

## Koch and al-Attas on Solitary Freedom: An Analysis of Bryce Andrews's Ranch Memoir

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### ABSTRACT

*Solitude has gained attention lately due to the growing emphasis on mental and emotional health. Freedom is one of the fundamental aspects of solitude. This study comparatively explores the concept of solitary freedom in Bryce Andrews's ranch memoir through the distinct perspectives of Philip Koch and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. While literary studies increasingly acknowledge the significance of solitude and its connection to freedom, there remains a gap in exploring how diverse philosophical traditions, particularly Islamic understandings of freedom, inform the theme of solitary freedom within Ranch Literature. To address this, the study examines Andrews's work by first employing Koch's features of freedom to detail experiences related to solitude. It then comparatively interprets these categories through the lens of al-Attas's Islamic outlook on freedom. Through a content analysis of textual evidence expressing solitude, the findings reveal complementary aspects of how Koch and al-Attas illuminate solitary freedom in Andrews's ranch-themed work. This paper responds to the need to heighten interdisciplinary awareness, as well as enabling inter-discourse studies of literature and Islamic philosophy.*

*Keywords: freedom; Philip Koch; ranch literature; solitude; Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*

### INTRODUCTION

Solitude is seen as both being physically alone and having a focused inner state (Weinstein et al., 2022). One inherent aspect of solitude is freedom, described as having different parts, including the faculty to think and move, the ability to control time, and the freedom to make one's own choices (Koch, 1994). Solitude is prominent in ranch literature, a genre that concerns works set on ranches or deeply connected to ranch life. Such genre springs from nature writing, which became a "lively field of American Literature" in the late 20th century (Lyon, 2001, p. 131). Since the 1960s, nature writing has widened its scope to comprise "rural and agricultural environments" in the American West (Scheese, 1996, p. 35). Nature writers explore "the ethical commitments to stewardship and examination of land use issues" (Pritchett, 2004, p. 7). Ranch literature is characterised by its emphasis on stewardship and physical work (Lyon, 2001). As Garrard (2004) argues, "American writing about countryside emphasises a working rather than an aesthetic relationship with the land." Study, solitude, and discovery are additional themes that fit well with this characterisation (Pritchett, 2004). Bryce Andrews's *Badluck Way: A Year on the Ragged Edge of the West* is one such example, especially as he writes about his ranch life and agribusiness. A Montana-based writer, rancher, and conservationist, Andrews's three-pronged life was shaped by his transformative experience ranching on the Sun Ranch, the setting of his debut book.

The book fits comfortably within ranch literature as it depicts the authentic experiences of ranching while tackling the broader themes of nature, freedom, and the evolving identity of the American West. It looks at ranch life and setting as it revolves around Andrews's experiences working on a ranch. It vividly describes the daily tasks, challenges, and rewards of ranching, firmly placing it within the genre's focus on this particular lifestyle. Also, Andrews's work strongly reflects its connection to nature writing, unpacking his deep engagement with the natural landscape, animals, and environment, an essential characteristic of both nature writing and ranch literature. The themes this work explores, therefore, are typical of the American West, such as man vs. nature, the changing West, and solitude and freedom.

The study draws upon and recontextualises Philip Koch and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's views to explore freedom within solitude. While Koch provides a Western philosophical lens on freedom, al-Attas first presents an Islamic understanding of motivations and experiences. Koch (1994) states that solitude concerns freedom of physical movement and thought. Secondly, solitude entails freedom of time, as time is dictated by the subject of one's attention and one's personal engagement with it. By relying on the autonomy of Kant's ethical theory for the final meaning of freedom, Koch defines it as the absence of external restraints and the ability to govern oneself according to self-chosen laws. Although following these laws may lead to consequences, individuals accept them as the cost of their chosen framework (Koch, 1994, "Freedom" section). Within the Sharia framework (Islamic principles), al-Attas defines freedom as one acting "as his true nature demands" (al-Attas, 1978, p. 62). Freedom involves "the power (*quwwah*) and capacity (*wus'*)" to fulfil one's true nature, which includes exercising control and guidance over both the soul and body (al-Attas, 1978, p. 141). Furthermore, al-Attas's concept comprises several elements, including natural inclination (*fitrah*), choice (*ikhtiyar*), submission (*aslama*), trade (*al-tijarah*), and responsibility.

