

Coronavirus: A Literary Perspective from the Arab World

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Abstract

The Coronavirus pandemic has had a profound impact on all aspects of human life, including the way we experience and represent reality. One of the most striking aspects of the pandemic has been the widespread documentation of scenes of chaos and suffering. These scenes have been captured on news footage and social media posts and have been shared widely around the world. While these images provide a glimpse into the reality of the pandemic, they often fail to capture the full emotional and psychological impact of the experience. In contrast, literature has a long history of representing the hidden impact of pandemics and catastrophes on the psyche of individuals and communities. From Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) to Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera* (1985), the novel, in particular, has offered a valuable and perceptive understanding of the pandemic experience. In the wake of the Coronavirus pandemic, a surge of literary responses emerged from novelists around the world. This paper aims to map how the pandemic outbreak unfolds in the Arabic novel. It investigates how Arab novelists make meaning of COVID-19 by examining prevalent themes and recurrent structures in their works. The focus is on four major Arab novels: Muhamad bin Muhamad Salem's *Ala'ib Khalid ma' Korona* (*Khalid's Games with Corona*, 2020); Wasini Alaraj's *Layliat Ramada* (*Ramada's Nights*, 2021); Jasem Salman's *Korona: Alhub wa Alharb* (*Corona: Love and War*, 2021); Sakina Aldakhil's *Nawbet Amal* (*A Fit of Hope*, 2021).

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The COVID-19 pandemic changed our lives in a rapid and unpredictable way. It is “a paradigm-shifting event that divides lives and cultures into a before and after” (Outka, 2020, para. 2). The pandemic outbreak has led to a great deal of uncertainty and anxiety. This uncertainty is represented in literature and the writings about the pandemic. There are many novels and stories that have been written about the pandemic, and each one offers a unique perspective on this global event. However, writing about pandemics in literature is somewhat akin to writing about wars and natural disasters: writers often need the tragedies to end before they can fully explore them in a literary way that is both profound and meaningful.¹ This is especially true for novels, which often deal with topics at length and in detail, and which require more time to convey human emotions during such turbulent times. Likewise, great authors have written about pandemics and used them as symbols in their novels. Yet, the most interesting literature about them has only emerged years after the end of crisis. According to Elizabeth Outka, in her study of the novels written about 1918-1919 influenza, “as the pandemic became less of an immediate threat and fears of its return started to recede, authors seemed more willing to resurrect it: to represent its damage directly, to process its meaning, and to assess its lingering effects” (Outka, 2019, p. 4). An example of this is the Great Plague of London of 1665 which was revisited many decades later in works like Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722). Similarly, the deadly Spanish Flu of 1918-1919 found its way into literature years later in works such as William Maxwell’s *They Came Like Swallows* (1937) and Katherine Anne Porter’s *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939).

The COVID-19 pandemic sparked a wave of public introspection among poets and novelists in the Arab world, as well as in other parts of the globe. A survey of Arabic pandemic fiction suggests that, amid the initial outbreak of Coronavirus, there has been a rush to publish novels that explicitly put “Corona” on their cover pages – *Running Away from Corona* (2021), *The Illusion of Corona* (2021), *The Judgment of Corona* (2021) – or use it as a backdrop to already known and familiar narratives – *Love in the Time of Corona* (2021) (Naef, 2020, p. 11). While some novelists were able to capture the chaos and uncertainty of the pandemic in their work, the majority of fiction published during that time was lacking in depth (Ismail, 2021; Naef, 2020). However, the novels that have been published to date suggest that the pandemic has had a significant impact on Arabic literature and culture, and it is likely that this impact will continue to be seen in the years to come. Moreover, the full extent of the COVID-19’s impact on the Arabic novel is not yet well-documented in the literary criticism (Alsabt, 2022, p. 273). The current study aims to fill the gap in the research on post-Corona Arabic novels by offering a nuanced paradigm for analyzing them. The study will explore how post-Corona Arabic fiction makes meaning of the pandemic and how it has shaped the novels’ themes, characters, and structures. To this end, textual analysis and close reading will be used as the primary methodology to analyze both content and form of the selected works. Given the limited scope

