Individual and Social Ramifications of Epidemics in the Saudi Novels: *Safer Berlik* and *Humma Qifar*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes two Saudi novels within the context of pandemics, employing a cultural imperialism perspective. The novel *Humma Qifar* حمى قفار (Fever of Qifar, 2003) is set against the backdrop of the oil boom in Saudi Arabia during the 1950s, while *Safer Berlik* سفر برلك (Mobilization, 2019) takes place during World War I, in the context of troop mobilization by the Turks and the forced deportation of Arabs to Damascus. These novels document significant moments of cholera and plague epidemics in the 19th century, highlighting the Ottoman Empire's presence in the region. The narratives are intertwined with xenophobic European notions about pandemics. Utilizing concepts of culture and imperialism from Raymond Williams and Herbert Schiller, this study employs cultural materialism as its analytical framework. The analysis seeks to identify commonalities within the historiographies of travelers and resident doctors who emphasized cultural differences between Christians and Muslims, particularly regarding the absence of quarantine measures, predestination, and divine intervention. Through textual, comparative, and thematic analyses, the study highlights themes such as xenophobia, mismanagement of quarantine, and disease transmission through communal gatherings like Haj.

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The paper argues that *Humma Qifar* recycles the myth of Turkish cruelties, well poisoning, jinn pricking, and divine intervention. Conversely, *Safer Berlik* encapsulates the portrayal of Turkish soldiers as lustful and tyrannical, reflecting hegemonic European narratives of encroachment on livestock holdings and financial corruption during plague times.

Keywords: Cholera Pandemic; Epidemics; *Humma Qifar*; *Safer Berlik*; Saudi Novel; Turks

INTRODUCTION

Post-truth had been one of the indispensable features of literature during pandemics times. Covid-19 was no exception either. Misleading statements, and fake news had been the most prominent character of the responses to Covid-19 (Al-Mwzaiji, 2021, 241). That is one of the reasons that the role of writers and authors of pandemic times is of paramount interest and importance. Writers and historians have often chronicled the ethos of an era caught in the web of pandemics. Public perception of plagues has been largely shaped by and enshrined in literary works, especially fiction, that set their events against famous historical outbreaks of diseases. Finnegan (1999) argues that "in an attempt to analyse man's condition, writers have traditionally drawn on sickness and devastation - epitomised in the often abstract theme of plague" (p. 23). Literary narratives can better convey the fears deeply rooted in such times than historical and medical narratives, which cannot describe the individual narratives of these times as deeply as literary works can (Adel et al.,2020). Even though Thucydides' (c.460 B.C.E.– c.400 B.C.E.) masterpiece *History of the Peloponnesian War,* is considered history, it is read from a reader-response perspective by W. Robert Connor. Highlighting the folly of identifying COVID-19 with the ancient disease, Connor pointed to the helplessness of the Athenian people bereft of any preventive measures against the backdrop of a war (Connor, 2022). Thucydides chronicled the "monstrous damage, both physical and psychological" caused by plague to the Athenians in the great Athenian plague (430 B.C.E) and recorded the victims' gradual resignation to their fate (Finnegan, 1999, p. 24). Similarly, Vergil's Noric cattle plague in *Georgics* 3 evoked a "sympathetic response" in its readers (Gardner, 2014, p. 3). Dustin Lovett (2022) examined the physician-astrologers of Renaissance Europe and explored the roots of handling and treating plague with magical medicine caught somewhere between superstition and modern medicine. Some literary works have foregrounded the individual ramifications of the plagues and the pandemics, featuring their existential and religious aspects. In Albert Camus's *The Plague* (1947), Paneloux, in his sermon, declares that "[o]ne must believe everything or deny everything" (2001, p. 173). Put another way, belief in God "implies an acceptance of plague as part of his divine plan" (Cooke, 2009, p. 36). Other works have foregrounded the social ramifications of the plagues and the pandemics, exploring the social and political dimensions of the disease.

