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I. INTRODUCTION

The rewriting of the biography of Ibn Arabi, who is mainly considered the most controversial Sufi figure in the Arab and Muslim world by a leading renowned, bestseller Saudi novelist; Mohammad Hassan Olwan is a landmark in the contemporary literary scene. He has set an example to the world that Arabia has a lot to offer to the world and that a culturally hybrid generation is changing the scene. He is a scholarly and established novelist who employs postmodern narrative techniques not only to rediscover, but to revive his own cultural heritage with dexterity. The thought of rewriting the biography of Ibn Arabi appealed to Olwan because no other established writer had accomplished writing an objective biography of Ibn Arabi nor did Ibn Arabi write his own. Therefore, what we know of Ibn Arabi through some unreliable sources is historically incorrect and ambiguous.

In an interview with Al-Khaleej Daily, Olwan remarked that:

> This tempted me to thoroughly read everything about him to finally find myself writing the fictionalized biography of Ibn Arabi, the Man. I was not mainly interested in the historical perspective, but rather in the creation of that sense of the atmosphere in which Ibn Arabi lived like any other human being. I tried to create the time and place in which the reader wanders step by step with Ibn Arabi, in which the reader travels along that vast areas, same as Ibn Arabi did, from Spain to Morocco; from Iraq

to Alexandria to Mecca to Aleppo. (17/5/2017)

Olwan had to demythologize the traditional point of view on Ibn Arabi by sifting through the unrealistic views of supernaturalism and superstitious terminology used in his own time so that the modern readers could understand the symbolic message of salvation. In other words as Fuller remarked: "everyone knows that a modern man could never believe that one can be raised from the dead!' however one could accept the resurrection symbolically whatever that might mean!"(15)

The starting point was to build suspense in readers and allow them to travel and live in the cities Ibn Arabi lived and visited, and introduce and accustom them to places they were not used to; and smell the scents of some places they did not even imagine of. Once the readers' attention was grasped and the setting had absorbed them, the readers forget that they are reading a novel and experience the life of Ibn Arabi; dancing and drinking, studying, travelling to different cities, meeting different people and falling and failing in love.

Small Death attempts to demythologize the myth of one of the most controversial figures in the Muslim and Arabic Sufi heritage; by writing the *literary* biography of MuhyDin Ibn Arabi. The feat of Olwan is that he managed to explore untrodden places in the not yet written literary biography of Ibn Arabi whose followers have blindly given him the status of a saint. James Morris claimed that Ibn Arabi "integrally combined the contrasting approaches of earlier Islamic intellectual traditions that had focused respectively on spiritual disciplines and contemplation, intellectual and scientific inquiry, and the elaboration of scriptural and prophetic teachings" in ways that were "*never really repeated or adequately imitated by any subsequent Islamic author*" ("How to Study" 73). Whereas, at the same time, his opponents defile, demonize and even consider him to be a heretic. In his book *Cambridge History of Arabic Literature*, Alexander Knysh asserted "Only upon his death did his esoteric works begin to gain wider circulation, antagonizing many conservative *Ulama* (Muslim religious scholars). Dismayed at the bold theosophical ideas advanced in these works, they accused their author of heresy and delusion, thereby setting in motion a torrid theological controversy that has not entirely abated up to the present day."(333) Others considered Ibn Arabi as the founder of the heretical doctrine of Oneness of Being (wahdat al-wuju¯d), understood as pantheism (Austin, Bezels 25–27). Olwan introduced Ibn Arabi as an ordinary down-to-earth character, a real man of flesh and blood like you and I, who falls in love, fails in love, behaves like any human being and has to experience ups and downs, in the journey for salvation. In fine, he is represented as a man in search for a unifying self and not as a saint.