¹ The impact of World War I (1914-1918) on Anglo-American fiction is just one example of the ways in which literature responded to war. There was relatively little fiction written about the dark side of the war during the war itself and the immediate aftermath (Hynes, 1990, p. 424). However, in the 1930s, a new wave of novels began to emerge, exploring the psychological and social impact of the war. The 1930s saw a publication of some of the most important and influential works of Anglo-American fiction about World War I, including Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (1927), F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) (Peters, 2012, p. 34).

of the study, the focus will be on four Arabic novels that were published shortly after the pandemic began and that offer a unique artistic perspective on this global crisis: Muhammad bin Muhammad Salem's novel *Ala'ib Khalid ma' Korona* (Khalid's Games with Corona, 2020), Wasini Alaraj's *Layliat Ramada* (*Ramada's Nights*, 2021), Jasem Salman's *Korona alhub wa alharb* (*Corona: Love and War*, 2021), Sakina Aldakhil's *Nawbet Amal* (*A Fit of Hope*, 2021). This way the study will examine how the parameters of assessing the nature of the pandemic are similar or different from one novelist to the other. By examining the diverse perspectives of post-Corona Arabic novelists, the study will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the pandemic and its impact on the Arabic literature.

Coronavirus Between Myth and Reality

Pandemics and the plague have been a recurring theme in literature for centuries (Girard, 1974). Pandemic in literature is not just a medical phenomenon, but also a powerful symbol that has been used to explore complex themes like fear, isolation, solidarity, and resilience in the face of death. In the Arabic novel, the representation of the COVID-19 pandemic takes two distinct forms: mythical and realist. In mythical representations of COVID-19, the pandemic is seen as a manifestation of a deeper moral or social crisis. Through such representations the pandemic is used as a metaphor for the challenges of modern life, such as capitalism, political corruption, and social alienation. Both Wasini Alaraj and Jasim Salman imagine a world in their novels in which the COVID-19 pandemic is just one of many catastrophes that have befallen humanity. These novels explore the ways in which the pandemic has exposed the fragility of our world and the need for new ways of thinking about our relationship to each other and to the world. In realist representations, the pandemic is depicted as a natural disaster that has devastating consequences for human society. These novels often focus on the physical and emotional impact of the pandemic, as well as the social and political challenges it creates. Good examples of such realist representations are Salem's *Khaled's Games with Corona* and Aldakil's *A Fit of Hope*. Both texts follow the lives of their central characters as they grapple with the effects of the pandemic. The novels vividly depict the chaos and fear that the pandemic unleashed, as well as the resilience and compassion of the human spirit.

The Mythical Plague

Myth is a recurrent theme in much modern literature (Gentile, 2011). It can assume many shapes, and the term "mythical" may conceal a variety of cultural phenomena (White, 1971, p. 3). James W. Menzies notes that there is no single form of myth and that it is constantly being reinterpreted and reinvented in literature (2014, p. 23). However, there are some common qualities that constitute the mythical attribute. Mythical literature often features mythical characters, such as gods, epic heroes, demons, and monsters. These characters are often used to explore themes of good and evil. There is also the mythical setting, such as lost cities, ancient forests, and magical realms. These settings can provide a symbolic perception of reality and the different aspect of human society. However, this study will apply a specific understanding of myth that combines an approach of myth as reception (White, 1971) and the myth and ritual school.

Pandemic fiction often features a sense of mystery, in which the disease is given some supernatural power (Girard, 1989). In literature the plague is often portrayed as a mythical or supernatural force that brings about death and destruction. This is because the cause of the pandemic is often unknown, the speed with which it spreads is unbelievable, and the power with which it destroys is unprecedented (More, 2021, p. 3857). In *Corona: Love and War*, Salman's narrator reflects on the mysterious influence of Corona pandemic: "Corona, the disease that baffled humanity with its tyranny [...] is just like the Nimrod's fly² – its origins, departure, and potential consequences for humanity remain shrouded in uncertainty." (Salman, 2021, p. 231). The novel draws a parallel between the mysterious and perplexing nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the enigmatic quality of Nimrod's fly. By making this comparison, the author highlights the sense of mystery and unpredictability surrounding the pandemic, emphasizing that it has left humanity grappling with many unanswered questions and uncertainties. Moreover, the plague is often seen as a symbol of the dark side of human nature and the destructive power of evil (Schmitz, 2021). Thus, the mythical plague can be used to explore different social, political, and psychological crises, reflecting the fear and uncertainty experienced during epidemics. This section will examine how mythical literary representations of COVID-19 in the Arabic novel reveal the complex social, political, and psychological dynamics that both shape and are shaped by this unprecedented global crisis.