Arab novelists have worked similarly in their depiction of the plagues and the pandemics around which they have woven their stories. Naguib Mahfouz's *Malhamat al-Harafish (*The Epic of the Harafish*,* 1977), through the narratives of Ashour al-Nagi, whose name means (the survivor), shows close kinship with Camus' *The Plague* in terms of the existentialist's dilemma during times of plague: "Every house was in mourning . . . Night and day, fractured voices rose in prayer, imploring saints and angels to stop the disaster" (Mahfouz, 1994, p. 34). Ashour boldly decided to flee the city and rest in a cave under the open sky for six months, keeping himself busy with prayer and meditation while communicating silently with God. He considered his family's and the alley's

decision to remain in their places a blasphemy, as their decision rendered them powerless (Mahfouz, 1994, pp. 39–40). *Tâ'ûn (*The Plague, 1989) by Saad Elkhadem bears structural similarities to Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (c. 1384), showing a "perfect assimilation of the themes and techniques of Western literature, and his fertile recreation of them in Arabic" (Paradela, 1995, p. 52). Literature from West to East seems uniform in its approach to plague. Saudi novelists, building up their narratives on European discourses on pandemics, followed similar lines of fictionalizing the individual and social ramifications of the plague on common people. *Al-Teen* (The Mud, 2010) by Abdo Khal tells the story of a group of characters who are trying to survive the plague and the social and political turmoil that brings. Shaikh Hasan wants Yusuf Obaid who is on his deathbed because of the plague, to be "burnt along with his family members in his house" as he would "transport death in every village" (Khal, 2010, p. 78). Abdulrahman Munif's *Mudun al-Milh* (1984) (Cities of Salt) features a number of plagues, including the cholera outbreak of 1930, along with its depiction of the oil boom in Saudi Arabia. Munif shows how the plague ravaged the land and the people leading to a breakdown of traditional society. These works by Saudi writers share a common reliance on xenophobic European thought processes about the plague. Recent studies have explored epidemics in Arab countries through travel literature and literary fiction, with a focus on Arab contexts (Abdu Al-Moghales et al., 2023; Adel et al., 2020; Ahmad et al., 2024; Al-Moghales et al., 2022). However, these works do not focus on influences working within the Arabic literary texts.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilizes cultural materialism as an analytical framework to examine the interplay between culture and the material conditions of the historical periods under discussion. This approach facilitates the exploration of the influence of European imperialist ideologies on the representation of pandemics in Saudi novels. The concepts of culture and imperialism, as articulated by Raymond Williams (1976) and Herbert Schiller (1976), serve as foundational tools for analyzing the texts. Williams' expansive definition of culture helps in examining the specific ways of life depicted in these novels, while Schiller's notion of cultural imperialism shows how these narratives reflect and challenge the power dynamics between colonizers and the colonized. Williams equated 'hegemonism' with 'imperialism' (p. 144), illustrating how 'cultural imperialism' involves cultivating and imposing a particular viewpoint. Similarly, Schiller likened 'cultural imperialism' to 'colonialism' in its realignment of power centers. *Cultural imperialism* uses the mechanism of attracting, pressurizing, forcing, and shaping the dominating social stratum into corresponding social insitutions (p. 9).

This methodological approach allows for a critical examination of how cultural differences, especially concerning pandemics, are constructed and represented, revealing the hegemonic influences that shape societal perceptions and responses to disease. Cultural imperialism seeks to maintain dominance across political, economic, social, and cultural realms by infiltrating the cultures of subject peoples. The paper presents European hegemonic discourses on the plague, primarily reflected in travelers' documents and resident doctors' reports. It identifies the homogenizing influences within the two novels by Arab writers that explore pandemic themes. Consequently, this analysis critically evaluates how cultural narratives surrounding disease reflect and reinforce hegemonic structures, particularly within the colonial framework and its impact on the Arab experience during epidemics. Through textual, comparative, and thematic analysis, the

study highlights themes such as xenophobia, mismanagement of quarantine, and disease transmission, uncovering the underlying power dynamics within colonial contexts and their effects.