In his book *Islamic Beliefs and Practices* (2010), Stefon Matt asserted that "his fame had spread all over the Islamic world. Venerated as the greatest spiritual master, his daring "pantheistic" expressions drew down on him the wrath of Muslim orthodoxy, some of whom prohibited the reading of his works at the same time that others were elevating him to the rank of the prophets and saints"(171)

II. DISCUSSION

I have chosen to investigate this topic; firstly, because of the controversy surrounding the main character (Ibn Arabi) and the influence it has on Muslim and Non-Muslim views of Sufism. Secondly, due to the deconstructing techniques (narrative metafiction and historiography, deconstruction and autobiography) used by the author to portray Ibn Arabi anew and demolish his "notion about the perfect man" (Cambridge History of Arabic Literature) as well as his "mystical path to spiritual and intellectual perfection" (337) as completely unholy and contrary to the well-established opinions about him. Finally, I would like to present this new perspective to the orientalists who admire the

writings of Ibn Arabi and praise his ideologies because they intersect with their beliefs. A rather large community of western scholars have taken a keen interest in translating and studying books of Ibn Arabi thereby piquing interest of academicians, critics and other curious readers all over the world.

Robert Fuller defines the process of Demythologizing as means to take the myth out (582). In this context it is used to replace the people's traditional view of Ibn Arabi, which gives him a mystical characteristic, with more acceptable and convincing view that renders him human characteristics or humanizes him.

To 'demythologize' literally means "de- to take out" or "be without" myth. 'ologize' means to study, therefore "to study in order to identify the unhistorical myths that are to be removed from the text."

Cambridge Dictionary defines demythologizing as "to provide an explanation of something, or to present something, in a way that removes any mystery surrounding it" while Oxford Dictionary defines it as "Reinterpret (a subject) so that it is free of mythical elements. Fuller asserted that "the term demythologize always refers to exposing or uncovering half-truths, deceptions, false premises, faulty theories, misguided historical interpretations and avoided or pretended documentation of sources" (11)

In order to make it acceptable for the postmodern readers, Olwan had to demythologize Ibn Arabi and give him human characteristics in order for people to relate to him and believe him to be true.

The notion of the perfect man is demolished by Olwan when he questions the credibility of these claims by depicting the day to day life of Ibn Arabi in the course of his novel. He portrays Ibn Arabi as an imperfect, normal character who behaves like any other human being. However, when Ibn Arabi finished his spiritual quest for knowledge by meeting his fourth pillar (Watad): Shams Tabrizi, he kept shedding tears and asked Tabrizi, "What should I do now?" Tabrizi replied, "Do whatever you like, Allah has fastened your heart with four pillars (Awtad)". Upon hearing, Ibn Arabi said disappointedly, "but I do not feel the serenity you are talking about? (537)" This quotation sums up the whole dilemma of the postmodern man. It depicts a dreadful sense of uncertainty as it shows, how man, whatever age he may live in, is tumultuously fighting for self-assurance and salvation; groping his way onward only to stumble in shocking obstacle about life and existence. Olwan prefixed quotations from Ibn Arabi's own books to chapters of *Small Death*, to give readers insights in Ibn Arabi's behavior as a character against his real writings as an author and Sufi scholar.) The 'Unreliable stories" proved that the action of Ibn Arabi as a normal human being, practically takes a contrary course to these quoted snippets.

The multilayered narrative framework of *Small Death*, underpins readers understanding of Ibn Arabi's biography, and in turn his human character. The thin historical narrative framework prefixed to each chapter of the novel, narrating in a semi-factual manner, the journey of the manuscript of the biography of Ibn Arabi, achieved a major purpose for claiming reliability of the story narrated by Ibn Arabi. This approach gives the readers the impression that Olwan wrote his novel according to what he found in that manuscript. The plain language used by Olwan to present the parts of the manuscript made the readers think that it is not the same author who wrote these parts about the journey of the manuscript which echoes the journey of Ibn Arabi himself. The end of both was in Syria. The heavy emphasis on that point provided Olwan a great advantage to present Ibn Arabi to the reader as he liked, especially after creating that façade which protected him from readers' accusations of misrepresenting such a public figure

