

Material Agency and Environmental Memory in Amal Al-Faran's *The Sand Divers*: A Material Ecocritical Reading

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Abstract: Literary stories as ‘storied matter’ reflect the culture of a society by revealing the dynamic interactions between humans and nonhumans and the association of agency with matter. This article examines Amal Al-Faran’s *The Sand Divers* (*Ghwāṣū l’ahqāf*) as a localized Saudi contribution to material ecocritical scholarship, focusing on how nonhuman agency is articulated within a desert environment shaped by historical memory and culturally grounded ecological practices. Drawing on Iovino and Oppermann’s material ecocriticism, Barad’s agential realism and Bennett’s vital materialism, the study explores how landscape, natural forces and memory function as vital, agentic forces that shape narrative trajectories, resist human control and sustain the heritage and culture of its people. By foregrounding the material agency of the landscape and natural forces and their role in preserving environmental memory, the article demonstrates how Al-Faran’s novel extends material ecocriticism through a regionally situated, non-anthropocentric literary vision.

Keywords: nonhuman agency, material ecocriticism, Saudi novel, vital materialism

1. Introduction

Our current geological age is often referred to as the Anthropocene, denoting that human activities have become the dominant influence on the environment. However, it is crucial to keep in mind that “human choices are determined by specific cultural and material circumstances that themselves shape further actions” (Dürbeck, Schaumann and Sullivan 2015: 119). To understand this situation, it is critical to recognize that humanity is not an autonomous entity that functions separately or in a vacuum. Accordingly, it is important to expand what is considered influential and agentic. Since the dominant cultural system of ideas, including the term Anthropocene, stems from a predominantly Western viewpoint, most studies on the topic have been primarily applied to Western literature. Ranging from Goethe (1787) to Karen Duve’s novel *Rain* (1999), Dürbeck et al. (2015) establish the existence of a wide range of agencies beyond the human. Also, Kost (2018) considers the agency of mushrooms in the Austrian writer Peter Handke’s novel *Versuch über den Pilznarren* (2013). More recently, Li (2025) explores the narrative agency of coal and snow in Clair Keegan’s novella *Small Things Like These* (2020). Other genres have likewise been explored, as demonstrated by Sarikaya’s (2024) material ecocritical study of Victorian poetry, with particular attention to Augusta Webster, and Publicover’s (2022) analysis of *Pericles*, which foregrounds the agency of water. Although it is crucial to examine how different

cultures incorporate interactions between human and nonhuman entities in their literature, few studies have discussed the nonhuman agency in non-Western contexts. For instance, Fourqorean (2024) examines the interaction between human and nonhuman characters in contemporary South Asian literature, as presented in Kiran Desai's novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*. Iheka (2018) also investigates the topic in the African context in *Naturalizing Africa* (2018). However, the only study focusing on the Middle Eastern context is Khalil's (2024) analysis of water agency in four works, one of which is British Egyptian playwright Sabrina Mahfouz's *A History of Water in the Middle East*. Based on available information, few studies have examined the nonhuman in Saudi novels. For example, Al-Suhaibani and AlQahtani conducted a material ecocritical reading of a Saudi novel in their work titled "Storied Matter and Literary Creativity in Ahmed Alhokail's *Roads and Cities*, exploring the "agentic matter of Najd region and traditional poetry" (2023: 8). Similarly, Almehaidly investigates how AI "serves as both a catalyst" and "a critical lens on human nature" in Alotaibi's *Raf Alyoum* (2024: 1). Yet there remains a need to study how humans and their nonhuman counterparts interact with each other in the Saudi ecosystem, where the vitality and vibrancy of the more-than-human world stems from the community's culture and heritage.

The Sand Divers, an example of Saudi literary production where nonhumans are portrayed as active agents, received positive reviews from both readers and critics, and it was shortlisted for the Sheikh Zayed Book Award in 2019. The novel was perceived by many as a notable example of desert literature. For instance, Zouggar (2020: 191) highlights the significance of the desert setting in the novel, arguing that the landscape is the protagonist which plays a role in shaping the language, the characters, and even conflicts. Nevertheless, the study does not treat the landscape as an independent entity with an agency; instead, it focuses on how the desert is represented in the text through a descriptive analysis. Nonetheless, Amal Al-Faran approaches the Saudi ecosystem from a perspective that challenges the anthropocentric view. In the world she creates, other forces influence human choices just as much as humans impact the nonhuman world because, as the new materialists point out, "human beings are far less sovereign than the humanist tradition would have us believe" (Berghaller 2014: 37). In the novel, landscape and natural forces are portrayed as vital forces that influence the choices and actions of human beings. As previously explained, most studies on the Saudi novel tend to overlook non-human agency. This tendency might be due to the fact that "studying portrayals of non-human agencies in the Anthropocene requires restructuring our knowledge about foreground and background, subject and object; it leads us to shift the frame and focus into a broader scope" (Dürbeck et al. 2015: 122). Consequently, this paper strives to shift the focus to the nonhuman in the narrative without entirely overlooking the human experience, thereby broadening the analytical framework to acknowledge the contributions of the vibrant components of our world. Further, it aims to explore the entanglement between human and nonhuman entities and to investigate how nonhuman agency is presented and enforced in the Saudi literary context.