The mythical representation of the pandemic is evident in both Alaraj's novel *Ramada's Nights* and Salman's novel *Corona: Love and War*. Both texts imbue the virus with mythical power, depicting it as a force that destroys all aspects of life in a way that transcends scientific understanding. Additionally, both novels utilize imaginative and mysterious settings, as well as recurring mythical motifs such as the "conjunction between the plague and the sacrificial rituals in mythology" (Girard, 1974, p. 19). While Salman invokes mythical characters such as jinn, devils, and demons, Alaraj draws on religious mythology. Despite their apparent differences, both novels share these elements, which contribute to their respective representations of the pandemic as a mythical phenomenon. The mythical portrayal of the pandemic in these two novels transcends mere incorporation of magical or supernatural elements; it serves as a lens through which to delve into the pandemic's profound meaning. Within Alaraj's *Ramada's Nights* and Salman's *Corona: Love and War*, COVID-19 emerges as a manifestation of systemic societal issues. This section aims to elucidate how such narrative approach facilitates a deeper understanding of the pandemic's societal and political ramifications and how it is employed to reveal the vulnerabilities inherent in civil and societal structures.

In *Ramada's Nights*, the author conjures up an imaginative city to serve as the backdrop of the outbreak of the pandemic in the novel. The name of the city is Coviland which is derived from the name of the virus itself, Covid. The city, which lies on the coast of an unnamed sea in an unnamed country, is represented as a land with a long history of diseases, droughts, and wars

² In Jewish and Islamic mythology, Nimrod is depicted as a powerful tyrant who incurred divine punishment leading to his death. This punishment is said to have resulted from a tiny fly entering his nose, causing him to fall ill and ultimately killing him (Furayhah, 1992, p.174).

and is dominated by anarchy and corruption. Salman's *Corona: Love and War*, on the other hand, features an unnamed city which is also dominated by anarchy and corruption. Salman's city is described as a land of "fear", "wars" and "arm trade" where people are constantly "looking over their shoulders" (Salman, 2021, p. 13). The virus is seen as a punishment from God, and the people of the city are in a state of constant restlessness and anxiety. Such unexplained, excessive forces at work in both cities suggest a mythological approach. The utilization of unnamed settings in the novels can be interpreted in two ways. First, the location may be irrelevant in itself but rather a symbol of places in which inequalities and injustice prevail. By avoiding naming specific places, the writers are able to make their criticisms of such injustices more universal and gives the place a wide symbolism as if talking about the world. Second, in their critique of such injustices – whether political, capitalist, religious, or social – the writers may be avoiding pointing the finger at a particular place in order to avoid censorship or persecution. This allows them to express their criticism of these powers without directly implicating any specific individuals or institutions. For example, the unnamed coastal city in *Corona: Love and War* has a lot in common with the planned city of NEOM built on the Red Sea in northwest Saudi Arabia. Salman's novel describes a city that rises economically in record time for unclear reasons, as if it was chosen by hidden forces to be a site for larger and wider works than its inhabitants could imagine. This suggests that the city, according to the author, is controlled by capitalism, which grows and controls everything, becoming monolithic and unstoppable. However, the pandemic interrupts the progress of this grand plan, and the city and its neighboring towns and villages are hit by a sudden stoppage of life and work. Eventually, the economic inflation that affected the place comes to an end.