The perfection of human life is unattainable. It could only be true in stories and books but never in real life. The reader of *Small Death* could simply arrive to this conclusion himself without extra-textual help. From his early years, Ibn Arabi, when he was young, lived a normal life like

any other person in his time, did. He loved the exotic beauty; Galla, he drank heavily, he danced madly, he lied about being in seclusion with his Shaykh while he was at loose ends in the farm of Fredrick drinking till dawn and sleeping till noon. He also made fun of the Islamic obligations which prohibit offering prayers in a state of intoxication. Once, while in his inebriated state when it was time for Dawn Prayer, he was asked by a friend of his who was also intoxicated, "How could we pray in such a state of full intoxication?" To which he replied, by asking, "Do you know what you are saying?" His friend answered "Yes." Ibn Arabi laughed and said, “Allah says you can pray if you’re aware of what you’re saying.” The notion of perfect man is not practically convincing as everyone is in need of physical as well as spiritual needs. When Ibn Arabi was found by his father after he had left the house, his father had asked him, "What is wrong with you son? How can you call yourself righteous when you spend a night with a woman and drink wine?” To which Ibn Arabi had replied, “It is my destiny, father”. (85)

The deconstruction of the idea of a perfect man as invoked by Ibn Arabi in his writings runs against the normal course of his life as represented in *Small Death*.

The feminist approach revealed in *Small Death*, can be interpreted as one of the means of demythologizing the myth of Ibn Arabi. The novel introduces Ibn Arabi as a man who falls in love, fails in love and lives for love. The novel portrays Ibn Arabi and his attitude towards woman realistically. Readers are given more than one perspective on Ibn Arabi when dealing with women. In his early years when he was young and immature, he and his friend Hariri, used to spend Saturdays and Sundays nights attending the underground sessions held by Castilian philosopher Fredric, drinking and dancing with the Christian beauty; the daughter of Fredrick: Ghala. Ibn Arabi felt attracted to her. However, Ghala repelled him and thus his attempts to woo her were in vain. He and his friend used to spend their carefree days at the farm of Fredrick in the countryside, dancing and drinking until they got fully drunk. The more Ghala rejected him, the more he drank, claiming that wine was a remedy for a broken heart. The second woman was his first wife Mariam Bent Abdoun who was recommended by his sister Om Saad. Their marriage was ordinary and unhappy like many others. They had one daughter from the marriage, Zaynab. However, she had been abandoned by her father at the age of two and could never see him again as she died on the way to Mecca with her mother, while she was travelling to see Ibn Arabi. While, Ibn Arabi was amorously involved with Lady Nezam, the beautiful daughter of Zaher Al-Din and the niece of Fakhr Al-Nessa.

The love Ibn Arabi experienced in *Small Death* is a spiritual unfulfilled love. Two love affairs of Ibn Arabi are mentioned in the novel, both of which were failures and left Ibn Arabi broken hearted. His first love affair was with Ghala, the daughter of Castilian philosopher, who repelled him; when he was young. His second love affair was with Lady Nezam when he was in his forties. He fell in love with her while he was in search of his third pillar that would help him achieve salvation and certainty. He met Lady Nezam when he was taking private lessons from her aunt, Fakher Al-Nessa. When he heard her sweet voice, he quickly fell in love with her and tried to find ways to meet up with her as much as he could. As the love between them burgeoned, she allowed him to see her hair, face and neck (as strange men are not permitted to see women in the Arab world). They started spending much time together. They were involved in a romantic relationship. They were lovers regardless of their age. The point here is that how could one interpret their relationship in the light of the (im)perfect man ethics and the traditional heritage at that time. This also is a postmodern feminist attitude that was imposed by the narrative and went unquestioned by the reader who forgot everything and pursued the narrative.