2. Matter matters

Ecocriticism primarily focuses on “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996: xviii). Nonetheless, ecocriticism, following the path of many schools of thought such as Feminism, has evolved and undergone changes which are commonly referred to as waves (Nuri 2020: 6). This is significant because the third wave, according to Marland (2013: 854), inspired the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth issued in Cochabamba at the 2010 World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. The significance of this declaration lies in its advocacy for the nonhuman and acknowledgment of its vitality and agency. Moreover, in March 2017, New Zealand’s Parliament issued the Te Awa Tupua Act, which gave the Whanganui River “the same duties, rights, powers, and liabilities as a legal person” and shortly afterwards, the Supreme Court of Uttarakhand stated that the Indian Ganga and Yamuna Rivers “were living entities with the status of legal persons” (Luisetti 2023: 20). These developments align with material ecocritical concepts central to the fourth wave, which foregrounds the vitality and agency of matter, whether animate or inanimate. Iovino and Oppermann (2012b: 75), who introduced “material ecocriticism” in 2012, relate the material turn to scientific developments and view it as a reaction to the linguistic turn, which reduced all phenomena to linguistic and social structures. Therefore, material ecocriticism “examines matter both *in* texts and *as* a text” (Iovino and Oppermann 2014: 2). New materialists, including Pickering (1995), Latour (2004), Barad (2007), Alaimo and Heckman (2008), Abram (2010), Bennett (2010) have made notable contributions to the field through their work on the vitality and agency of matter. However, Iovino asserts that *Material Feminism* (2008), along with Barad’s *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, constitute the “theoretical groundwork” for this emerging field (2012: 135). In the introduction to *Material Feminism*, Alaimo and Hekman (2008: 7) declare that the book aims to describe nonhuman agency where “nature is not a passive social construct but is, rather, an agentic force that interacts with and changes the other elements in the mix, including the human.” Barad’s development of agential realism is another pivotal contribution to material ecocriticism. Her views on the concept of agency did not conform to the traditional notion in which agency is something possessed by an entity. Contrarily, Barad perceived agency as arising from the relationships or interactions between entities. In the agential realist framework, the concept of intra-action is of great importance as the term “*signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies,*” in contrast to interaction, which implies the existence of separate agencies (Barad 2007: 33). The concept of intra-action is significant because it emphasizes the coexistence of agencies through their interconnectedness, which is relevant in the discussion of the current novel.

Material ecocriticism’s main contribution is its emphasis on the agency and vitality of matter in literature. Iovino and Oppermann (2012b: 461) proposed that “[a]ll nonhuman things—water, soil, stones, metals, minerals, bacteria, toxins, electricity, cells, molecules and atoms, and a vast array of nature’s constituents as well as culture’s trash and garbage—are manifestly vibrant and possess various degrees of agentic capacity”. It also introduced consequential concepts that helped

evolve the perception of matter as agentic such as ‘storied matter’, which signifies that matter possesses narrative agency, which “can be defined as a nonlinguistic performance of matter manifesting itself often in expressive collectives” (Oppermann 2014: 30). Hence, this concept refutes the basis of anthropocentrism by asserting that both humans and nonhumans can demonstrate narrative agency because “displaying matter’s incipient eloquence, narrative agencies debunk our habit of worlding as if we are the only storied beings” (Oppermann 2017: 285). Storied matter serves as a tool for interpreting literary narratives that highlight the nonhuman’s narrative potential, as humans and nonhumans alike possess the capacity to historicize and to act as storytellers; therefore, they should not be positioned at opposing ends of a hierarchy. In addition, vital materialism, a concept introduced by Bennett (2010), challenges the traditional standpoint that divides the passive, inert matter from the vibrant beings. Bennett (2010: viii) defines vitality as “the capacity of things edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans—but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.” This concept is significant because it indicates how nonhumans, such as ecological forces, can be perceived as dynamic agents in literature. As such, a desert or a sea is not just a setting but an entity with agency that can influence the plot and characters.