In Salman's and Alaraj's novels, the mythical plague is never present alone. It is part of a "thematic cluster" (Girard, 1974, p. 840–1) that includes the motif of ritual sacrifice, which is a significant element of mythological narratives. This element is present in both texts, but it is depicted more explicitly in Salman's novel. In *Corona: Love and War*, there is a clear interweaving of reality with "ancient Arab mythology" of *jinn*, lost treasures of Aladdin, and stories of the sudden rise from rags to riches (Salman, 2021, p. 73). The story of Amer, a poor shepherd from the village, who meets the *jinn* during his regular trips to the desert while tending to his flock of goats evokes stories of fantasy and allegory (Menzies, 2014, p. 33). Amer is represented as meager, mean man who is determined to rid himself of his "bitter poverty" in any way possible (Salman, 2021, p. 31). He finds in the *jinn*'s fantastic power and knowledge an opportunity to escape his reality. Amer approaches the *jinn* and makes a contract with their leader, "a half-human-half-demon creature" (Salman, 2021, p. 36), in which he agrees to sacrifice the body of a young girl and present it to the *jinn* in return for power, wealth, and the marriage to the most beautiful girl in the village, Layla. Amer's wish is granted and in no time, he becomes the wealthiest, most powerful man, not only in his village, but in the whole country. However, this prosperity is interrupted with the spread of the pandemic, which takes the life of Amer's young bride as well.

While there are no ritual sacrifices explicitly made in Alaraj's novel, there is a similar representation of the trope of ritual sacrifice in the death of Ramada's mother, Zahra.. Her illness is initially approached with superstitious and religious treatments by the father, who

keeps her locked in and refuses to allow her to be hospitalized or receive any medical treatment. His resources in this approach are what Ramada calls “the superstitions of the Imam, Shamsuddin” whom the father considers as “the savior of all humanity” (Alaraj, 2021, p. 17). The father’s superstitious and religious treatments for Zahra’s illness indicate a belief in the power of these rituals to heal or protect. On the other hand, the mother, who is depicted as having made all sorts of sacrifices throughout her life, adheres to her husband’s wish as if making her final sacrifice to both patriarchal figures, the father and the Imam. The narrator declares that the reason behind the father’s sacrifice of Zahra is “his fear of the death devils” (Alaraj, 2021, p. 14), which once again emphasizes the role of superstitious beliefs in addressing the illness. This portrayal suggests that the father is giving away Zahra as a scapegoat in an attempt to save his own life. Immediately after Zahra’s death, his fear of death disappears, and he starts a new life. He marries a woman half his age and revives his business, which has temporarily collapsed during quarantine.

Examining the ritual sacrifices depicted in the selected novels provides valuable insight into how certain individuals’ deaths, as Judith Butler has argued, are considered less “grievable” than others (2022, p. 4). Pandemic fiction has consistently uncovered the unequal impact of crises on marginalized and oppressed groups revealing the harsh reality that those who are already disadvantaged face heightened challenges during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Burkert, 2021, p. 39). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the high rates of death among marginalized groups, such as disabled individuals and people from racial minorities and ethnic communities, can be attributed to several factors, including structural racism and disparities in healthcare access (Krishnadas and Taha, 2020, p. 50). Their death is not perceived as important or worthy of grieving because they are considered as *others* (Butler, 2022, p. 4). Butler’s concept of “grievability” can be extended to show that the deaths of women, in the novels under discussion, are also considered less “grievable” than those of other groups. In both Salem’s and Alaraj’s novels, only women are sacrificed not as an inevitable tragic consequence of the pandemic, but because their lives are devalued within the patriarchal societies depicted in both works. The representations of the sacrificial acts of women characters by men are used to explore and expose the gendered inequalities pervasive in society. The sacrifices of the young girl and Zahra, the mother, are ultimately futile, as they do not prevent the spread of the pandemic or bring about any lasting happiness for the survivors. However, these sacrifices do serve to highlight the vulnerability of women’s lives in communities controlled by gender inequalities.

The mythical representation of the pandemic in these two novels is not simply a matter of adding magical or supernatural elements to the story. Rather, it is a way of exploring the deeper meaning of the pandemic. It provides a framework for understanding the pandemic and its social and political implications. COVID-19 in Alaraj’s novel *Ramada’s Nights* and Salman’s novel *Corona: Love and War* is seen as a manifestation of the underlying problems in society. The prevailing inequalities and injustices that are present in the depicted cities are seen as equally significant, if not more so, than the pandemic itself. The pandemic is used to reveal the fragility of civil, societal, and humanitarian structures as a whole.