The inclusion of the role of Lady Nezam in *Small Death* is an important strategy used by Olwan to demythologize the myth of Ibn Arabi. It allows the reader to view Ibn Arabi as a normal person who

behaves and acts like every other ordinary person. Though Nezam was introduced to the reader as a perfect woman who is both beautiful and intelligent as her father, she is the one who drew him closer to her. This episode led Ibn Arabi to write one of his famous books, T*urjman of Love*, in which he describes Nezam from a lover's perspective. The separation between him and Nezam was devastating for him. He had proposed to marry her, but she turned down his proposal. This broke his heart and made the matter worse, his wife Marraim passed away. He felt lonely and sad and that his life was valueless. He married again just to make up for the loss of his wife and his love Nezam. It was an ordinary marriage like the one before. But the marriage did not last long and he divorced her when her previous husband who was missing, returned, as he found out that she still loved him. Finally, he married his friend's wife after the death of his friend.

From these Ibn Arabi's adventures in love, one can easily conclude that woman is the motivating factor in the narrative. Thus, woman is the catalyst for the events that take place and shape Ibn Arabi's life. The novel cannot be imagined without the presence of the beautiful women that Ibn Arabi encountered. Without the presence of women and Ibn Arabi's adventures in love, the narrative would have lost all its riveting characteristics that compel the readers to pursue the narrative to the very end.

The popularity of *Small Death* after its publication as well as the winning of Arab Poker by the author for writing it, paved the way for reinterpreting Ibn Arabi's character as more human rather than mystical. It was time to objectively interpret the character of Ibn Arabi again and to point out his human aspects as emphasized by Olwan himself in an interview.

In order to achieve the goal of demythologizing Ibn Arabi, Olwan wrote *Small Death* adhering to the tenets of the postmodern narrative techniques to highlight the dilemma of a man who resembles postmodern citizen in his uncertain and unguided search for salvation. This search for salvation was done through spiritual endeavors where he finally finds himself uncertain of nothing but love. Olwan, very skillfully presents the idea of uncertainty that absorbs his readers. No one is able to draw demarcating lines between what is fact and what is fiction about Ibn Arabi in *Small Death*. Olwan relied on the records and documents he himself collected and searched for factual details on Ibn Arabi which are accessible to the readers as well; a technique that allows for active reading and allures readers to coauthor the text as they anticipate the turn of events according to their knowledge of the main character. However, Olwan was clever when he used this strategy to get readers involved in the act of active reading.

The masterly mixing of history and auto/biography allows Olwan to stir doubts in the minds of his readers. Reading *Small Death* is challenging because it tests the readers skills in keeping alert to the fictional and dramatic tricks that evidently resemble the factual details of Ibn Arabi's (hi)story. This approach lets the reader asks; is this story or history as it swerves too distant to the other extreme allowing the reader to keep vigilant to the next turn in the narrative. Same importance should be given to the thin metafictional framework prefixed to some 12 chapters printed in bold, telling the story of one of his manuscripts that is passed from one hand to another, across ages until it reaches the modern age where a French PhD student convinces the last Syrian owner to buy that precious manuscript for a little sum of money. This time-travelling manuscript gives Olwan credit for employing the playful approaches in demythologizing the myth of Ibn Arabi, hinting at the probability of finding another source of reference of Ibn Arabi's story.

Being skeptical of the historical accounts is one strategy of Olwan in demythologizing the myth of Ibn Arabi. Olwan's main narrative corresponds to another pseudo-historical account of the manuscript's journey of one of Ibn Arabi's major books, which seems factual to the inexperienced reader. Though it is mainly a narrative fiction, it is a pseudo-historical account of some real historical

events. The dates and plain non-narrative language used in writing these sections cast doubt on the historicity and relevance of the narrative. Thus meta-historical and metanarrative techniques help Olwan to induce doubt in readers, so that they can read Ibn Arabi anew. The focus on the representation of both Ibn Arabi as a historical figure, as well as the account of his manuscript, baffled the mainstream readers who were used to having a singular opinion of him as well as the history which here appears to be distorted. Furthermore, focusing on the narrative of his life allows a perspective on his visions, fantasies, logics and ideas that most mainstream narratives tend to overlook. Attention is fully given to Ibn Arabi's literary narrative which is skillfully interwoven in the narrative giving more space to his human characteristics to loom clear to the reader as he deals in different day to day situations.