3. Analysis

In *The Sand Divers*, the material environment is represented as an active participant in the narrative, rather than a passive object of human exploitation. Iovino and Oppermann (2012a: 79) indicate two ways of interpreting the agency of matter: The first way “focuses on the way matter’s (or nature’s) nonhuman agentic capacities are described and represented in narrative texts,” while the second “focuses on matter’s “narrative” power of creating configurations of meanings.” In *The Sand Divers*, the material environment exercises agency at both levels, shaping human lives while simultaneously functioning as a medium that records and articulates their history. The story centers on three neighborhoods that are the descendants of three brothers: Hdhāl, Fwāz, and bnīān. All are descendants of Mān’ bin Hādī. These neighborhoods are in Al’ qīq oasis, part of Al’ahqāf, where residents earn their living by diving for pearls in the Gulf. Upon the conclusion of the diving season, they return to cultivate the palm trees within the oasis. They fight for two-thirds of the year, which is the time for nurturing the palm trees, and refrain from fighting during the diving months. Every year, the three neighborhoods gather around the acacia tree, the oldest tree in the area, to renew their oath to abstain from war during this time. The novel narrates their love and war stories, with the primary focus being Naflah and Omoosh’s relationship. It is a historical novel set during the conflicts that led to the establishment of the third Saudi state and predate the modernization of Saudi society. This is essential because it addresses the heritage of Saudi culture and practices concerning the natural ecosystem prior to the country’s exposure to Western cultures. The Arabic title, *Ghwāṣū l’ahqāf*, signifies the location of the characters’ residence, which is situated between Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Yemen. Therefore, the material environment is foregrounded from the beginning. However,

it is essential to note that the three neighborhoods are situated in an oasis and primarily rely on cultivating palm trees. Therefore, the typical Bedouin lifestyle is not present. The text utilizes the natural components of the oasis in addition to ecological forces to depict the Arabian desert as an egalitarian environment of different, but somehow cooperating agents. The material agency in the text is represented through three primary aspects: the portrayal of landscape as an influential agent in narrative development, nature as a counter to human control, and, finally, matter as a reservoir for memory.

3.1 Shaping fates: Landscape as a catalyst for plot and character development

The landscape in *The Sand Divers*, encompassing both natural and human-made elements, plays a significant role in the narrative. It shapes characters, and the entanglement of human culture and the natural environment drives the plot. The impact of the environment on various aspects of people's lives in the oasis is evident from the outset. Al-Faran's world aligns with Iovino and Oppermann's (2014: 3) statement that "[i]t is quite arduous for humans to declare their agentic independence in a hybrid, vibrant, and living world." The novel opens with a description of how the arrival of autumn affects the people of the three neighborhoods in Al'qīq. They must travel across the Arabian Peninsula, from southern Najd to Al Hasa, then to Bahrain, to participate in pearl diving expeditions (Al-Faran 2016: 7). The inhabitants adhere to a natural calendar that influences even their marital decisions, as those planning to leave would "pardon their wives from any commitment to wait" for them, fearing they might never return (Al-Faran 2016: 7). As a result, the people of the oasis follow the ecological rhythm of their environment as it shapes their identity, influences their traditions, and determines their way of living. They fight for eight months, which corresponds to the growth cycle of palm trees, from pollination to the beginning of the hot summer when the dates ripen. With the harvest of the palm trees, "they store both the dates and the spears" (Al-Faran 2016: 8). They store the spears because they will not need them during the diving season, which spans the remaining four months of the year. However, the material environment's agential force extends beyond shaping cultural formations; it also structures territories and borders, which subsequently become sites of ongoing conflict.

This agentic power of the natural environment is not confined to the oasis. In her discussion of the environmental patterns introduced in Saudi novels, Al-Qarni (2024: 109) argues that these texts present multiple types of environments, each with its own system, to which humans adapt, resulting in behaviors that vary according to the specific characteristics of each setting. However, Al-Qarni (2024: 114) concludes that the pattern introduced in *The Sand Divers* combines two distinct environmental systems, namely the desert and the sea, because the characters, who live in the desert, are forced to dive for pearls as a means of survival, which has had an impact on the people and their lives. Even though the sea is only mentioned in passing and the primary focus is on the oasis, the fear of loss and absence associated with it permeates the residents' lives. The best example of this is Naflah's mother, who lived in constant fear of losing her husband, Sālḥ, to the sea. This fear was

passed down from her mother-in-law, who lived and died waiting for this loss. Eventually, Sālḥ dies from tuberculosis caused by his diving career. Her son Jābr's realization of this deep trauma prompts him to leave secretly for his diving voyage. Jābr's mother bears a resemblance to Mauria in John Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, a character who lost all the men in her family to the sea. Both women acknowledge the sea's formidable power as a persistent threat to the men in their respective families. Khalil (2024: 357), in her examination of the agential performativity of water in Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, acknowledges that the agency of the sea overpowers humans. Jābr's mother is aware of this overwhelming power of the sea, and her fear probably stems from her realization of the impossibility of overcoming it.