Realist Representation of the Pandemic

Realist representations of the pandemic typically focus on the physical and emotional effects of the pandemic. In such representations, the narratives often draw on deep research and the author's reporting skills to create a vivid and realistic depiction of the pandemic. Both Salem's *Games with Corona* and Aldakhil's *A Fit of Hope* represent the epidemic in a matter-of-fact way, drawing on facts and scientific evidence in an attempt to bring to life a contemporary world of pestilence and death. The notion of what constitutes real evidence both scientific and social in both works is fundamental. They emulate genres of factual reports of the pandemic based on available data, epidemiological variables, and the reports from the World Health Organization.

Khaled's *Games with Corona* by Salem tells the story of a Mauritanian child who is displaced from his home country due to his father's work. Khaled is forced to adapt to his new life in the United Arab Emirates, where he cautiously makes new friends and tries to enjoy the city atmosphere. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forces Khaled to stay indoors and limits his social interactions. Khaled finds it difficult to adjust to these restrictions, and he begins to devise plans to go against the rules. The novel chronicles Khaled's daily efforts to circumvent the quarantine rules, and it explores the psychological and emotional toll that the pandemic takes on Khaled and his family. The novel is divided into four chapters, each of which corresponds to one week of full quarantine. The chapters are written in a simple and direct style, and they provide a clear and concise account of the outbreak of the pandemic, the government precautions against its spreading and the way people reacted to these precautions. The following passage is a clear example of this:

That night, Khaled learned that the Emirate's government had implemented a number of measures to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. These measures included the closure of mosques and the suspension of *jama'ah* prayers. The number of confirmed cases had reached 93, and it was likely that more measures would be implemented soon. Social gatherings of all types would be banned, and stores and shopping areas would be required to enforce strict social distancing measures (Salem, 2020, pp. 45–46).

The narrative style here provides a detailed perspective of the early measures taken in response to the spread of COVID-19 by the Emirate's government. These measures are listed in a matter-of-fact way, and they are followed by the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases. The use of statistical facts in this passage serves to create a sense of reality and provides a clear perspective on the impact of the COVID-19 on contemporary life in that particular moment of history.

In her novel *Fit of Hope*, Aldakhil tells the story of a nurse who must choose between quitting her job to care for her sick newborn daughter or returning to work to save lives. The novel explores the challenges faced by healthcare workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the personal and professional sacrifices that they make. The novel's protagonist, Dalilah, is a dedicated nurse who is passionate about her work. However, when she gives birth to her sick

daughter, she stays at home to attend to her. With the outbreak of the pandemic, Dalilah is forced to make the difficult decision of going back to work, but she does so with great reluctance. She knows that she is putting her daughter and her family at risk, but she also knows that she will be saving other people's lives. The novel follows Dalilah as she struggles to balance her personal and professional obligations, and it explores the emotional and physical toll that the pandemic takes on her. In her daily interaction with the sick and ill, Dalilah reports, almost in a scientific matter-of-fact way, the signs, symptoms, and consequences of getting infected with COVID-19: "The symptoms were similar, almost identical: high temperature, difficult breathing, pain in the chest, severe headache, lack of oxygen and signs of delirium" (Aldakhil, 2021, p. 47). This vivid description becomes even clearer when the narrator gets infected with the virus herself: "Her breath becomes erratic, her chest muscles fatigue, her heart rate quickens, her blood oxygen levels drop, and she teeters on the edge of fainting" (Aldakhil, 2021, p. 93). The narrative focuses on the observable and tangible aspects of the pandemic. Furthermore, it depicts how it is even more challenging for emotional and mental health. The following passage creates an intense sense of claustrophobia and despair:

She had lost track of time in that small, suffocating room, in which she was trapped. The ceiling was her only companion, and she had come to know its every crack and crevice. She learnt by heart which lights go on first before the others (Aldakhil, 2021, p. 146).

Having submitted to medical isolation care, Dalilah cannot see her family anymore. The passage effectively conveys her emotional state in the small isolation room. Dalilah, who has previously nursed so many infected patients and attended to them in their time of isolation, now knows for real what it is like to be sick, isolated and separated from her loved ones in the time she needs them the most.