While ranch literature is often associated with Western values, a closer inspection reveals significant connections with Islamic paradigms. This genre, seemingly distant from Islamic tradition, actually promotes fundamental ethical principles and explores human themes shared by both worldviews. For instance, both Islamic and Western ethics highly value hard work, and in the case of ranch work, its demanding nature can be seen as embodying this principle. Furthermore, the vast, open landscapes of the West often signify freedom, and both Islam and the West champion the rights and freedoms of individuals in the pursuit of meaning and purpose. Western ideology's emphasis on individual autonomy and self-sufficiency finds a parallel in Islam's high regard for individual effort. Moreover, both Western and Islamic thoughts offer frameworks for evaluating the ethical dimensions of human actions. Since both Islam and the West support the kind of freedom that benefits humanity, sensible practices, for example, solitude, as Barbour notes, help individuals "understand and feel connected to the fundamental sources of meaning and value in their lives" (2014, p. 570). Therefore, solitude carries positive echoes as expressed in the two traditions. Therefore, examining ranch literature through these dual lenses may present insights into a richer and more nuanced understanding of the text, uncovering profound insights and shared human values.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

The existing scholarship coalesces around the romanticised figure central to ranch literature and their evolving representations. Many early stories painted the American cowboys and Argentine gauchos as heroes with shared lifestyles but also differences shaped by their countries' views

(Olson, 2012). These heroes were often linked to national identity and a complicated relationship with nature, sometimes based on myths and psychological ideas. Some stories focused on how the tough ranch life turned young, lost boys into strong, independent men, like the cowboy and the gaucho (Shelton, 1959).

More recent studies challenge this romantic image. Frantz (2007) analysed Annie Proulx's works, showing cowboys with limitations and making the myth less romantic. Some research, like Anderson (2007), even explores unexpected male intimacy and possible homosexual relationships among cowboys in early writings, going against the traditional macho image. In addition, Cormac McCarthy's books, as analysed by Spencer (2000), suggest that the popular image of the cowboy is mostly a myth that conceals the real history of the American West. Some studies also offer valuable insights into themes of home and identity. Davidson (2003) showed how ideas of home and identity in Western memoirs have changed, moving away from the tough, individualistic cowboy to a more modern and adaptable New West. Hill (2006) revealed that landscape plays a big role in how female writers in this genre find their identity. In the meantime, Pritchett (2004) viewed how modern authors write about the connection (and sometimes collision) between ranching and nature, often favouring older ways of life.

Solitude holds religious and spiritual importance. Schlau's (2016) study on Discalced Carmelite nun-poetry found solitude as a means of achieving spiritual perfection, demonstrating Alfred North Whitehead's view: "the close connection he sees between religion and solitariness in his classic work, *Religion in the Making*" (Dombrowski, 2015, p. 226). These poems show solitude's spiritual benefits, like union with God, and describe the difficult journey to achieve it. Solitude was used to pursue this divine connection, not personal freedom (Schlau, 2016). In the same vein, Bessetti-Reyes (2014) studied British writer and traveller, Lisa Bird's published letters, *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, for her responses to solitude in the Western wilderness. Even amidst "the absolute lawlessness and roguishness" of the West, Bird maintained her Christian values (Bessetti-Reyes, 2014, p. 91). Solitude allowed her to perpetuate worship. This might exemplify Whitehead's view of "religion is what the individual does ... solitariness" (1996, as cited in Dombrowski, 2015, p. 227).

Like Whitehead's idea of religion as solitude, Czeslaw Milosz's *Legends of Modernity*, as Dombrowski examined (2015), explores different religious meanings of solitude. He was fascinated by *Robinson Crusoe*, seeing it as a story about finding isolation for spiritual renewal. Milosz contrasted this with his Catholic upbringing that prioritised community. He argued that when the community becomes oppressive, people seek isolation as a refuge. Milosz also examined how individualism affects religion in modern society. He observed that in cities, people become more focused on themselves, even when surrounded by others. This can ironically lead to a more personal, internalised form of religion, especially in the face of urban evil. He further explored individualism through works like *The Red and the Black*, where some characters reject traditional religion entirely. Milosz also critiqued extreme individualism, as seen in Andre Gide's work, which he believed could justify violence and power. Ultimately, Milosz's book concludes with a discussion between himself and Andrzejewski, emphasising the value of the individual and the ethical responsibility to protect them. They believed their historical context made them appreciate individual voices more deeply.

Halikowski-Smith (2023) studied Gustaw Herling-Grudziński's stories that explore the painful aspects of solitude, often using religious symbolism. Islands, used often by Herling, show how people can be alone in different ways, from feeling pure to being made to suffer, and this shows the sad, lonely parts of being human. His characters' isolation drives them to extreme

actions, like a priest committing rape. He also wrote about a leper's confinement, drawing on historical religious practices that isolated lepers from society. Herling, who experienced hardship in Soviet camps and exile, identified with this isolation. In another story, he depicted religious extremism and death, influenced by his personal observations. He was fascinated by a torture device that created “absolute solitude” by publicly isolating victims (Halikowski-Smith, 2023, p. 136). Though he feared solitude, he recognised it was a substitute for freedom during his time in the Soviet camps.