A key component of the environment is the landscape which is the dominant force in the narrative, as the entire story of the three neighborhoods is constructed around their relationship with the place where they have dwelled for ages. The narrator asserts that "the land to which they belong is more ancient than they would ever imagine, but its history that concerns them begins with the house that their great-grandfather planted in the forehead of Al'aḥqāf ... and years after his death, his palace's arm extended westward to make the palace of his youngest son bnīān" (Al-Faran 2016: 10). The older siblings, Fwāz and Hdhāl, criticized their half-brother for leaving the family palace. However, years later, Fwāz takes his family and ascends the mountain eastward to his father's place, while Hdhāl and his family stay in the palace. Even so, the borders of these three neighborhoods are not merely the result of human choice or agency. As the narrator observes, "the bowels of each palace continued to spill out houses and farms, while the streams ensured the drawing of the borders of the three neighborhoods and the raids continued to attack those borders and protect them" (Al-Faran 2016: 10). The palaces are thus depicted as organic beings that generate offspring, metaphorically referring to the expansion of the neighborhoods. But more importantly, the material environment of Al'aḥqāf is portrayed as a key factor in determining the separation of the three brothers and, subsequently, the borders of the three neighborhoods. It is a distributed agency because it is a collaborative effort between the people of Al'qīq and the natural environment to create and maintain these borders. Eventually, networks of human and nonhuman agents co-produce the outcome, or, to use Barad's terminology, enact an *intra-action* between the two.

This tendency to create separation and fixed borders is present in the natural environment of the oasis itself: "Al'aḥqāf trees are terrified by crowds. Every push poison its surroundings, eliminating any chance for life to grow nearby" (Al-Faran 2016: 56). This is reflected in the man-made environment as the houses of Mān's lineage maintain a distance between each neighborhood:

Since Al'qīq was isolated in three neighborhoods, the houses of the bnīānis spread and extended in the direction of Mrīfh, while the houses of the Fwāz family crowned the mountain and streamed down its slope. As for the houses of the descendants of Hdhāl, they spread out like a heavy raindrop in a circle, with the center being the ruins of Mān'. The streams separated

them, so they assumed that their borders were as fixed as their palaces (Al-Faran 2016: 56).

The previous passage evidently describes a collaboration between humans and their physical environment to delineate the borders among neighborhoods.

The landscape of the oasis and its borders evolve as a storied matter and a creative force in the novel. The landscape's material agency is clear, as it is seen both as the cause of conflict and the creator of peace. The borders are the reason the war erupts between the Hdhālis and the bnīānis (Al-Faran 2016: 66). This agency is evident as “there is an oral contract in Al‘qīq between the oasis and the stream; the water flows around the curves of its neighborhoods, making sure not to trespass on the neighborhoods as long as it has a path in between them. At the same time, it is feared by its palaces and palm trees for none grows on its sandy banks, no matter how long the draught continues” (Al-Faran 2016: 67). Matter is intra-acting with the human dimension to produce meanings and discourses that can be interpreted as stories (Iovino and Oppermann 2014: 7). The people of the oasis loved and fought at these borders that were created by the material environment.

The impact of the components of the oasis landscape extends beyond the plot as it has a profound influence on its residents. The most prominent example of this influence is Naflah. She is described as a lively, cheerful, affectionate, and energetic young woman during her stay in the neighborhood. Naflah’s mother gave birth to her in a stream of water, and the first thing she heard was the sound of drums, and the first thing she saw was water and people dancing (Al-Faran 2016: 31). Therefore, dance becomes a defining characteristic of Naflah’s personality. However, all of this changes when she ascends the mountain and moves into the palace of Wthīl following her marriage to Omoosh Alfwāzī. The palace of Wthīl is not a mere setting for the events. Its significance is underlined when the narrator provides a detailed description of it, unlike the other residences. The location of the Wthīl palace is emphasized as it is situated at the top of the mountain in seclusion, providing the Fwāzis with protection from the war and the subsequent flooding. These unique features suggest that this space is unlike any other in the story, as people tend to change upon crossing its threshold.