Olwan almost reconstructed Ibn Arabi's narrative anew than deconstructed it. Now, it is clear that history itself is a shifting problematic discourse. The approach in which Olwan deconstructed Ibn Arabi is paralleled by another deconstructive one to the sanctity of history as sacred and factual. Both of them were anatomized and subjected to multiple narrative layers. Olwan integrated non-literary accounts of Ibn Arabi into his narrative to facilitate the portrayal of Ibn Arabi's human characteristics.

It cannot be said that the representations of Ibn Arabi in the literary accounts are merely reactive; it is to insist that these accounts need to be situated as parts of a much larger fabric.

The skillful use of the first person narrative or the omniscient narrator in *Small Death*, made it easier and possible for Olwan to demythologize and deconstruct the third person historiographical and stereotypical image of Ibn Arabi. The case here is different, as people's opinion of Ibn Arabi is biased based on Ibn Arabi's beliefs and ideology. Some approved of him and some disapproved. Nevertheless, Olwan's feat was to make Ibn Arabi occupy the stage and tell his own story, keeping in line with his own writings known to all people and guarded by a well-established and programmatic novelist who maters his tools and knows how and when to employ them.

Olwan filled in the gaps in Ibn Arabi's biography contradictory to the expectations of his readers. Fact and fiction were blurred. The title of the novel is quoted from Ibn Arabi himself, "Love is a small death". It is a title which can be also interpreted as conclusion. A curious and meticulous reader who has knowledge of or interest in Ibn Arabi and his books would be astonished to find out that he is reading fictionalized historiographical sketch of a real author. The timeline of Ibn Arabi's life events is well presented in the novel to the degree that the reader would be enticed into referring to the factual accounts of Ibn Arabi's books and life incidents such as his marriage, parenthood, travels and his quest for spiritual perfection and salvation.

Additionally, Olwan mixes facts and fiction through another postmodern narrative strategy by inserting quotations of Ibn Arabi at the beginning of chapters, leaving the readers perplexed. This technique is meant to work as a reference framework that guides the process of reading as well as that of writing. It enables the sharing of authority between the writer and the written. Readers are often confused as to who is the real author; Ibn Olwan or Ibn Arabi.

The unprecedented contribution of Olwan is that he managed to breathe life into Ibn Arabi and portray him as a real human being full of complexities. By contrast, he has been portrayed either as a saint or a devil. Olwan recreated a brand new image of a man who lived all his life like any other human being searching for certainty and love as most of us do. This long missed and neglected aspect of Ibn Arabi's life and portrayal is what makes the novel appealing to both readers and critics. The process of depicting the life of Ibn Arabi together with the ups and downs that he experienced is marvelous.

Another contribution is Olwan's skill to demolish Rudyard Kipling's ancient idea that "East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet", by employing western narrative techniques to an eastern topic without glorifying one over the other. He tries to reconcile form and content, body and spirit; and he succeeds in striking a balance between these polarities.

Another demythologizing technique used by Olwan is stripping Ibn Arabi of knowing the unknown or what is technically known in Sufism as revelation. When was in love with Nezam and asked her father for her hand in marriage, he waited too long for her father to reply, but no reply came. He did not know why Nezam refused to marry him when they cordially loved each other. After she forsook him for a long time, when he met her at her father's (Zaher Din) funeral, she did kiss and tell him that she was his third pillar (Watad). Paradoxically as remarked by Jandi in *Sharah Fusus*, Ibn Arabi confirmed: "God showed me all my future states, both internal and external, right through the end of my days" (111) Now, readers are given an insight into the life of an ordinary man who does not know what his own destiny is. Another incident that is in line with Olwan's treatment of that aspect in Ibn Arabi is the discovery of his second pillar: Al-Khayat … he stayed with him not knowing that he would be the long sought after Watad.