THE PLAGUE BETWEEN TWO CULTURES

Historiographical scholarship has primarily focused on epidemics, particularly cholera pandemics, which emphasized colonial and biological factors rather than a unified cause. The Ottoman Empire was viewed in terms of "racial origins" and was seen to have established social equilibrium through religious, educational, and cultural autonomy (Yalman, 1930, p. 200). After the cholera pandemic of 1865, scholarship took on political undertones, with modernity intensifying the lethality of the disease (Cohn, 2018b, p. 163). Plague science became disconnected from previous studies due to the conflicting nature of modern *Germ Theory* and prophetic medicines. Micheal Dols (1974) argued that the Christians during the Black Death (1346-1353) responded with profound guilt and fear whereas Muslims responded with "three religio-legal principles" (p. 291). Justin Stearns (2011) pointed out the juxtaposition of Muslim and Christian responses to the plague. He highlighted further the medieval period's view that Christians were more prone to fleeing away from the affected areas than the Muslims because of ideological reasons, and those who fled among the Muslims must have been treated as heretics and punished. Furthermore, in his view, both Muslims and Christians responded to the Black Death with "procession, public gathering, and prayer" (Stearns, 2011, p. 164). However, their methods were different. Christian communities in Europe had held the "penitential processions to end and ward off natural catastrophes since the ninth century". Muslims, however, withdrew outside their cities to fast and pray together in hopes of ending the plague (Stearns, 2001, 164).

Alexander Russell (c. 1715-1768) noted the lack of effective treatment among the native population and the belief among Muslims borne out of their dependence upon their faith that the plague was a punishment from God.[1] He thinks that Muslims considered the plague as a curse, did not have faith in medicine, and most of the physicians were either Christians or Jews (pp. 363-364). This belief was the result of four important principles according to Russell that Muslims steadfastly clung to. First, concerning the plague, Russell (1794) argued that Turks have carried predestination, to a dangerous length, and that this is productive of extensive mischief (p. 234). Second, regarding taking recourse to medicine, they are totally at the mercy of Almighty because they believed that Almighty who created diseases created remedies (p. 235). The Europeans opposed this view because it refused to acknowledge the biological transmission of the disease. Third, he opined that before Islam the concept of contagion had existed, but the prophet Mohammed ascribed its appearance to God, which had a negative impact on the populace. Turks in comparison to other nations, became more "indolently negligent of precaution" (p. 423). Fourth, fleeing during the time of the pandemics to the plague-stricken areas was contested by the Muslims as they strictly followed the prophets' principle by not entering the affected area and staying in their place. These principles had bearings upon the general masses in the Muslim areas. Thomas Dawes (1763), in the letter (1762) to Rev. Charles Lyttelton referred to several examples which showed that the natives in Aleppo hardly maintained social distancing from the affected persons or the areas.

[1] *The idea that the plague had been a form of punishment or mercy originates from a Hadith in Bukhārī, see (Awaad et al.)*

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These perspectives, including a belief in predestination, indifferent attitudes towards medicines, and social distancing, narrowly interpreted by European travelers and resident doctors had a significant impact on the historiography of the plague. Basing their arguments on religious parameters, Ebussuud Efendi, Idris Bitlisi, Ta~kopri.izade, and Hamdan Bin Osman Hoca, during Ottoman period, justified fleeing in the face of deadly danger (Bulmuş, 2012, pp. 24–25). However, the Islamic perspective on the plague was not lacking in understanding or knowledge. Sam White (2010) vehemently argued that Ottomans, including Muslims, were not always as passive or fatalistic in the face of plague as once supposed (p. 549). Arabs had a rich understanding of the plague and were able to discuss it using specific terminology and frames of reference (Fancy & Green, 2021, p. 158). The foundations of Arabic thought on pandemics are based on three sources: prophetic traditions, historical accounts, and literature on pandemics.

Medieval Islamic scholars held differing views on the origins of plagues, with some, like Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d.1374), rejecting the theory of miasma or divine direction (Byrne, 2004, p. 144), while others, like Ibn Khātima (d.1369), believed in the "corruption of the air" theory (Byrne, 2004, p. 155). Ibn al-Wardi, who witnessed the Black Death in Aleppo in 749/1349, referred briefly to the early plagues (Byrne, 2004, p. 176). They viewed the plagues through the Galenic humoral framework during the Abbasid period (750-1258). Thus, Prophetic Medicine (*al-Tib al-Nabawi*) was reconciled with scientific medicine. Hans Daiber (2022) analyses the Egyptian scholar Zakariyyā b. Muḥammad al-Anṣārī's (d. 926/1520) treatise *Tuḥfat al-Rāghibīn fī Bayān Amr al-Ṭawāʿīn* ("On the Gift for Those Who Like to Get Information on the Topic of the Plagues"). In Ansari's view, the believers are tested. Through prayers and patience, the believers can find their way to paradise. He pointed out various steps (i.e. intentions, repentance, and patience) for the Muslims during plague times. He did not exclude medical interventions. In fact, on religious grounds, even though, Christians and Muslims could be different, they adopted identical paths. Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta (1304-1369) gave balancing accounts of the devastating Black Death in Damascus, Palestine, Cairo, Jidda, and Mecca.

