in panic by dawn. As he sinks into bed, comfort eludes him, replaced by the memory of blood that "strikes, sharp and relentless: from now on, he must live two lives—one haunted by Fouad's death, the other defined by the pain in his beloved's eyes"(Alhumaidan, 2010, p. 232).

Issa's trauma, marked by his grief over Fouad's violent death, mirrors the profound grief Gilgamesh experiences after the loss of his closest companion, Enkidu. Both characters are overwhelmed by the sudden, brutal nature of death. In Gilgamesh's case, the loss of Enkidu initiates a deep existential crisis, forcing him to confront his own mortality:

How can I keep silent? How can I stay quiet?

My friend, whom I loved, has turned to clay,

my friend Enkidu, whom I loved, has turned to clay.

Shall I not be like him, and also lie down,

never to rise again, through all eternity? (George, A,1999p. 78).

Issa, haunted by Fouad's death, faces both despair and a sharp awareness of his vulnerability. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh's response to Enkidu's death—uncontrollable rage and sorrow—mirrors Issa's outburst upon seeing Fouad's lifeless body. Both are paralyzed by their emotions, confronting the inevitability of death. Gilgamesh's quest for immortality is his attempt to escape death, while Issa's recurring memories trap him in a cycle of despair and guilt. Both characters are forced to confront life's fragility. While Gilgamesh embarks on a physical

journey for meaning, Issa's struggle is internal, marked by emotional paralysis and deepening grief. Their experiences reflect a universal truth: death spares no one, leaving behind only memories, pain, and the challenge of how to continue living in its shadow.

8. Conclusion

In the novel *A Hole in the Cloak of Night*, Alhumaidan explores the theme of arrested development through the protagonist, Issa. Despite his initial enthusiasm for self-improvement, Issa's journey is consistently undermined by external obstacles and personal doubts. His struggle with social alienation, spiritual crises, and emotional trauma ultimately impedes his growth. Alhumaidan underscores the complexity of personal transformation, showing how enduring challenges can disrupt an individual's development. This analysis offers new avenues for exploring arrested development in Saudi literature, highliting how characters' lack of progression reflects broader social, psychological, and existential issues. A comparative approach could illuminate parallels between Issa's experiences and those of characters in English literature, focusing on the tension between internal aspirations and external barriers. This study also invites a deeper investigation into recurring themes—social exclusion, spiritual disillusionment, and emotional trauma—that obstruct growth in literature across different cultural and historical contexts.

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النضح المتعثر في رواية "ثقب في عباءة الليل" لإبراهيم الناصر الحميدان

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المستخلص: في رواية "ثقب في عباءة الليل" لإبراهيم الحميدان، تأتي رحلة النضج متعثرة وغير مكتملة، حيث ينطلق بطل الرواية، عيسى، في رحلة مضطربة لاكتشاف الذات مليئة بالعقبات والعثرات. يرمز مفهوم "النضج المتعثر" إلى تعقيدات وتحديات النضج التي تواجه بطل الرواية، إذ تعيق التوقعات المجتمعية، الصراعات الشخصية، والصدمات العاطفية نضج عيسى وتكوينه الأخلاقي والنفسي. فبدلاً من الوصول إلى هوية بالغة واضحة ومستقرة، يواجه عيسى لحظات من النضج المتعثر، ما يجبره على مواجهة حدود طموحاته. تناقش هذه الورقة البحثية كيفية تصوير الحميدان للحظات التعثر ودورها في تشكيل رحلة نضج عيسى المتعثرة. ومن خلال التركيز على مواضيع رئيسية مثل الرفض المتبادل بين الفرد والمجتمع، الأزمة الروحية، والصدمات العاطفية، يسعى التحليل إلى الكشف عن أن فشل البطل في النضج ليس مجرد قصور شخصي، بل هو أيضًا انعكاس لصراعات اجتماعية ونفسية أوسع. في النهاية، تقدم هذه الدراسة قراءة حديثة توضح كيف تسهم هذه العوامل في بناء سرد يعكس نضجًا متعثرًا، مما يعقد الإطار التقليدي لرواية التكوين الأخلاقي والنفسي للشخصية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رواية التكوين، تكوين الذات، الوصول إلى سن الرشد، المملكة العربية السعودية، النمو المتعثر، التطور المتوقف، إبراهيم الحميدان.