Both realist and mythical representations of the COVID-19 pandemic offer valuable insights into the human experience of this global crisis. Realist representations help us to understand the physical and emotional impact of the pandemic, while mythical representations help us to see the pandemic as a symbol of deeper moral and social challenges. By exploring these different perspectives, the selected novels help us to reflect on how individuals navigate a profound reevaluation of their self-conceptions and interpersonal dynamics within the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, which is the central theme of the following section.

Social Lockdown: Rethinking Self and Others

The social lockdown imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic serves as a central theme in much of the pandemic-related fiction. It is impossible to discuss the pandemic in fiction without discussing the social lockdown, as it is one of the most defining features of the pandemic and a powerful metaphor that runs through the post-Coronavirus novels. The social lockdown has a profound impact not only on society and life but also on the literature and culture of the time. This period exposes the vulnerability of individuals to social and economic consequences, while also prompting a reevaluation of how individuals relate to themselves and

each other in the context of illness and death. These themes are particularly relevant given the various forms of social lockdowns – such as isolation, quarantine, curfew, and social distancing – that test the inherent sociability of human beings. The novels under discussion delve deeply into these overarching themes. They serve as powerful metaphors, intricately woven into the post-Coronavirus narratives, symbolizing the profound societal shifts and personal transformations brought about by the pandemic. This section explores ideas of social lockdown, quarantine, isolation, and social distancing as narrative tools used to represent the impact of the pandemic on notions of individuality, community and belonging.

In *Khaled's Games with Corona*, the author explores the impact of social distancing on Khaled, who is already familiar with social isolation. As mentioned previously, Khaled is displaced from his home country of Mauritania and he experiences social isolation in the city where his family settled. The few friends he made were merely distractions, as the dream of returning home to his old friends and extended family has always been with him. In the wake of the COVID-19 quarantine, Khaled's limited social life comes to a halt, and his feeling of estrangement is further intensified. The lockdown causes him to reconsider his place in this alien community. In one scene, Khaled packs his bags and tells his parents that he is going to flee the country exclaiming: "I'm basically jailed in the house here. I can't go out, I can't play ... I'm suffocating and I will die" (Salem, 2020, p. 84). This childish idea of fleeing the country in a time of lockdown and air travel curfew shows how social distancing can be more challenging for people who are already alienated and displaced. Furthermore, the novel also explores the impact of social distancing on different individuals and in various geographic contexts, providing an insightful understanding of this issue. Khaled's experience in the United Arab Emirates differs from his cousins' experience in Mauritania. In the crowded cities of the United Arab Emirates, social distancing is strictly enforced, and Khaled is warned that he could be arrested if he violates the rules. In his hometown, a village south of Mauritania, social distancing and the government's precautionary measures are not strictly enforced or followed. Khaled makes video calls to his cousins back home, where they mockingly assert their freedom to wander the streets and visit each other without any concerns about Corona; they insist, "there's no Corona here!" (Salem, 2020, p. 85). This illustrates the notion that in some regions, Corona is seen as an illusion imposed by lockdown. These geographic disparities in the enforcement of social distancing measures not only contribute to diverse pandemic experiences but also present distinct challenges and opportunities.

In *Khaled's Games with Corona*, the narrative centers around Khaled's experience of social lockdown while placing those of his mother and sisters in the background, despite them sharing the same challenging circumstances. Unlike Khaled, his sister does not exhibit any resistance to the lockdown. She is depicted spending her time locked in her room "as usual" (Salem, 2020, p. 13), as if the lockdown has had no discernible impact on her, except for Khaled's increased presence at home, which occasionally leads to more annoyance than before. The mother's response to the lockdown receives minimal mention, with her main concern being Khaled's potential rule-breaking and venturing out onto the street. The author's deliberate omission of the mother's and sister's experiences may convey the notion that in certain Arab countries, women already contend with various forms of confinement, rendering the concept of social

distancing relatively inconsequential for them. This perspective sheds light on the complex interplay between gender roles and societal norms during the pandemic. It highlights how gender dynamics can shape individuals' responses to crises like the pandemic, influencing their perceptions of what constitutes confinement and the impact it has on their lives.