The people from Abrahamic religions begged God for the plague to stop, fasted for three successive days, assembled in the Great Mosque, and spent the night there in prayers, carrying Korans in their hands. The entire population of the city joined; the Jews went out with their book of the law and the Christians with the Gospel, and God lightened their affliction (Battuta, 1929, pp. 143–144). Reports from the Christian world exclusively held similar views: "communities across class and professions agreed that a two-pronged attack was needed to arrest plague—quarantine and appeals to God's mercy with public prayers, litanies, and above all, processions" (Cohn, 2018a, p. 72). The discourses and treatises on plagues during medieval times across all religious denominations were very rich and did not take isolated views informed by religious parameters alone. Instead, they were a combination of religious principles, Classical Western medicine exemplified by Hippocrates, and medicines from medical science.

Nevertheless, attempts were made from time to time to present prophetic medicine in a poor light. Dols (1974) deduced and foregrounded three principles which were derived from the teaching of the Prophet and stood in opposition to Christianity's perspective: plague is a mercy and offers martyrdom for Muslims, Muslims should neither enter nor flee plague-stricken areas, and there is no contagion because disease comes directly from God (p. 377). Conrad (1995) specifically pointed out the views of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī that the toxin was introduced by the machinations of spirit beings (the jinn, from which comes the English word "genie") (p. 392). Ironically, one hears the identical view before him from Giovanni Boccaccio (1313 –1375): "there came the deadly pestilence that, either because of the influence of the superior bodies or our

iniquitous deeds, was sent upon the mortals by the rightful wrath of God to correct us" (Traversa, 2018, p. 48).

In fact, causes of plague during modern times remained an enigma until 1894 when Alexandre Yersin and Shibasaburo Kitasato discovered *Yersinia pestis* (Y. pestis), the pathogen of the plague.[2,3] The discourse among the armchair Renaissance scholars, historians, and travelers discussing the plague purely from various religious perspectives was misguided.

DISCURSIVE ANALYSIS OF THE NOVELS

The present study focuses on the presence of Western discourse on pandemics in two representative twenty-first-century Saudi Arabic fictions. The novels under consideration— *Safar Berlik* سفر برليك (Mobilisation, 2019) by Maqbul Moussa al-Alawi (1968-), and *Humma Qifar* حمى قفار (Fever of Qifar*,* 2003) by Ali Mohammad Alhabardi (1943-)—written against the backdrop of pandemics, reflecting colonial perspectives on the Ottoman empire. These novels are akin to what Foley (1986) calls 'documentary novel' which "is distinguished by its insistence that it contains some kind of specific and verifiable link to the historical world" (p. 26). However, they make a synchronic study of the political history of Arab Revolts during World War 1. They failed to see through Western interests as the British had a great role to play. The revolt was engineered by people like T.E. Lawrence (known as "Lawrence of Arabia"). This paper looks for a definite pattern in the propaganda politics of the Europeans about the Ottomans. *Safar Berlik* carries forward the European narratives of using the Prophet's Holy Mosque as a storehouse of weapons and transporting valuable items from the Prophet's Holy Mosque to Constantinople.