The island as a symbol of solitude is pivotal in Milosz and Herling’s writings. This same symbol appears in Ibn Tufayl’s *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, a story Madhi (2004, p. 9) describes as “a tale of spiritual ascent that begins on an uninhabited island.” Unlike Herling's island of moral failure or Milosz’s island of escape, Hayy's island allows him to gain scientific and spiritual knowledge, leading to union with God, similar to the solitude found in Carmelite nun-poetry. Hayy, through his own intellectual effort, achieves transcendent knowledge in seven stages, each lasting seven years. After 49 years of complete solitude, he attains divine union. Absal, a holy man seeking asceticism, arrives on the island, representing a rejection of worldly life. Later, Hayy and Absal travel to another island to share their knowledge, highlighting the responsibility that comes with spiritual enlightenment. Ibn Tufayl emphasises Hayy's ability to reach near-perfection without societal help. The story also uses the cave motif, where Hayy finds God, referencing the Prophet Muhammad's experience in the cave of Mount Hira.

Muhd Norizam and Shaiful Bahri (2016) employed al-Attas’s 2001 Islamic framework to examine how traditional Malay literature teaches proper behaviour and fulfils humanity’s role as God’s representative. They argued that traditional Malay literature aims to create well-rounded individuals, both spiritually and physically, by teaching principles for a balanced relationship with God and other people. It explains humanity’s purpose as God's representatives. They drew on al-Attas’s framework, which emphasises knowledge as crucial for restoring humanity's natural state and achieving perfection.

Muhd Norizam and Shaiful Bahri (2013) used al-Attas’s *adab* framework, arguing that traditional Malay literature helps create just leaders who fulfil their role as God’s representatives on Earth. In Islam, justice means putting things in their proper place, leading to balance in both this world and the afterlife. Malay literature emphasises justice to guide people in their relationships with God and others, and to clarify their roles as God's servants and representatives. Leaders must be both just and balanced, and they must obey God’s commands and use wisdom. As His representatives, they must be trustworthy and fair in their duties, especially in problem-solving and judgment. The study showed that the traditional Malay literature describes just leaders as those who: perform duties with integrity, seek counsel, use power responsibly, judge fairly, obey God, and use their intellect wisely.

While a lot is known about the heroic cowboy, the changing West, and the environment, no one has really focused on solitude in ranch literature. This is surprising because ranch life often involves isolation. Solitude’s depiction also varies in religious contexts despite a lack of association with the idea of freedom. This study looks closely at how solitude is shown in ranch literature and how it connects to freedom – both feeling free as an individual and having a deeper sense of purpose or meaning.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study comparatively analyses the concept of solitary freedom as depicted in Bryce Andrews's work, using the distinct theoretical lenses of Philip Koch and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas.

Koch's features of freedom are employed to detail how Andrews's actions personify the following:

- i. **Physical movement and thought**  
Freedom of physical movement aligns with freedom of thought. Free movement allows for "the escape from the social controls which govern all interpersonal life" and also other people's structures of demands, which are aspects that limit thought (Koch, 1994, Freedom sec., par. 11).
- ii. **Time**  
"Free time, in this sense, is time liberated from socially imposed constraints, the clocks, the deadlines, the need-schedules of other people" (Koch, 1994, Freedom sec., par. 21). Called attentive time as opposed to objective social time, it is "a time controlled solely by the object itself and one's interest in it" (Koch, 1994, Freedom sec., par. 23).
- iii. **Autonomy**  
Koch heavily leans toward Kant's autonomy, which is "being self-governing according to laws of your own choosing," and willingly accepting consequences that spring up from the laws you have chosen (1994, Freedom sec., par. 32).

Al-Attas's references to freedom are multiple in his major works, yet it is not his main focus. Extrapolation of his concept of freedom is done through dovetailing the references and examining their contexts from his writings, such as *Islam and Secularism* (1978) and *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (1995). Freedom is defined as man acting "as his true nature demands" (al-Attas, 1978, p. 62). Freedom, he adds, is "the power (*quwwah*) and capacity (*wus'*) to do justice to itself; and in turn refers to exercise of its rule and supremacy and guidance and maintenance over the animal soul and body" (1978, p. 141).

Al-Attas's concept comprises:

- i. **Responsibility**  
Freedom is invariably mentioned alongside responsibility. The ruling of one's self by itself pertains to fulfilling responsibility and freedom by making use of the latent capacity and power bequeathed by God.
- ii. ***Fitrah* (natural inclination)**  
Freedom integrates into the natural state of being. Man is naturally inclined to fulfil his obligation in serving God, following the pattern according to which God has created all things. This inherent tendency comes as a normality when man is said to fulfil the purpose of his creation and existence.
- iii. ***Ikhtiyar* (choice)**  
Freedom is bound in meaning with "a choice for the better is an exercise of freedom" (al-Attas, 1995, p. 94). He adds that the choice meant towards what is bad is not a choice since

it is predicated upon ignorance and “on the instigation of the soul that inclines towards the blameworthy aspects of the animal powers.”

iv. *Aslama* (submission)

Freedom connects to submission, more pointedly, conscious, and willing submission, i.e., continual obedience to the will of the Creator, and manifestation of it internally as well as externally.

v. *Al-tijarah* (trade)

Freedom relates to man inevitably participating in trade, in which "he is himself the subject as well as object of this trade" (al-Attas, 1978, p. 67). Al-Attas adds, man is said to be “he is own capital, and his loss and gain depend upon his own sense of responsibility and exercise of freedom.”