The drastic change that Naflah undergoes is consistently attributed to the palace rather than to the women who harassed her or to her husband, Omoosh, who failed to satisfy her need for love and care: “Like it or not, the palace started to limit her joy and change even her dance” (Al-Faran 2016: 131). Her awareness of this influence is evident, as she confesses in sadness, “I have not danced since I came to your house” (Al-Faran 2016: 206). For her, to cease dancing is equivalent to abandoning the activity that has brought her the greatest happiness in her life. She restores her old self solely by departing the palace, which is why her visits to her family are described as escapes, and “throughout the distance that she takes down the mountain toward her neighborhood, she is possessed by the spirit of a slave running from his masters. The slave reaches his haven only to discover the chains on his legs.” Moreover, “the laziness that weighs on her soul in Wthīl disappears in her parents’ home” (Al-Faran 2016: 141). This indicates that the mere change of place altered her condition. When her best friend, Farjh, considers marrying

Omoosh's brother, she feels compelled to caution her against Wthīl. The palace is portrayed as a character in the novel that is agentic, vibrant, and interactive. When Naflah disregards Omoosh's request for her to stay at home during the divorce ceremony of her cousin, her visit and dancing are described as an attempt "to regain a smile that was stolen by the mountain of Fwāz" (Al-Faran 2016: 230). She resists Wthīl's influence through her brief visits to her neighborhood, but more importantly, by dancing, which is portrayed as an act of resistance not only against her husband's patriarchal attitude, demonstrated by his restrictions on her love for dancing, but also against Wthīl. Following her divorce, Naflah's reflections on the matter focus primarily on blaming Wthīl: "Between blaming herself and accusing Wthīl, she cursed the palace that considered the disclosure of love and rapture as a sin; her pain had no solution but to bury the ruins of Wthīl in her imagination" (Al-Faran 2016: 240). Naflah's psychological trauma is connected to the palace of Wthīl and the mountain of Fwāz; therefore, the healing process involves addressing the source. Naflah's therapeutic process of walking in nature is regarded as a treatment for the ordeal she experienced from the time she spent at Wthīl Palace. So, the narrator describes her condition following Omoosh's sudden death by stating that "with every step she kept removing the thorns in her soul from Wthīl's palace" (Al-Faran 2016: 261). Even the death of her late husband is perceived through the marks left on her soul by the palace.

The palace is described by Aljebreen (2020: 83) as the "authority of the place", which mainly applies to Wthīl, given its interaction with both characters and events. Aljebreen (2020: 87) further equates Omoosh with Wthīl Palace, arguing that both exert forms oppression and authority over Naflah. However, this paper argues that Wthīl is far more influential in the narrative than Omoosh to the extent that even the death of Omoosh is understood in light of the marks Wthīl leaves on Naflah. Aljebreen's argument appears to emphasize the leverage Wthīl exerts over Naflah in the novel. This emphasis, however, reflects a human bias in narrative interpretation, an anthropocentric perspective in which humans are considered the primary agents because agency is linked to intentionality, and equating a nonhuman entity with a human one is perceived as an act of enforcement. Such a perspective results in a failure to acknowledge nonhuman agency, which can at times exceed that of humans. As Iovino and Oppermann argue, agency is not an exclusively human property; rather, it is an inherent property of matter that manifests in multiple forms (2014: 3). In this context, agency is evident in the profound impact that Wthīl had on Naflah and the trauma she experiences.

3.2 Nature as a site of resistance to Anthropocentric control

In *The Sand Divers*, the nonhuman not only exerts power and influence but also defies human will and intentionality. Al-Faran presents the nonhuman entities as the only effective resistance against human authority that is striving to prolong the war, a conflict that is driving the entire oasis, with both human and nonhuman elements, towards destruction. Except for Omoosh, almost everyone in the three neighborhoods either seemed eager for the war or reluctant to bring it to an end. On the other hand, ecological forces were resisting this human recklessness. For

instance, brief truces were imposed by the natural cycle of plant growth: during the single warm week in the depths of winter, when palm trees pollinate and their flowers bloom, before the cold returns even harsher than before. The narrator emphasizes that “during this week, the men put down their spears and went up their palm trees, but it is only a temporary calmness between the two neighborhoods. Then the spears came to visit in their beds” (Al-Faran 2016: 97). The natural environment is constantly advocating the prevention of war, even when human mediation fails. However, this temporary truce, which results from the natural cycle of plant cultivation, is only the beginning of a series of events that will bring the war to an end. At the height of the conflict between the neighborhoods, heavy rain began to fall, and the locals assumed it would pass quickly. Nevertheless, the rain continued for an extended period that “they saw nothing in it but the silver whip of the lightning, flogging their valleys nonstop” (Al-Faran 2016: 71). This image highlights the wrath of nature directed towards them and alludes to its retaliatory response against human acts of aggression. The rain pauses briefly, providing them with a limited chance to take measures against this overwhelming power. However, this break is short-lived as the rain intensifies and continues for three more days. On the fourth day, the residents realize that a flood is coming.

