

Portrayal of Bedouins in Ali Al Naimi's novel:

Out of the Desert

Presented By: Syed Mashud Hashmi Jain University,
Bangalore)

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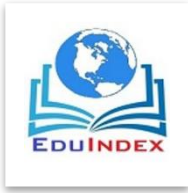
E-Mail: syedmash95@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is to portray the indigenous lives of Bedouins and to highlight how capitalism has taken over not only their lives but their identities too. Masked superstructures with rising modernization and other power politics are ones that hold the strings to their lives. The memoir "Out of the desert" by Ali Al-Naimi (former Saudi oil minister), stands as a foundation on the insights this paper has to provide. The thrive, the drive, the struggles and lives of Indigenous tribes such as Bedouins are outlined in the paper. The mechanism behind the death of their cultural identities and the acceptance of a neo-colonial identity is something that this paper encapsulates too; like sand in an hourglass, the identities of these dessert dwellers drift away like sand dunes in the capitalistic desserts.

- Things to look for:-

1. Life of Bedouins

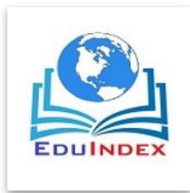


2. Struggles in the lives of Bedouins
3. Saudi's "New" source of income (Oil trade) – A catalyst behind capitalistic growth in Saudi
4. Advent & Impact of modernism and capitalism
5. Role of power politics
6. Acceptance of neo-culture in indigenous lives
7. Depletion of one's Root indigenous Identity

Chapter 1: Introduction

Quoting Mohsin Hamid to start this paper, "Islam is not a monolith. Most Muslims, like people of any faith, are born into their religion. They then evolve their own relationship with it, their own, individual, view of life, their own micro-religion, so to speak." Something I'd like us all to keep in mind while this paper presents us an outlook on the lives of "Bedouins", indigenous to Saudi Arabia and traditionally lead a nomadic lifestyle.

The word Bedouin or Bedu comes from an Arabic word بَدَو (badw) or in singular بَدَوِي (badawī) that means "desert dweller", a name that they've acquired with their adaptive lifestyles to the severe dessert climate. Most Bedouins are animal herders who migrate into the desert during the rainy winter season and move back towards their cultivated land, in the dry summer months. The lines below from Ali Al-Naimi's autobiography "Out of the desert" give us a glimpse of the relationship structures in the Bedouin community and a translucent image of their culture. "As we trekked from outpost to outpost along the shores of the Arabian Gulf, we would come into contact with others, mostly Arabs like ourselves. But our lives centered



almost exclusively around our families and tribe. Marriage between cousins was commonplace....”

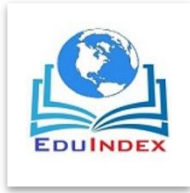
- a) “The Bedouins were not well understood, and often feared by outsiders...”
- b) “That may sound shocking to those unfamiliar with traditional societies, but to the Bedu, the broader family – parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles – has always been the core of tribal culture”

It highlights how the world ‘sees’ them too, something that helps distinguish key features of their culture. One that we can fish out is of the “joint-family” system, similar to their “broader family” system and much more.

The lives of these dessert dwellers vary from the sub-urban and urbanized citizens of Saudi Arabia, without Ac’s to beat the heat and ‘flip-flops’ or ‘slippers’ to enclose their feet, they have a different lifestyle revolving around their families, livestock and customs that help them survive the harsh desserts.

1.1 History

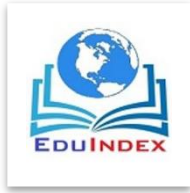
Agriculturists and pastoralists have inhabited the southern edge of the arid Syrian Steppe since 6000 B.C. (Fagan 1986, 234). By about 850 B.C., a complex of oasis settlements and pastoral camps were established by people known as “A’raab”. These Semitic speakers were the latest in a succession of farming and stock-breeding societies. They were distinguished from their Assyrian neighbors to the north, however, by their Arabic language and by their use of domesticated camels for trade and



warfare. These A'raab were the cultural forerunners of the modern-day Arabs. They carried out a caravan trade with their camels between southern Arabia and the large city-states of Syria. By the first century B.C., they had moved westward into Jordan and the Sinai Peninsula and southwestward along the coast of the Red Sea. The creation of a powerful Islamic state in western Arabia in the middle of the seventh century A.D. gave a dramatic impetus to Arab expansion. Thousands of Arab Muslims—many of them Bedouin—left the Arabian Peninsula to settle in the newly conquered lands around it. As a result, the Bedu/hadar distinction was reproduced in those Arabized territories where such a regional division of labor was ecologically and geographically practicable.