Andrews’s actions, detailed by Koch’s features of freedom, serve as concrete manifestations of the abstract concepts articulated by al-Attas. The application of these frameworks to the memoir is mostly crucial due to the genre’s inherent thematic concerns: spatial isolation, individual agency, and existential reflection. Therefore, the juxtaposition of Koch’s emphasis on individual autonomy with al-Attas’s focus on ethical responsibility and spiritual orientation allows for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how solitude is represented and experienced within this specific literary genre. By employing these frameworks, the study moves beyond a descriptive account of solitude to explore its deeper significance in shaping Andrews’s sense of self, his connection to the natural world and his search for meaning and purpose.

## METHODOLOGY

The analytical framework employed, as shown in Figure 1, comprised a multi-stage process. A textual review was first conducted to identify all passages concerning solitude. The analysis included textual sources, such as descriptive prose, observations of daily life, dialogues, and introspective analyses, to contextualise Andrews’s solitude. Afterwards, the identified passages were detailed through Koch’s features of freedom. The passages were then analysed through al-Attas’s concept of freedom.

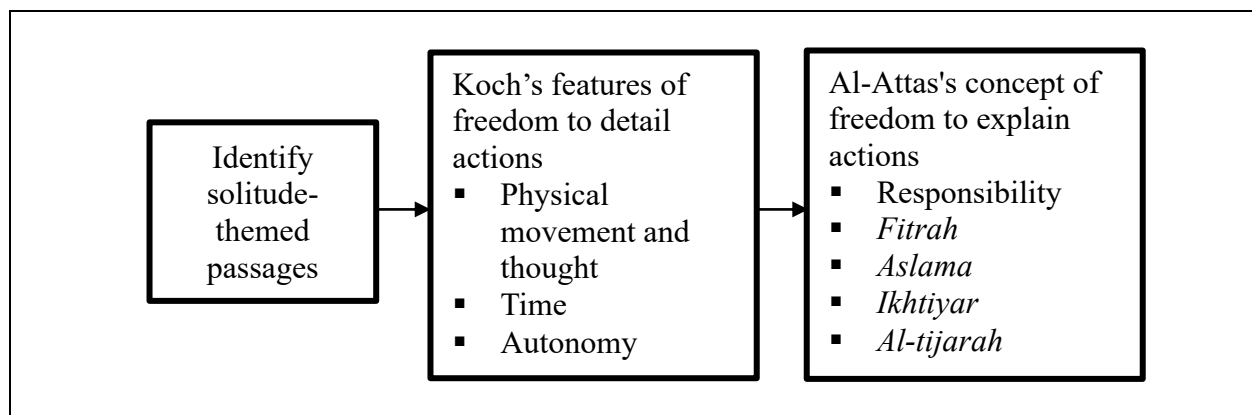


FIGURE 1. Flow chart showing progression of the study

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

### FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND THOUGHT

According to Koch (1994), moving freely and thinking freely go well together. Reed W. Larson says people seek solitude to freely think and act (as cited in Harris, 2017, “What Is Solitude For?” section).

Andrews, feeling a need for freedom, left Seattle by train for San Diego, where he surfed and visited his grandparents and claimed “Getting lost was easy” (2014, p. 4). His pronouncement that becoming lost provided him the liberty to engage in any activity he desired illustrates his unrestricted movement. And “travelling three unwashed days” was breaking at least one of those societal norms, demonstrating his thought free from any imposition socially enforced by communities (Andrews, 2014, p. 4). Obviously, the social controls that dictated all interpersonal life were escaped. Andrews seeking freedom became clearer in his aimless roaming.

I took trains that rattled across the Southwest: Phoenix, Tucson, San Antonio, and a hundred map dots in between. I got a hotel room in New Orleans for my twenty-third birthday, did what everyone does there, then ran north to get away. From D.C. and New York to Chicago, where clinker ice hissed against a concrete breakwater, I was quick and free. My feet had barely touched the ground since California. I bought a southbound ticket and one week later crossed into Juárez, Mexico, in the middle of the night.

(Andrews, 2014, pp. 4-5)

The joy of solitude was telling, even during a regular train ride. Andrews clearly enjoyed travelling alone for the freedom it gave him. When thoughts are free, solitude leads to self-understanding. For example, after crossing back into the US at Tijuana, Andrews said, “I spent three days retching in my grandparents’ bathroom, and went home to Seattle feeling as though I could handle just about anything” (Andrews, 2014, p. 5). Andrews also expressed free thought when comparing Seattle, his birthplace, to a typical ranch location, as seen in “Whenever I went home to the damp claustrophobia of Seattle, I would dream about big, dry, lonely country. I pictured it each time I bought a ticket to anywhere or filled up the gas tank on my truck” (2014, p. 6). Andrews found unrestricted freedom of thought and action in the open West, a stark contrast to the restrictive environment of Seattle.