The word [Seferberlik] refers to the mobilization effected by the late Ottoman Empire during the Second Balkan War of 1913 and World War I from 1914 to 1918. The publication of Saudi Arabian historian Ahmad Murshid's collection of interviews *Tayba wa-Dhikrayat al-Ahibba* (Tayba and Memories of the Beloved) in 1993 and 1995 has ignited new passions in the so-called 1916-19 siege of Medina under Fakhri Pasha.[4] This event is discussed among the scholars for a host of reasons: the recorded memories which center around traumatic experiences common to civilians during wartime sieges throughout history, including famine, disease, scarcity, fear, uprooting, and death (El Bakri, 2014, p. 703); the serious human ramifications of the event, a journey by train to Damascus, sabotage of different parts of the railway train by the rebels, recommendations of the consumption of locust by Fakhri Pasha on account of food supplies running out (Wasti, 1991, p. 646). This episode is also known for recording the disappointment of hopes of Faysal, Abdullah and Ali to attack Medina on account of serious difficulties with regard to the water supply, and the breaking out of the plague in September and its spread to the troops (Kedourie, 1977, p. 126).[5]

Safar Berlik is divided into three sections. It revolves around the protagonist Theeb's enslavement by Ottoman soldiers, his deportation to Damascus by train during the 1916 uprising, and his repeated assertions that "I was not a slave. I was a free man" (p. 51). The first part of the

[2] *For review of the various stages of the evolution of contagion through the historical framework, see (Sakai & Morimoto, 2022)*
[3] *During the Black Death, the epidemic of 1603, and the Plague of London of 1665, the causes of plague remained an enigma. For sentiments prevailing against Jews, prevailing Miasma Theory among medicos, and superstitious emotionalism during the fourteenth century, and four possible reasons for plague and prophylactics during the seventeenth century, see (Rechnitzer, 1947) "History of the Plague," UWOMJ 17 (Winter 1947): 23-32.*
[4] *See Ahmad Murshid Salih Amin, Tayba Wa-Dhikrayat al-Ahibba. Vol. 1. (Jeddah, 1993), and, Tayba wa-Dhikrayat al-Ahibba (Jeddah, 1995).*
[5] *For various implications and interpretations of Saferberlik, see (al-Qattan, 2004, pp. 163–173), (Hanna, 2010, pp. 299–311), (Ziya, 2012, pp. 22–29)*

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novel tells the story of the imprisonment and enslavement of the narrator together with others by the Ottoman soldiers, their journey on the backs of donkeys while handcuffed, an exchange of slaves with bandits on the way, the cruel treatment of the caravan people at the hands of the Ottoman soldiers especially Fares, the young boy (p. 29) Initially treated humanely, Fares was given provisions of separate vessels of food, nutritious food, and a comfortable bed only to be followed by probable sexual perversion in the dead of night, killing by those armed soldiers, and his burial in the sand (pp. 31–32). In the second part, which foreshadows the third part, in a flashback, the mother tells Theeb the prince-to-pauper story of his father from Mecca, his contraction of smallpox, his death in the desert, and Theeb's birth in the desert after that with the help of her loyal brother. She explains his father's contraction of smallpox in the following words:

> Your father contracted smallpox after the end of the pilgrimage season, during which he worked hard and as a guide with pilgrims who came from the land of Shanqiq. With the end of the Hajj (pilgrimage season), smallpox broke out among them, the smallpox was transmitted to your father. Fear spread among the residents of the neighborhood because of your father's illness.
>
> (p. 34)

The third part of the novel highlights the trauma of forced deportation, the agony of separation and alienation of family members, the glimpse of deserted houses, tortuous deportation to Damascus by train, and the horrible conditions prevailing inside the train compartment. Theeb narrated some of the gruesome experiences during his forced deportation:

> I realized my grim fate and ill fortune the moment I entered the depths of the train. What I saw inside left me stunned. There were people who looked like ghosts, their bodies frail, mere skin and bones, as if they were the dead who had risen from their graves days after burial. You could see silent men, women crying endlessly, and children screaming... suffocating odors filled the air, assaulting the senses. I came to understand that the train had been stationary for two days.
>
> (pp. 111–112)

The author of *Safar Berlik* examines the historical position of primitive Arab society in dealing with pandemics. The archetypal Arab Society is called into question. The author shows some cultural affinities deeply rooted among people in Hejaz at those times. People find solace, peace and healing in the desert, believing that its pure, dry air and hot sands serve as remedies for many diseases. The desert has a history of being a place of recovery, many people who had suffered from smallpox eventually regained their health there. Theeb's mother is given a choice to take her husband to the quarantine centre in Jeddah or to the desert. She chose the latter: "Maybe the fresh, dry air and the hot sand will help him heal" (p. 34). Unfortunately, her belief in the desert as a traditional remedy bore no fruitful result.