Bedouin societies are always linked to other non-pastoral societies by economic, social, and political relations. In the local context, a "Bedouin" is a regional specialist in livestock breeding whose closest social and political ties are with his pastoral kinsmen. The sedentary Arab, by contrast, places less emphasis on relations with genealogically distant kin. During periods when pre-modern states were weak and large-scale irrigated agriculture declined, some settled cultivators increased their reliance on breeding of small stock and moved into Bedouin social circles. In modern times, strong centralized authority and the monetarization of the rural economy have prompted some Bedouin to seek wage labor in cities and become sedentary. Regardless of their occupation and residence patterns, however, they remain culturally Bedouin as long as they maintain close social ties with pastoralist kin and retain the local linguistic and cultural markers that identify them as Bedouin.

1.2 The Bedouin Culture

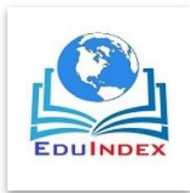


These Camel nomads occupy huge territories and are organized into large tribes in the Sahara, Syrian, and Arabian deserts. Sheep and goat nomads have smaller ranges, staying mainly near the cultivated regions of Jordan, Syria, and Iraq. Cattle nomads are found chiefly in South Arabia and in Sudan, where they are called Baqqārah (Baggara).

The lines "...The Family's efforts provided enough to eat, but little more. The rhythms of seasonal migration were set by nature, by the endless search for water and grass for our camels, sheep and goats. It was a way of life untouched by the modern world"

(And) "The harsh desert sun, the night-time moon and stars and family gatherings around a communal fire were our schoolrooms; the gossip shared in coastal trading towns and date-palm oases our internet"; clearly outline their nomadic lifestyle. We see how nature sets their timelines in places to stay, as weather conditions and land fertility both work hand-in-hand in the spheres of these wanderers. A little hint of how detached modernity is to their root culture can be seen in these lines too, giving us possibly a glimpse of how their culture strings are loosely tied with modernity and the modern spheres of society.

An example of how their primitive ways were modern enough can be seen from few lines of the Memoir such as "My uncle gathered a bunch of bushes from the surrounding desert and told us to stack them in the cave entrance..." (And) "He told us that if we heard a gunshot and the bushes didn't move, then he would have killed the wolf. If we heard the rifle and the bushes moved, then we would know that he had missed and the wolf, now frightened and angry, would be



after us. We tied our thobes, or ankle-length robes, and were ready to sprint for our tents.”

Their rich pastoralists and fishing lifestyle provided them with everything they needed for their nomadic culture. It is a culture comprised of family and tribesman dependency and independent of all modern methods or techniques of survival and adaptation.

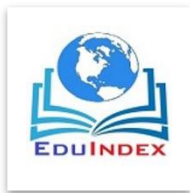
1.3 Research Focus

This paper focuses on bringing back light to the rich indigenous lives of the Bedouins and attempts to free them from the ‘neo-colonial trap’. The paper also highlights the transformation of their ‘root identities’ to ‘neo’ or ‘half-breed’ identities. It also sheds light on the consumer-capitalistic society.

The study uses the memoir “Out of the Desert” by Ali Al-Naimi as its alibi. It is perfectly well written and is a memoir that portrays the rise of a Bedouin in his Saudi country, the cost and struggle for that position and it also brings to our canvas the different power and capitalistic structures that function behind the curtains of these developing countries to juice out profits from the lives and identities of its people and indigenous tribes too.

Chapter 2: Looking into the Novel
Of the Dessert” (Flowchart Representation)

“Out



1) Start of a journey (1935)

2) Coming of Age (1945-1953)

Early life
and Culture

3) Stepping Out (1953-1959)

4) To America (1959-1961)

5) Adventure and Education (1961-1964)

Exploration,
and Learning

6) Back to Arabia (1964-1974)

7) On the rise (1970s)

a) Politics and Promotion (1977-1983)

b) From Boom to Bust (1984-1989)

c) War and Peace (1990-1994)

Career and
Power Politics

8) The Eastern Promise (early 1990s)

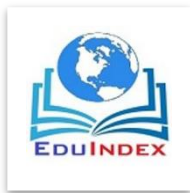
9) The World Stage (late 1990s)

10) Out of the Desert (1995-1998)

Power Politics, Modernism
and the New World

11) Domestic Pressure (1998-2003)

Domestic
Problems



12) New Millennium (the 2000s)

13) Building a University (2006-2009)

Neo-Colonialism
and Neo-Culture

14) Prices Rise and Fall (2008-2014)

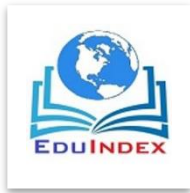
15) The Caravan Rolls on (2014)

Present World

After reading Ali Al Naimi's Novel, I glanced back at the contents to find how beautifully it can be used to portray the 'transformation' of 'indigenous identities' into 'half-breed' or 'neo-identities' that either carry bits and pieces of one's root culture or discard them completely to form new (neo) identities.

Chapters 1 and 2, show us the untainted Saudi Arabia, it's microscopic view of the Bedouin lives and something that could stand as the "image" of one's 'root' culture/identity.