Obsession restricts a person’s freedom of thought and action. Andrews’s fixation with the West, like in “ever since I can remember, I’ve been obsessed with the West”, appears paradoxical (2014, p. 5). His drive for freedom, instead of binding him, helped Andrews find his true calling: returning to Montana, a place of solitude. His travels across the US and Mexico were a clear expression of this freedom.

When asked about his plans after the grazing season, Andrews said, “I want to stay out here ... Do something that keeps this place wild, open, and undeveloped” (2014, p. 131). Mohd Fadhli Shah et al. state that “individuals who are drawn to a region absorb a great deal from their surroundings, which ultimately affects and shapes their own perspectives via a process known as self-discovery” (2022, p. 184). The ranch's landscape provided the solitude Andrews sought, making him feel at home. Alvi et al. (2019) suggest that environmental imagery helps create this sense of belonging. The stated intent to stay expressed his freedom and desire to avoid city developers who threatened to change the land, as Andrews (2014, p. 154) strongly opposed:

This was the future I feared most deeply for the Sun Ranch. Although the ranch had remained wild and largely untrammelled, the same could not be said for the rest of the valley floor. A small subdivision occupied half a section of land adjacent to the ranch's northern boundary. It was just twenty or so houses spaced evenly across three hundred and twenty acres, but it bothered me.

Giesecking et al. stated that people's surroundings affect their mental and physical well-being (2014, as cited in Mohd Fadhli Mohd Shah et al., 2022). Development, to Andrews, triggered the physical and mental conflicts, specifically "when planning interventions aimed to improve particular place qualities are initiated" (Healey, 2005, p. 6), ultimately restricting his free thoughts and movements.

Emotion is indispensable to connect with nature (Khosravi et al., 2017). A vast, untouched landscape offers solitude and freedom, especially for solitary activities like running. Andrews said, "I loved to feel the wind, lay claim to my landscape by crossing it, and watch the deer outpace me before disappearing in the rising night" (2014, p. 146). This run made the ranch feel smaller and more personal to him, allowing him to imagine it as his own. He was free to do as he pleased, including, as he added, "I chased everything I could – coyotes, jackrabbits, and a badger."

Andrews noticed James, another ranch hand, was envious of his solitude and freedom, and of the fact that he was leaving behind "cattle grazing in dark bunches and mountains scraping up against a clear blue sky," and "He was headed for the world of examinations and fluorescent light, while I got to stick around and have adventures" (2014, p. 190). Andrews used these images to show the restrictions James would face, while highlighting the freedom he found in his solitary adventures as Andrews conceded feeling "ecstatic in the knowledge that I did not have to leave and could work the ranch for years if I wanted. I pictured myself toiling until my body wore out, then buying a cabin by the river" (2014, pp. 190-191).

#### TIME LIBERTY

Koch defines solitude as subjective time, driven by personal interest, allowing for free imagination. This passage shows how Andrews used his imagination freely in solitude.

A day rarely passed without my spooking a dozen or of them (elk) from their day beds. They always headed for the high ground, and I watched group after group disappear into the mountains. I got the feeling that I was clearing the country of elk, displacing the natives to make room for our vast, bawling herds of steers and heifers.

(Andrews, 2014, p. 115)

Earlier, Andrews stated, "Every day in early July led me on some type of great or little expedition" when he was alone, free from the need-schedules of work and other people (2014, p. 114). In this sense of time alone, he found pleasure in picturing the elk gone and the land used for human economic needs.

Andrews's private activities, like hunting and running, are examples of focused, personal time. Hunters typically work alone (Benson, 2012). Andrews, for example, "left the big herd on the Flats alone and chose instead to prowl the complex terrain of the South End" while hunting elk, simply to allow his imagination to roam freely (2014, p. 211). Solo hunting allows time for silence, thinking, and just walking (Pierre, 2013). And like hunting, running was something Andrews did for pleasure, and despite the long, wearing days, he "swapped jeans for shorts, cowboy boots for running shoes, and took off across some chunk of the ranch" (2014, p. 145). This supports Thomas' (2017) assertion that solitude seekers proactively carve out solitary time.



Andrews exhibited that on those runs, he was looking for trouble, sneaking up on deer or antelope, claiming:

It was wicked, feral fun. I drew near herds of deer, elk, and antelope, sometimes crawling on my hands and knees to stay hidden in the sage and grass. When the animals saw or smelled me, I sprinted toward them, scattering them to the horizon. They always left me in the dust, alone and smiling under a many-colored sky.  
(Andrews, 2014, p. 145)

Andrews's personal passion and interest strengthened and spread attentive time, implicated in the absence of interpersonal activities to which he confessed, "There was never malice in it, only simple joy" (2014, p. 146). What Koch (1994) seems to suggest by subjective time within solitude is the personal and internal experience of time passing when one is in a state of focused awareness due to being socially disengaged by choice. Besides, every time the harsh winters made others leave, Andrews remained "as the sole caretaker of the ranch, spending my workdays in a struggle with the elements" (2014, p. 216). Likewise, during those winters endured alone, Andrews was finding simple joy and taking pride since "For all my ploughing and driving on snow-choked roads, I never once had to be pulled out. I'm as proud of that as almost anything" (2014, p. 219). This stays true to Koch's calling, Andrews's subjective time bereft of any urgency to correlate his subjectivity with other people's.