Another approach used by Olwan to demythologize Ibn Arabi is skillfully deciphering the enigmatic languages used in Ibn Arabi's oeuvre which prevented most readers from grasping their contents. It is a well-known fact that language is meant primarily for communication and whenever it loses this functionality, it becomes useless and futile. The language used in Ibn Arabi's writings did not almost give direct meaning. It is more like a jargon than a language used to transfer meaning to listeners or readers. That is why most people complain that they cannot understand the language of Ibn Arabi, the phenomenon which Derrida called *Abyss* or the point in which meaning is lost though the language is still in use. Ian Almond stated in *Sufism and Deconstruction* that "The mysteries and enigmas of everyday life were simply 'bad' uses of language – the result of using 'nonsense', unclear metaphysical propositions" (94).

Olwan presented Ibn Arabi as a normal character who uses the same language people used in discussing most of the factual incidents that occurred in Ibn Arabi's life and stirred storms of endless debates. Incidents, such as the presence of Khedr, talking to the dead and meeting prophets in some abnormal states are presented briefly, just to give the modern reader an opportunity to determine the credibility of these incidents by himself.

Much of Ibn Arabi's fame came is mainly due to the difficult language he used in his books. He was a great imaginative writer, a person with super imaginative power. His reliance on the use of symbolic language prevented most people from understanding the gist of what he (un)wanted to say. His language is given a multiplicity of radically different contexts, each proffering subtly different speculations on the notion of what is hidden, veiled or withdrawn (92), he is using a speech foreign to our normal speech (93) the idea that the Ineffable Author is on the 'inside' – whilst we, humble readers, linger forever on the 'outside'–remains essentially the same. (94)

III. FEMINISM

Small Death gives three female characters space to formulate Ibn Arabi's thought; His spiritual mother, Fatima Bent Mathny, the woman who midwifed Ibn Arabi and who guided his spiritual progress, was the first influence on Ibn Arabi guiding him to the path of Sufism. When his father passed away, she said to Ibn Arabi's mother, Noor, "Muhy is your father, though you are his mother, don't disobey him" (176). He was attached to Fatima even after her death. When he came back home he went to her house and sat on the threshold of her gate and felt her spirit greeting him. The second female who taught Ibn Arabi was Fakhr Al-Nessa. This is one of the early

postmodern examples of women teaching men of great spiritual ranking. She instructed Ibn Arabi in many fields of knowledge. The third female character in Ibn Arabi's biography is Lady Nezam; which is considered by many of Ibn Arabi's scholars to be the symbol of love and knowledge, and as asserted by Leonard Lewisohn in *The Heritage of Sufism*" "She, as his illuminated soul, represents the search for unity and contains in herself the still causes of history and of creation.

IV. CONCLUSION

In fine, Olwan successfully achieved his key point that accounts of Ibn Arabi as known to people are not accurately depicted in the writings about him than as a constructed man's point of view. His unprecedented contribution is that he managed to breathe life into Ibn Arabi and portray him as a real human being. Olwan succeeded in demythologizing Ibn Arabi through relying on some techniques. First, he used postmodern narrative techniques to highlight the dilemma of the modern man. Second, he managed to mix history and auto/biography to stir doubt in the minds of readers as well as doubting historical accounts about Ibn Arabi. Third, Olwan integrated non-literary accounts of Ibn Arabi into *Small Death* to facilitate the portrayal of him as a human character. Fourth, he relied on the interchange between the first and the third narrative technique to mix fact and fiction through inserting quotations of Ibn Arabi at the beginning of the chapters. Fifth, Olwan stripped Ibn Arabi of knowing the unknown to reveal him as an ordinary human being. Sixth, he deciphered the enigmatic language used in Ibn Arabi's Oeuvre which prevented most readers from grasping their content. Finally, Olwan employed a feminist approach when he allowed three female characters to formulate the thoughts of Ibn Arabi.

The novel is a call for love, tolerance and acceptance of the other; principles vital for people in all times.

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