Chapters 3-13, show us the neatly structured system behind 'identity' colonization. It shows us how capitalistic structures at the stake of modernism lure a country's citizens and tribesmen towards it. The 'need for individual growth' policy is one fuel that these superstructures fuel these systems with. In the memoir's case, the country's growth which is at the



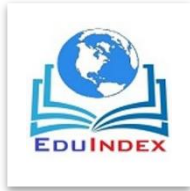
expense of its citizen's identities and its black gold (Oil) can be drawn from it. The reason for modernism and capitalism to advent these golden sand lands, their structural schemes and growth can be drawn. How one accepts a new (neo) identity and how his/her indigenous identity fades away can be seen from the novel too. The linear study of the chapters should give us an "image" of the entire "timeline" too.

Chapter 3: The land of Black Gold (Power Politics in Saudi Arabia)

In its early years, Saudi Arabia relied heavily on the many foreign pilgrims who annually came to the Muslim holy cities of Mecca and Medina. The Great Depression had its toll here too. In the 1930s Riyadh was feeling its effects; the number of pilgrims arriving had ranged from close to 100,000 in the late 1920s to about 20,000 in the 1930s.

- a) "Fewer pilgrims arriving for the hajj meant a reduction in customs duties and levies for King Abdul Aziz, who was custodian of these holy places. That money was badly needed to build our new nation."
- b) "...a search was already under way for a new source of income. The fruits of that search – what would turn out to be the largest known reserves of crude oil in the world – would shortly begin to transform not only Saudi Arabia but also the global economy itself."

Lines a) and b) from above (taken from Al-Naimi's memoir "Out of the desert") beautifully portrays the symmetry of the Oil boom in Saudi Arabia; Its birth and the cause behind it.



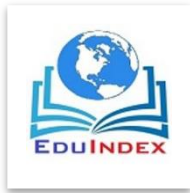
- c) "In the spring of 1933, even before Saudi Arabia was a year old, our king granted concession to Standard Oil of California (Socal) to explore for oil across much of the vast Kingdom."
- d) "To get the best financial terms for the kingdom, the king and his advisers cleverly played the American company off against its rival, the British-controlled Iraq Petroleum Company, IPC. The king and many Gulf leaders tended to distrust the British, given their history of imperial designs on the region."

Lines c) and d) (from the same memoir) give us a clear-cut picture of what's underneath the crust of Saudi's Global oil trade, Ali Al-Naimi was the Saudi Oil Minister for almost two decades from August 1995 to May 2016. Hddais autobiography gives us an insight at inner walls of Global Oil trade and the power politics involved behind it.

Chapter 4: Impact of Modernism and Capitalism

- a) "While I was growing up, so was my country. We didn't really appreciate exactly how much, and how fast, things were about to change...."
- b) "I came from the desert. By the age of seven I knew everything that my father knew. I thought that was it. But then you see all the new equipment and machines. It's not a camel, it's not a donkey, it's not a horse, it's not a sheep and it's not a goat. Then your mind begins to tell you that you don't know everything. You want to know more and that's how it started."

The quotes (a) and (b) from the memoir display how the lifestyles of Bedouins are altered with the rise of capitalism and modernism that weave



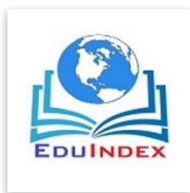
interconnected webs to trap indigenous tribes in them. They highlight the rising growth of modernism in the country. How Capitalism and modernism are connected. How the rise of technology is directly proportional to the rise of industry. Also, how all of this is a product of a mindset that is steered by "Curiosity" (Something Colonialists and capitalists have been using alongside language to control them).

We can use the example of Maria Campbell's autobiography "Half-Breed" too in this scenario, where one is partly their Indigenous Identity and partly a neo-colonized/cultural identity. We know about the challenges that she faces which can be seen as a common ground or experience in most of the Indigenous tribes around the world. The only problem about acquiring a half-breed identity is the inability to be able to be accepted by anybody; the reason for which one forms a new "mixed-breed" identity, a word I'd like to coin for now, that is, an identity formed from mixture of identities and disintegrating the root or primary identity.

Such ways Capitalism and Modernism work together as Modernism calls for Capitalism and vice-versa.

Conclusion

The modern society is involved in a rat-race of technology and growth and fueled by capitalistic greed and Indigenous identities that have been depleting one-by-one. A new world with neo-cultures and identities are formed, ones that do not carry the root cultures completely and if they do, they do just their bits & pieces or adulterated fragments if we may say. Indigenous identities are completely depleting because of this. What once made "their"



indigenous identities is sold for a 'so-called' modern lifestyle. A price of 'their' culture and identity is what these Bedouins have to pay, to be accepted and be involved into modern societies and the present world.

The two chapter titles from the memoir, that are, "Prices Rise and fall" and "The Caravan Rolls On" is what I'd like to end this paper with, symbolizing how indigenous people and many others are trapped in the capitalistic-consumer loop.

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