In *Ramada's Nights*, the narrator declares in the opening chapter, "lockdown has exposed us all [...] our secrets, ailments, and human frailties" (Alaraj, 2021, p. 21). This quotation sets the tone for exploring the impact of lockdown on the main characters' lives. It indicates that lockdowns have forced individuals to confront hidden aspects of themselves or their lives that they may not have previously acknowledged. This could refer to personal struggles, familial issues or psychological problems that have come to the forefront due to isolation. Alaraj's central character, Ramada, who is unhappily married to a mentally abusive husband, finds solace in her relationship with Shadi, a middle-aged musician who constantly travels between countries to perform. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic forces the two lovers to separate, as Shadi is unable to travel back to Coviland. When the government of Coviland imposes full lockdown measures and sends people back to the safety of their homes, Ramada is frightened by the idea of being locked in at home with her abusive husband. Alaraj's narrative is a thought-provoking exploration of the ways in which homes are not always safe spaces for women. For many women, homes can be sites of violence, abuse, and control. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this issue even more pressing and has exposed how "home is not, and has never been, a place of safety" (Krishnadas and Taha, 2020, p. 47). According to a report from UN Women, the global lockdowns implemented in response to the pandemic led to a surge in domestic violence targeting women. The lockdown orders aimed at controlling the spread of COVID-19 inadvertently trapped women in close spaces with their abusers, creating perilous conditions that often resulted in violence against women, sometimes with tragic consequences (UN Women, 2021).

Before the quarantine, Ramada struggles against the cruelty of traditional patriarchy, personified in two main characters: her selfish father and her unbalanced husband. Ramada's father, who names her after the year of the great drought when the land turns to ash in the thirteenth century AH, is disappointed that his firstborn is a female. He expresses his disappointment by giving her a name that means ashes. Ramada's husband is described as infected with an inferiority complex, and he takes revenge by torturing Ramada and trying to enslave her. Ramada is not able to resist either of them. She submits to her father's will to get married to Kareem and later submits to Kareem's violent subjugation, continuing in a hopeless marriage. The social lockdown is depicted as threatening, not only for Ramada's safety but also for her husband's mental stability. During quarantine, he becomes paranoid and increasingly hostile towards Ramada, beating and violating her in every way possible. The escalating violence that Kareem inflicts on her leads Ramada to rethink the whole idea of her situation and reevaluate her priorities. Ramada confronts the cruelty and violence of her husband and her place as subservient to abusive patriarchy. During quarantine the proximity between Ramada and Kareem becomes suffocating, and she eventually pushes him off the balcony of their seventh-floor apartment to his death.

I took a deep breath and held it in as I ran towards him with all my strength. In that moment, I felt like a lioness attacking its prey. I was powerful. I was a beast. I didn't hear anything. I threw myself at him with all my weight and pushed him off the seventh floor. All I remember is the sound of his body hitting the ground and exploding like a trash bag. I couldn't tell if I was awake or if it was all just a nightmare (Alaraj, 2021, p. 299).

In the above passage, Ramada describes herself in terms like “lioness”, “powerful” and a “beast”, all of which have connotations of empowerment, strength, and autonomy. This phrasing avoids the negative connotations of the murder and leaves the interpretation of Ramada's self-descriptions up to the reader. The novel suggests that quarantine can be a catalyst for change, as it can force people to confront difficult truths about themselves and their relationships. This is also true about Ramada's prodigal brother, who starts to distance himself from the family during social distancing. He becomes involved in criminal activities, smuggling medicines and pain killers. Eventually, he becomes a prominent figure in the neighborhood, providing people with essential goods and services, albeit through illicit means. Clearly, the quarantine is also giving him a new sense of power and authority which he could not experience before when he was overshadowed by his father's authority.