On the social level, human values have deteriorated while on the individual level, signs of humanity have not lost their sheen. The novelist presents the ruler Fakhri Pasha's executive orders towards the "corrupt Arabs". The draconian orders are to close the markets, confiscate goods and stop buying and selling. Furthermore, as per the instruction, the Ottoman officer "seized bags of Al-Luqimi wheat and Al-Ma'iya wheat [types of wheat] in the Al-Hababa market. He went to the ovens that prepared bread and even seized the well-known dry bread known as Qunita, which is easy to store" (pp. 80–81). In contrast, when the storage room in the house of a notable figure of the city, Sayyid Abdul Rahman, began to become empty of flour, barley, rice, sugar, wheat, dates, pressed dates, fresh dates, and honey, he gave to the queue of hungry and homeless people from the storage room whatever was necessary to sustain them (pp. 92–93).

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Crisis in values and dehumanising practices during the times of the disease have been highlighted by the author to demonstrate how authorities such as the mayor of the area and his relatives took advantage of the infection of the disease, with terrifying stealth, to disown the family of their home. They threaten to put Theeb's mother along with her newly born baby in the quarantine centre if she continues to demand her right to residence. The mayor along with the soldiers of Makkah's Sheriff come to carry out the orders to quarantine by force: "the mayor came to me now and told me: I must take you and the baby to the quarantine" (p. 35). Theeb's mother is presented as defiant against quarantine centres due to the prevailing news that people admitted there are infected with diseases, and she sacrifices her house and gold to protect her baby from being taken there by force and rescues her brother after "they put my thumbprint on the ownership transfer document of the house", as she says (p. 35). Her tryst with destiny reflects the individual struggles against the imposed and unjust orders to leave her house by the state representatives. Theeb's torturous journey was the product of the treatment of the ruling state with the individuals and society during the spread of the disease. Theeb's family was forced to leave Mecca due to the epidemic and the stringent measures, some of which, as previously discussed, were unjust. Theeb's family has no other option except the desert since they have no trust in quarantine as a protective measure to stop the infection. Due to this displacement, Theeb was kidnapped from the desert near Mecca leading to his endless suffering.

Al-Alawi presents the state as a totalitarian state encroaching upon basic inalienable fundamental rights. He seems to document rampant corruption prevailing in social structures and the representatives of the state during the Ottoman rule taking advantage of the spread of the disease as reported in some travel books, to fill their coffers. Earlier European travellers had successfully embedded the view that the possessions of those who die of such epidemics or leave their areas should go to the ruler of the region. Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (1829) pointed out the corruption of the ruling state during the 18th century such as the Grand Signior and his Pashas "tolerate the plague in their dominions, because the numerous deaths fill their purses" (p. 416). This narrative is viciously woven in Naguib Mahfouz's *Malhamat al-Harafish*. After the plague, people realised that the government was beginning to recover from the onslaught of death and destruction (p. 50). Inventories of the wealthy people's houses were compiled, but the properties were looted. The government ignored investigating it. Ashour al-Nagi believed that this was the work of the government itself (p. 52).

Such historiography is lopsided because *Tereke defterleri* (state records) of the inheritance property prove it otherwise. The Ottoman probate inventories contained "data on wealth and living standard" on annual infections (White, 2010, p. 557). Adam Mestya and Rezk Nori (2022) tried to remove the misconceptions related to the term *bayt al-mal* (literally, "the house of wealth" in Arabic) which is generally, identified to mean a Muslim government's "treasury" (p. 601). Alan Mikhail (2017) considered the records of Islamic courts extremely useful for the study of the history of plague in the Middle East since one of the primary functions of the court was to administer the inheritance of the deceased. By tracing the vicissitudes in the number of such inventories before, during, and after known plague epidemics, one can gain an approximate idea of the scale of mortality for a given region (p. 278).