For people living in deserts and oases, water is often regarded as a symbol of life and growth and is received with profound relief because as Dürbeck et al. argue “[a]s a natural agent, water shapes life and land, and is an age-old metaphor for change itself” (2015: 123). Nonetheless, this time, it is the source of fear and destruction. This contradiction is highlighted by the narrator, who first emphasizes that “water is the beloved of the oasis, which it awaits every year to wash its palm tree fronds and fill its wells” and later recognizes that “water, which is its guest, for which it usually dances, arrives roaring in anger with its muddy face and deafening growling, it was about to do them a great injustice” (Al-Faran 2016: 172). The narrator continues to anthropomorphize torrents, describing the streams of water created by them as a tongue that “chases those who are running cluelessly from its face” (Al-Faran 2016: 172). The use of anthropomorphism places the natural forces on equal terms with the people of the oasis. Consequently, the conceptualization of nature as resisting human authority becomes a valid response to the direct encounter between two equally agentic and vibrant entities. Bennet (2010: xvi) finds it necessary to develop “a bit of anthropomorphism”, which is the notion that human agency has an echo in the nonhuman nature, “to counter the narcissism of humans in charge of the world.” In this context, the narrative equates the two forces, paving the way for the reader to anticipate whose agency will ultimately prevail.

The torrential rain is described in detail, and its destructive effects are vividly illustrated. The rain stops at dawn, allowing the people of the oasis to comprehend the gravity of its impact, only to resume before sunset. This interplay of rain and sun works as a calculated collaboration among natural elements, psychologically manipulating these people, draining their energy, and stripping away whatever power they have left to resist. At this point of the disaster, a voice coming from the direction of Mīrīfh shouts: “The mountain, seek Fwāz’s Mountain” (Al-Faran 2016: 172). This unforgettable event in the history of Al’qīq was known as Qshāsh,

indicating the immense power it exerted on the oasis, including its organic and nonorganic components. The houses, streets, watchtowers, palm trees, animals, and humans were all affected. Therefore, the narrator describes it as the longest night of Al'qīq, "when the Fwāzis hosted the Houses of Hdhāl and bnīān. The bodies that were fighting yesterday are now stacked up, forgetting temporarily what was in their hearts" (Al-Faran 2016:176). The three neighborhoods suddenly find themselves crowded together on the mountain in a desperate effort to survive the natural disaster. Hence, the end of the war and the sharing of the remaining shelters and food in Fwāz mountain are therefore not human choices, but rather consequences of the rain and flood. This is evident when Omoosh's brother, who had gone on a short trip to Riyadh, returns after the natural disaster and is astonished to realize that "the rainwater put out what he was keen to ignite by throwing the carcass in the well of the bnīān tribe" (Al-Faran 2016: 180). Omoosh's brother and his friends were so eager for the conflict to continue that, prior to their journey to Riyadh, they had plotted to throw a dead donkey into the well, contaminating the only water source the bnīānis have, and blaming it on the Hdhālis. This plan was intended to provoke further conflict over water supply in an oasis where resources were already scarce. However, the torrential rain not only influences the struggle between the three neighborhoods, but also initiates a sequence of consequential environmental events:

Qshāsh left behind a heavy legacy. The swamps it caused in the palm trees of Al'qīq are shrinking, and in their place the mallow bushes, which the farmers detest, are expanding. These pushes are turning their leaves toward a sun that Al'qīq oasis is yearning for these days. And they are doubling in size every day. The green flies have returned to the valley, and termites are no longer a rare sight in the houses. However, the worst guest of the oasis waited two weeks to arrive. In the dusk, its flocks settled in the valley, and at dawn the shepherds saw it rubbing its legs against its body. The amazing creature, with the face of a horse, the thighs of a camel, and the tail of a snake, chose the worst time to visit the oasis. It would devour everything while they watched (Al-Faran 2016: 201).