Enjoying time alone makes it feel special, with stronger feelings and more freedom than regular daily time. Andrews's unending work cycle was the anguish he mitigated by locating time apart from the objective time of ranching enterprise, shown in his commentary regarding departure:

Day followed wild day, and over time, it amounted to a process of seasonal change. Immersion in that constant cycling was the ranch hand's highest privilege. The thought of summer coming on, the whole drama starting over with green grass, spotted fawns, and high expectations, made it hard to think of leaving.  
(Andrews, 2014, p. 227)

#### AUTONOMOUS SELF

Koch, like Kant, defines freedom as choosing and following one's own rules, despite any negative outcomes. When he first started ranching, Andrews (2014, p. 6) demonstrated his independence by choosing to leave civilisation and embrace the freedom associated with the American West.

Every summer until I turned eighteen, I returned to the Zentz Ranch to work for nothing, or next to nothing, finding recompense in the little calluses on my palms. Whenever I went home to the damp claustrophobia of Seattle, I would dream about big, dry, lonely country. I pictured it each time I bought a ticket to anywhere or filled up the gas tank on my truck.

Even though his hands were calloused from hard work, which he willingly chose, Andrews was content. He valued his independence, despite the difficulties, such as:

As I looked down at the jaundiced wreckage of my palms, I felt a strange surge of pride. These weren't city boy hands. They weren't delicate by a long shot. From elbows down, the skin of my arms was covered with a chiaroscuro of barbed wire scratches. The older ones had healed, peeled, and turned a dark, bluish colour from the sun. More recent marks were zippered shut with lines of cracking scab. A few spots, either sliced today or bumped hard enough to reopen, were smeared with small patches of freshly dried blood.  
(Andrews, 2014, pp. 90-91)

Attaining self-fulfilment through solitude is a grievous journey marked by “trials and contradictions” (Schlau, 2016, p. 143). Andrews preferred the image of a tough ranch hand, scarred and injured, over that of a delicate city boy, a desire that was established early in the memoir:

The bustle and toil of life in August—long days on horseback and barbed wire fence work—had raised a thick network of scabs and scars on my hands. Some of the scars remained, but they were the least of the high season’s bloody relics.

(Andrews, 2014, p. xiv)

Often, cattlemen are nonconformists (Marshall, 1980), finding purpose in odd jobs that most people frown upon. Yoon et al. (2019) argued that repetitive tasks cause people to perceive their work as meaningless, leading to reduced enjoyment and motivation. Conversely, Andrews found adventure in his hard, simple work as seen in:

Every day in early July led me on some type of great or little expedition. Each morning I set out with a long list of tasks that were scattered across the ranch: I might begin by setting out salt for the steers, roll east to check fence at the base of the mountains, swing north to fix a broken gate, then finish up cleaning leaves and detritus from the spring box on Bad Luck Creek. On the way home, I would always loop back through some little hollow or drainage that I’d never seen before.

(2014, p. 114)

Marshall’s articulate statement that “There is solitude, there is work, there is the land” wraps up Andrews’s existence (1980, par. 5). Being able to independently choose his work location near nature and how to organise it gave him the freedom he needed to run his cattle operation.

This part, which explored Koch’s (1994) ideas on freedom within solitude, reveals how Andrews’s experiences embody these concepts through his freedom of movement and thought, his subjective experience of time, and his pursuit of an autonomous self.

#### THE INTERSECTION OF SOLITUDE OF RANCH AND NAQUIBIYYAN FREEDOM

While Koch provides a Western philosophical lens on freedom within solitude, this section presents an Islamic perspective on Andrews’s motivation and experiences by examining how al-Attas’s Islamic concept of freedom – encompassing responsibility, *quwwah* (power), *wus’* (capacity), *fitrah* (natural inclination), *aslama* (submission), *ikhtiyar* (conscious choice), and *al-tijarah* (inherent trade of life) – resonates with Andrews’s deep connection to the solitary ranch life. Andrews’s actions, detailed in the earlier segment, serve as tangible examples of the abstract concepts presented in this part.

One recurring theme when dissecting solitude is freedom. The onset of freedom necessitates the *quwwah* (power) and *wus’* (capacity) to act in accord with what *fitrah* (natural inclination) demands, exploited to fulfil and realise the ideals people recognise as befitting them.

Andrews’s move to the West disclosed his true nature. He said, “Whenever I went home to the damp claustrophobia of Seattle, I would dream about big, dry, lonely country” (2014, p. 6). These images contrast crowded Seattle with the freedom of the West. When asked why he came to the ranch, Andrews replied, “I had come to the ranch because I liked the work and loved the land. I enjoyed being alongside the wilderness and making my living from it” (2014, p. 130). He also showed his commitment by saying, “I never even glanced at the rearview mirror” (2014, p. 8), meaning he never considered returning to his old life.