Humma Qifar by Ali Mohammad Alhabardi (1943) tells the story of the historical transformation of the society of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the political, personal, and social levels post-1850s in the throes of epidemics. The novel depicts two worldviews: one of the foreign oil companies operating in *Dhahran* in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia and representing crass materialism, and the other of the nearby village community which still lives in medieval

conditions marked by simplicity, medieval customs, and mud houses. To the villagers, the car and the radio symbolize modernity. As society was transforming because of the recent boom on account of oil discovery, for them "Dhahran planet was one of the distant inaccessible planets" (p. 6). The main protagonist Saad is caught in the vortex of these two different worlds. Young Saad worked in oil companies in *Dhahran* region where multinational companies were operative and active under the principles of the new world order and its civilization. He returned on vacation to visit his family in a village in the Ha'il region that resembled the Middle Ages in social conditions: customs and traditions in this village were poles apart from the *Dhahran* lifestyle:

> The car stopped in the city's market [Ha'il], buzzing with movement and loud voices, to buy some travel supplies and provisions. …The market's narrow lanes were filled with a variety of different voices, different goods and different scents, the fragrance of spices, the sounds of vendors, and the roaring of camels and the bleating of sheep. After a short period, Saad came to drive them through the narrow unpaved city roads, until the car stopped in the spacious sand yard in front of a large house in the southern city of Ha'il.
>
> (pp. 19–20)

Saad went with his uncle and some of his companions on a hunting expedition into the wilderness, away from Ha'il city where they could hunt deer. The hunting trip is used as a foreshadowing technique in which the readers are informed about the pandemic history of the village which faced the wrath of the Ottomans. During this trip, they passed through the village of "Qifar", the dead village, which experienced a mysterious epidemic that killed everyone with the sole exception of black-skinned people. His uncle told Saad the story about this village, the origin of the epidemic, and several potent reasons believed by the people for this epidemic, including divine punishment, utter disregard for bounties of Allah, a plot hatched by the Turks, and the belief that the Jinn in the form of bats came and put toxins in the wells to spread the disease (p. 46). This belief derives from Al-Hafiz Ibn Hajar Al-Asqalani's view on plague that it is affected by the jinn. This discourse of Asqalani later became the source of ridicule among the European scholars.

After the hunting trip which lasted several days, Saad came back to his headquarters in *Dhahran*, then went on a study trip to the United States, where he met a Spanish girl Lula (p. 126), and abandoned his family and his community forever. He believed that the society he came from would end and perish because of the values that still existed there, just as the village of Qifar had perished before. It still carries all the reasons that can repeat the tragedy of the city of Qifar. The community in the village still adheres to old customs and traditions and has not yet been influenced by the values of civilization and scientific temperament that Saad has been experiencing in Philadelphia. Saad is dazzled at "the future in this new world, unknown to his village which is nestled among the hills and its people" (132). He wants a new world liberated from all his old ties (pp. 132–133).

Humma Qifar boldly tackles the issue of ideological mobility**.** The novelist seeks to explore the reason for pandemics in the village. It stems from the people's belief that the epidemic is due to "the people of Qifar, whom Allah had blessed, but who had transgressed and acted tyrannically in their village and had done many things that anger Allah" (p. 35). The author's interpretation bears a close affinity to Venerable Bede's interpretation of pandemics. Bede believed that as a result of a luxurious lifestyle, the pandemics brought the spiritual death and every kind of foul crime among the people including the "Lord's own flock and their pastors" (Galbraith et al., 1969, p. 49). Like Bede, the novel blames the bacchanalian mood and merrymaking as *hamartia*:

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> And the elderly people also narrate that there was no town from the mountain lands that lived with blessings and happiness as the town of Qifar whose people squander the grace of God, their hearts were hardened, so their greatest concern was joy, fun, and amusement day and night, and laughter because of the trivial things, and they may fabricate reasons that arouse surprise and laughter.
>
> (p. 37)