In Salman's *Corona: Love and War*, the chapter titled “Quarantine” opens as follows: “Days went slowly; everything was locked down. People were imprisoned in life's large prison, not knowing what to do. Problems and social issues escalated” (Salman, 2021, p. 278). While the opening of Salman's chapter sets the stage for the atmosphere of confinement and uncertainty during the pandemic, the novel as a whole delves deeper into the impact of social distancing on relationships. The novel examines the impact of social distancing on the young lovers Gibran and Layla, illustrating how quarantine and social distancing leads to the reevaluation of relationships and fundamentally reshapes the very nature of physical intimacy. This transformation can also give rise to new desires and needs. Gibran, the son of the coastal city, is in a long-distance relationship with Layla, who lives in the village. Prior to the pandemic, Gibran seems content with this type of relationship, spending his time in prolonged conversations with Layla on the phone, with whom he shares interests in literature, poetry, and art. However, with the implementation of social distancing, Gibran, who is already distant from his beloved, becomes terrified by the idea of distance and runs to Zeina, his neighbor, because she is more easily accessible. The novel suggests that social distancing can awaken in people the urgent desire for physical intimacy. Moreover, it underscores the irreplaceable significance of physical presence and touch in human interaction, echoing Julia Obermayr's insightful observation that virtual connections, while helpful, cannot substitute for the value that physical presence and touch hold for humans (Obermayr, 2023, p. 278). Obermayr's insights into the effects of isolation highlight that the most profound form of loneliness arises from the absence of physical touch, which cannot be adequately addressed through the “virtualization of our relationship with the world via technological media” (2011, p. 278). This observation sheds light on the complex interplay between physical and emotional intimacy during times of social distancing, showing how human beings yearn for physical closeness as a means of combating the emotional challenges of isolation and the virtualization of relationships. In Salman's novel,

the pandemic has made Gibran feel more isolated and alone, which has led to a greater need for intimacy and connection.

In the final novel of this study, *A Fit of Hope*, Aldakhil titles the opening chapter “Curfew”. This chapter examines the repercussions of social distancing on the central character, Dalilah. Her unique situation as a new mother to a baby girl born with a congenital heart defect compels her to adopt a rigorous form of self-imposed quarantine and social distancing, effectively confining herself to what the narrator describes as “a jail-like existence, where she simultaneously takes on the roles of both the jailed and the jailer” (Aldakhil, 2021, p. 15). This cautious approach arises from her profound concern for the health of her new-born, as she fears that any infection could endanger her child’s life. However, shortly after the government-imposed lockdown, the protagonist’s self-imposed quarantine becomes part of a broader, enforced isolation experienced by the entire community. At this point, Dalilah disregards her self-imposed quarantine and returns to her work as a nurse due to her sense of responsibility toward the broader community. In a desperate effort to save lives, Dalilah ultimately loses her own life. She is portrayed grappling with isolation as she lies dying in the intensive care ward, lonely and separated from her family. However, she finds comfort in the knowledge that her daughter’s heart condition has been cured. The ending of the novel suggests that even in the midst of pain and loss, there is always hope for new beginnings. Dalilah’s death and her daughter’s healing at the same time can be seen as a symbolic representation of the cyclical nature of life. The pain of the pandemic is often followed by hope, and new beginnings can emerge even in the wake of tragedy.

Conclusion

In mapping the representations of the pandemic in the Arabic novel, this paper offers insight into how authors respond to the COVID-19 outbreak. The selected novels offer a range of perspectives on how the pandemic challenges traditional notions of community and belonging, as well as how characters view themselves and the world in the wake of lockdown, isolation, quarantine, and social distancing. It is noteworthy that the use of different narrative modes, including the mythical and the realistic, allows authors to provide diverse perspectives on the pandemic’s impact. In some novels, the pandemic is seen as a symbol of social inequalities and economic discrepancies that already exist in society. In other novels, the pandemic is viewed as a global health crisis that claims the lives of so many people and divides and isolates many others. Moreover, some novels regard the pandemic as a reminder of the fragility of human existence and of social and political systems. Others argue that the pandemic can also be a catalyst for positive change, as it forces people to re-evaluate their priorities and re-think their situations. Overall, these novels offer a rich tapestry of responses to this unprecedented event and underscore the significance of narrative choices in conveying the complexities of the COVID-19 outbreak.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic is a relatively recent and ongoing event that continues to shape the literary landscape. As a result, the representation of the pandemic in Arabic fiction is still evolving. Writers are still in the process of interpreting and representing this

transformative experience. Through various narrative modes, such as the mythical and the realistic, they offer diverse perspectives on the current state of the world. We are only starting to see the first wave of pandemic-themed novels, and it is likely that we will encounter a broader array of narratives exploring the COVID-19 pandemic in different ways in the future, reflecting the ever-evolving nature of this global crisis in Arabic fiction.

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