Kantian freedom of self-governing and no restraints, acquiesces to the Islamic idea of freedom that naturally comes with responsibility. Kant's ethical theory dictates acting as you see fit, or simply, being self-determined, bears consequences despite being heedless of them. This aligns with *al-tijarah*, which al-Attas (1978) describes as man's inevitable participation in trade, where he is both the subject and the object. He then adds, man is his "own capital, and his loss and gain depend upon his own sense of responsibility and exercise of freedom," he lives with the consequences of his chosen lifestyle. Madani opined that "the real freedom cannot be enjoyed or attained without sacrifices" (2011, p. 116). *Badluck Way* is fraught with testimonies of Andrews preserving his autonomy by committing to what he deemed the befitting lifestyle. For example, "Whenever I went home to the damp claustrophobia of Seattle, I would dream about big, dry, lonely country," or the following: "I had practiced this departure many times," and "I was eastbound toward the West, to become a ranch hand in the high country of Montana. I never even glanced at the rearview mirror" (Andrews, 2014, pp. 6 & 8). Evident in these sayings is self-governing regarding Andrews exerting *quwwah* and *wus'* in order to stay inordinately true to his *fitrah*. In reality, he faced consequences from his choices that he had not even thought about, as illustrated through his suffering, such as "As I looked down at the jaundiced wreckage of my palms," and "From elbows down, the skin of my arms was covered with a chiaroscuro of barbed wire scratches," and the fact that:

The real work of ranching isn't riding horses, moving cattle, shovelling shit, fixing fence, digging holes, or any other specific task. It is instead the process of toughening the body into something worn, weathered, scarred, and strong enough to do everything asked of it, and honing the mind until it knows precisely what it can and should ask the body.

(Andrews, 2014, pp. 90-91)

In granting himself authority to be self-determined, Andrews was in fact in the trade, or *al-tijarah*, that he gained through his predicament, as he noted, "I felt a strange surge of pride" (2014, p. 90). And for he yet lost to the interminable decadence inflicted by the elements, as Andrews (2014, p. 92) lamented

Though the posts were set well and the wires tightly strained, the long process of their decay had begun. A decade would find them grey and rusting. In a century, they would be all but gone – toppled in the grass and picked apart by endless freeze and thaw. Elk would step carefully across the ruins of my best efforts. Sagebrush would rise to hide the braces, as it did the myriad piles of old bones that dotted the ranch's pasture. In time, the last traces of my labour would dissolve into the dirt, leaving only wild animals, hardy plants, and the wide blue sky.

Acting consistently with *fitrah*, man is said to fulfil the purpose of his creation and existence. Any choice or *ikhtiyar* for the better is generally directed towards the purpose of his existing hereafter. Al-Attas elaborated that a choice towards what is bad is premised upon pure ignorance, and "the instigation of the soul that inclines towards the blameworthy aspects of the animal powers" (1995, p. 94). Andrews would argue that his first visit to Zentz Ranch until he left in May 2007, along with his summer returns in between, were all part of his *ikhtiyar* for self-improvement. He had found his calling, as shown in his words, "I could not put the idea of ranching from my mind" (2014, pp. 6-7). Often, choices intended for goodness presuppose a sacrificial part on somebody's end. Andrews (2014, p. 116) spoke to this as well when he expressed:

The wolves were no longer hypothetical. Soon after we'd moved into the foothills, they chased elk through our fence and made a kill not far beyond the edge of a pasture. There, they could not have failed to see and smell the steers. When Jeremy worried aloud that they might return for a beef buffet, I started sleeping out with the cattle. It was a perfect job for me, really.

The "It was a perfect job" confession has unmasked Andrews's *fitrah*, simultaneously representing his *quwwah* and *wus'* in search of solitude and freedom. His action was hindered when threatened by progress. Development was his antipode that ousted him from the Sun Ranch. If he decided against his true nature and opted to stay, that would be a choice in defeat and anguish, yet we learn:

It wasn't loneliness that ultimately drove me off the sun, though I sometimes got lonely. It wasn't the fact that my friends were gone. I left the ranch because I could feel something changing completely and irreversibly, like summer becoming fall.

(Andrews, 2014, p. 223)

The interests of cows, wolves, and elk would collide with the desires of millionaires. When they did, our stewardship of the land would suffer. I felt my job, life, and purpose on the ranch sliding into obsolescence. And so I decided to leave.