Despite the metaphorical portrayal of locusts mentioned above, Al-Faran assigns agency to the nonhuman through the natural cycle itself, rather than invoking any metaphysical realm. Locusts increase due to the torrential rain because "[h]ydroclimatic conditions are closely linked to the biological behaviors of desert locusts, among which rainfall plays the most dominant role in the locust life cycle. It replenishes soil moisture so that eggs can complete development. Rainfall also promotes vegetation growth to feed hoppers" (Liu, Dongxiao and Xiaogang 2024:1). Therefore, Qshāsh is followed by the massive invasion of locusts. However, the most crucial aspect of locusts is their devastating effect on the plant cover because a "swarm of 1 km² comprises 80 million locusts and can consume food crops in a day sufficient to feed 35,000 people" (Liu et al. 2024: 1).

The locals struggled to protect their crops, but they were unsuccessful:

The smoke from the palm fronds, which the palm owners burned, could not prevent the greedy invader, and the sound of the swarms of locusts echoed in their houses. The locusts ate every plant along the banks of the stream and the farms. Even the palm trees that withstood Qshāsh were stripped of their crowns. It was a war with those who do not want to settle in their land. They realize that, yet it does not bring them any comfort (Al-Faran 2016: 208).

This overwhelming force of nature impedes human desire for war as one of the locals states: “We have no energy for war, do not open a door that was closed by Qshāsh” (Al-Faran 2016: 209). This is an explicit declaration of defeat on the part of the people of Al'qīq in the face of the mighty power of nature. Although torrents are a recurring theme in Saudi novels, significantly affecting characters, plot development and ways of life, *The Sand Divers* stands out for its unique portrayal of nature's cruelty. In the novel, humans are rendered helpless, unable to protect themselves and focused solely on survival (Al-Qarni 2024: 293-297). Al-Faran chooses to grant nature the ultimate authority over humans as their selfishness and arrogance become their motivators. As such, the flood and locusts are acts of resistance from the more-than-human world against human aggression towards the natural environment, stemming from war. The fighting neighbors broke the agreement to cease fighting during the diving months, burned the trees, and attempted to contaminate the well by throwing the donkey's carcass into it. This pattern of natural disasters causing substantial changes is not exclusive to Saudi novels. For instance, Gabriel García Márquez's *The Autumn of the Patriarch* showcases how tropical storms “disrupt the established patterns of both life and narrative” (Rogers 2021:1583).

Recognizing the agentic powers of the natural environment is what Nancy Tuana (2008: 193) called “viscous porosity” arguing that Hurricane Katrina in the United States exemplified this viscous porosity between humans and their environment, as well as between social practices and natural phenomena. She observes that, although humans often believe they have subjugated nature through technological advancement and that human agency predominantly governs the natural order, natural disasters serve as a reminder that nature also possesses agency that “influences the so-called natural and social order” (Tuana 2008: 196). Within the context of the novel, the depiction of the natural disasters serves as a reminder to the people of āl'ahqāf that humans are not in complete control, as they might assume, because other entities also demonstrate power. This notion of humanity's creations failing to guarantee their superiority in the ecosystem is reflected in the story: the first car they have ever seen, following the flood, malfunctions and becomes stuck in the mud, unable to go any further (Al-Faran 2016: 188).

3.3 Memory within a memory

In *The Sand Divers*, two distinct forms of remembrance are employed. Firstly, the text itself functions as a site of memory for the collective Saudi consciousness, a medium of remembrance for the past that no longer exists, due to the economic, cultural, political, and social changes that Saudi Arabia has undergone. This text becomes a historical record to preserve the language, traditions, architecture, and even the natural environment of a society that new generations have not encountered (Aljebreen 2020; Zouggar 2020; Al-Rashada 2022; Al Farhan and AlRaddadi 2023). This form of remembrance represents the initial layer of matter as memory within the novel, intended for the actual readers of the book. However, within the narrative, there is another agent of memory for the people of Al'qīq, the Acacia Tree in the northwestern area of Al'qīq, which they call Mrīfh. Trees are typically considered a record of time as their material bodies record time through growth rings. It is worth noting that Barad uses these rings to illustrate how matter can be eloquent. She states that “the rings of trees mark the sedimented history of their intra-actions within and as a part of the world (Barad 2007: 180). Therefore, the author’s choice of an indigenous species in the ecosystem of the Arabian Peninsula, unlike the fig tree that was mentioned in Naflah’s dream, highlights the fact that it is a long-standing witness to the history of the oasis and the region. In this context, the agency of the Acacia Tree, Mrīfh, is to be conceptualized within what Britta Colligs terms the ‘arboreal agency,’ where the tree’s agential realism is omnipresent in fiction when it “becomes a marker of place, an arboreal monument of time and history as well as the centre of mythology” (2024: 73). These three characteristics are obviously present in Mrīfh, and it is the only tree in the narrative that holds such a prestigious position. In contrast, other trees are often referenced collectively, such as the palm trees in the oasis.

To highlight its significance, Mrīfh is rendered the marker of place for the whole oasis as the description of the landscape prioritizes it and foregrounds its presence. Beyond Mrīfh, the three neighborhoods clearly diverge. In this description, the ancient tree serves as the point of unity, the three neighborhoods as points of divergence and disparity, and the borders as the units of dispute. As such, Mrīfh demonstrates a capability to shape the land and the culture. The locals view it as a sacred entity to vow their commitment to their agreement to stop any wars of aggression during the months of diving, so “they never leave until the three neighborhoods pledge to disregard any grievances toward each other during the months of diving” (Al-Faran 2016: 7). The tree is more than just a place to carry out this meaningful tradition; it becomes a witness to the agreement. Also, Mrīfh is the last thing they see before leaving the oasis to make their oaths and the first thing they see when returning from diving or trade trips. The Acacia Tree not only marks the borders of the oasis but, more importantly, dominates it.

The second aspect whereby Mrīfh demonstrates agency is serving as an arboreal monument of time and history, as Acacia trees are connected to both the natural environment and the area's cultural traditions. Environmentally, Acacia trees are classified as perennials, as their expected lifespan exceeds one hundred years. Therefore, the explicit use of the term “the memory of the tree” in the novel seems

consistent with a creature that surpasses the lives of people and most living creatures in the area (Al-Faran 2016: 9). In this context, the tree is an active, agentic entity that serves as “an arboreal storage of memory” for the people of Al‘qīq, as Colligs terms it (2012: 79). Historically, wood from Acacia trees has been the preferred choice for lighting fires in the Arabian Desert due to its unique burning properties and the scent it leaves behind. As such, Acacia woodlands in Saudi Arabia are decreasing immensely due to logging for firewood and charcoal (Alshahrani 2021: 945; Alanazi 2024: 224). Al-Faran’s depiction of this tree, now subjected to severe injustice through aggressive logging, as the memory of the oasis can be interpreted as a warning about the consequences of allowing humans to dominate other nonhuman beings. Moreover, the reverence that all the residents have for the tree highlights this cultural change especially considering that Mrīfh symbolizes a refuge and a mother figure, as noted on several occasions. For example, when Shafī, Naflah’s secret lover, hears about her marriage, his first thought is to run to Mrīfh. In Islamic and Arabic culture, mothers are the epitome of sacredness, and harming a mother is an unforgivable sin.

The third feature of Mrīfh’s agential realist presence is its centrality to mythology, with Mrīfh serving as a primary illustration by embodying both the mythology and the cultural identity of the people of Al‘qīq. Therefore, the dispute over its history and the origin of the name among the three neighborhoods is discussed intensively at the beginning of the novel. Each neighborhood has its own version of Mrīfh’s story (Al-Faran 2016: 11). The dispute is never resolved in the novel because Mrīfh remains an emblem of a shared heritage and memory. Its centrality outweighs that of nearly all characters in the novel, and its absence would fundamentally change both the landscape and the trajectory of the narrative.

4. Conclusion

Iovino and Oppermann (2012b: 451) affirm that “[h]umans share this horizon with countless other actors, whose agency—regardless of being endowed with degrees of intentionality—forms the fabric of events and causal chains.” This assertion encapsulates the central argument of this paper, which situates human agency within a broader network of agencies by examining the influence of nonhuman entities in Al-Faran’s *The Sand Divers*. Ultimately, Al-Faran created a world where these entities are vital, effective, and agentic. The vitality of the more-than-human world is demonstrated through its constant interaction with the human dimension, as the two engage in a dialogue, playing a crucial role in shaping the culture of the oasis, a fact reflected in the people’s adherence to the rules dictated by the location and its ecological forces. This intra-action between people and their environment constitutes a form of distributed agency, through which they collectively produce Al‘qīq. The agency of the landscape is evident in its influence on both plot and character, demonstrating a form of narrative creativity that is integral to the agency of matter. A world is depicted in which nature resists human authoritative aggression, manifesting as a chain of natural events that prevent human conflicts. Moreover, Al-Faran constructs layers of material memory that preserve the heritage and culture of its people. By choosing Mrīfh to embody this archival memory, she

underscores the disconnection from the natural world brought about by modernization. This study is limited to one Saudi novel, yet it highlights the need for further research addressing the scarcity of studies on nonhuman agency in Saudi literature. It may also be of interest to future studies to consider how this topic is tackled across different regions, whether in the Middle East or other non-Western regions, to examine the impact of various cultural backgrounds.

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