(Andrews, 2014, p. 224)

*Aslama*, or submission, can explain man's obsession. Conscious and willing submissions do not generally involve loss of freedom since freedom is, in fact, man acting as his true nature demands (al-Attas, 1978). Andrew had this to say of his obsession, "ever since I can remember, I've been obsessed with the West" (2014, p. 5). His pulsating obsession was also seen in "Every summer until I turned eighteen, I returned to the Zentz Ranch to work for nothing, or next to nothing, finding recompense in the little calluses on my palms" (Andrews, 2014, p. 6). Even this laconic statement unfurled his preoccupation: "I could not put the idea of ranching from my mind." Behind everything he had said and done, obsession appeared to reign. It emphasised Andrews's continued interest in finding comfort through ranching. *Aslama* and obsession, therefore, seem to overlap in qualities that could help explain Andrews's behaviour. *Aslama* denotes continual obedience to the will of the Creator, and both external and internal manifestation of that will. Andrews's unbending compliance with his *fitrah*, or how God fashioned him, resembles what al-Attas has pointed out regarding *aslama*, and his landing a summer ranch job was the concrete proof that had cemented his *fitrah*. Andrews's ability was the result of his agency to "take action and articulate those actions in a way that is intended to bring about some sort of change" (Raihanah & Mohd Muzhafar, 2023, p. 274).

Even after leaving the ranch, Andrews remained obsessed with Montana, saying, "I left the Sun Ranch in May 2007, but could not turn away from the vastness of southwest Montana" (2014, p. 233). He then added, indicating his constant involvement by keeping in touch with James, who managed the ranch, "to know that things went badly toward the end of July." Andrews also told us, "I returned to the Lee Metcalf Wilderness when I could as a hunter or backpacker." His fixed obsession was also seen in:

The Sun Ranch refused to slack its grip on my head and heart, so I kept track of it, returning in the fall of 2008 to find that the road up Squaw Creek had been improved. Though I feared I would one day find that remote drainage filled with freshly built mansions and luxury cars, development never came. The bottom dropped out of the real estate market, vaporising the assets of would-be buyers.

(Andrews, 2014, p. 234)

Andrews's obsession also materialises in his aversion to transmutation. It was in his *fitrah* to keep the rural West in its pristine state; therefore, any threat to that ideal was judged incapacitating. Andrews (2014, p. 131) said this that uncovered his *fitrah*, "I want to stay out here, I told Roger. Do something that keeps this place wild, open, and undeveloped," and

I launched into a vicious little tirade about subdivisions, especially the one that huddled against the foothills of the Madison Range just across the ranch's north boundary. Ranchettes, I said, were blights on the landscape, perversions of the Western dream.

Near the book's end, Andrews explained why he had to leave: "I left the ranch because I could feel something changing completely and irreversibly" (2014, p. 223). He then explained the conflict by saying:

The interests of cows, wolves, and elk would collide with the desires of millionaires. When they did, our stewardship of the land would suffer. I felt my job, life, and purpose on the ranch sliding into obsolescence. And so I decided to leave.

(Andrews, 2014, p. 224)

Andrews's choice for solitude is the result of his personal freedom that was predicated on him exercising the power (*quwwah*) and the capacity (*wus'*) to act in accord with what his natural inclination (*fitrah*) demanded, for example, through his literal movement from urban Seattle to the rural areas of the West, a move that implied and amplified his affinity for a natural space that is synonymous with solitude and freedom. From a young age, Andrews's obsession with the idea of ranching and the West was undeniable, underlining his submission (*aslama*) to his *fitrah*, to how God made him. Acting in line with his *fitrah*, Andrews is said to fulfil the purpose of his creation and existence. Any choice for the better (*ikhtiyar*) is directed to that purpose of his existing, one that, of course, includes solitude. Andrews found happiness and meaning in life despite the choice he made, requiring sacrifices that occasionally caused defeat and anguish, the natural consequence of accepting full responsibility for his choice. Acting as he saw fit or engaging in whatever he thought ideal while consciously shouldering the consequences are consistent with *al-tijarah* as man invariably participates in trade; his own sense of responsibility and his exercise of freedom determine his gains and losses.

## CONCLUSION

This analysis demonstrates the depth between freedom and solitude as seen in Andrews's life as explored through both Western and Islamic philosophical viewpoints. Andrews's journey, driven by a strong desire for the freedom to move and think endlessly, perfectly illustrates Koch's idea that they go hand-in-hand. His choice to live a solitary life on the ranch genuinely brings home how being alone can lead to a better understanding of oneself, an independent spirit guided by personal values and a personal sense of time unconstrained by external pressures. Furthermore, the application of al-Attas's work concerning freedom gives us glimpses into why Andrews did what he did, which unveils his deep-seated *fitrah* for the natural world and how his choices, even amid hardship, reflect a submission (*aslama*) to his inner leanings and a conscious acceptance of responsibility (*al-tijarah*). Ultimately, Andrews's account strongly supports the idea that seeking solitude, driven by an inherent desire for freedom, can result in self-discovery and a life lived authentically.

By using al-Attas's framework and drawing on Islamic teachings, this study might contribute to a broader understanding of solitude. It has attempted to 1) identify elements of Islamic freedom relevant to understanding solitude, 2) propose a way to analyse solitude using al-Attas's ideas; and 3) offer a clearer conceptualisation of al-Attas's framework of freedom. By combining these lines of work, useful ideas for future research can be offered and understanding the Islamic perspective on freedom within ranch literature may be replenished.

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