In *Safar Berlik*, the image of gun-trotting Turks is present almost throughout the novel: his back would "flare up with his whip every now and then. They were guarding our residence and beside them lay their rifles and daggers on the ground" (pp. 14–15). The beating by those soldiers with dirty sticks "was burning in his body like fire" (p. 22). Cruelty meted to a boy for his refusal in slave trade is exemplary: "they beat him with their sticks and whips. They beat him with the butts of their rifles until he died. His cries and screams fell on deaf ears" (p. 26). They left him there as morsels for wild animals, i.e., wolves. In the backdrop of "Arab Revolt" (p. 72), one gets the horrible image of cruelties at the hands of the soldiers forcing common men to railway stations under the shadow of guns and ammunition. It started with the draconian orders of Fakhri Pasha for the forced deportation of the people to the railway station so that they could be transported from there to Damascus. Additional mobilisation of troops that came on demand of Fakhri Pash 'spread like locust': "Their frowning faces flushing with anger inspire fear in everyone who sees them". The soldiers encroached on "goats, sheep, and camel" of the people (p. 92). The trigger-happy Fakhri Pasha is credited with using the gun inside the prophet's mosque: "the Pasha, who was completely blindsided, secured one of the holiest places of the Muslims and desecrated it with weapons" (p. 86). The cliché of Sheikh Abdurrahman Al-Madani that:" The city (or Medina city) doesn't go hungry as long as the city has two loins: dates and water" proved incorrect. The Medina city had started going hungry (p. 81). People in the street started feeling the heat: "Ottoman soldiers who came from Istanbul and the Levant started harassing people in the streets and markets" (p. 76). The same is true about *Humma Qifar*.

It is, generally, believed that medieval Muslim scholars such as Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya ((1292-1350CE / 691 AH- 751 AH)), Lisan-ad-Din Ibn al-Khatib (1313-1374), known for *Muqni'at as-sa'il 'an marad al-ha'il*, and Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani(1372–1449) whose works on plague are highly venerated overwhelmingly condemned flight believing plague was God's ordained form of punishment (or blessing), from which there was no point in seeking refuge at another location (Mikhail, 2008, p. 250). [6]

The lived experiences of past pandemics provide many clues about methods used by the people. These can take many forms, ranging from biological traces of past diseases in populations to cultural markers that reflect how those populations tried to protect themselves both religiously and scientifically (Varllk, 2020, p. 185). Hamdan highlighted the pitiable conditions of people during the time of plague in the following words:

> If someone in a household is struck by the plague (*taun*), they decide to flee due to the fear of contagion and they go to another location. Sometimes those who remain are firm and do proper supplication to God and do not change their location. Consequently, three to four die in their household.
>
> (Bulmuş, 2012, p. 23)

[6] *for Khatib's view and his influences see, (Ober & Aloush, 1982, pp. 418–524).*

Similarly, in *Humma Qifar* the tragic moment of the people is worth quoting:

> The epidemic spread in the village, and those who were able to flee fled, but those who could not, dug their own graves, and lay next to them in order to facilitate their burial in them. Some graves are inside homes, some are near wells, and some are in the middle of empty groves, cemeteries for entire families in the midst of their possessions.
>
> (p. 48)

In *Humma Qifar*, the novelist seems to offer a social criticism where it sees the society's liberal self-interpretation, conflict, and disagreement as the cause of the emergence of the epidemic: internecine war among the sons of Qifar and the owner of Ghayyad palace went to the Othman leader for help (p. 39). There had been an absence of unity among the ranks and the files. The plot of *Humma Qifar* revolves around the village of Qifar, starting with the remains of the palaces and the wall of the huge, ruined Ghayad built in Qifar as a bulwark against the attacks of the Turks (p. 24). This wall is what opened the biggest problem among the people of the village and among the Turks, who are the cause of the creation of the epidemic, according to the novel, to eliminate the people of the village of Qifar (pp. 46–47). This proved to be genocidal as it evidences the direct link between the emergence of the epidemic on the one hand and the Turkish presence and ensuing violence and counter-violence on the other hand. The Turks started creating problems for the villagers who "decided unanimously to build a wall around their city and fortify it against the Turks who used to attack it and take the production of their orchards without their permission" (p. 24). This theme is reiterated in *Safar Berlik*. Fakhri Pasha ordered his soldiers to cordon off the area, in addition to many other things:

> Then close the stores and shops, even the entire markets. When these Arabian people are hungry, then they will come out from the city despicably. Stop selling and buying by any means. And take forcibly foodstuff you find, even the dates. Create groups of soldiers to collect them from palm trees by force if necessary. Put it in the boxes, keep it in the castle and the soldiers' stores. . . .
>
> (p. 80)

Humma Qifar states that the commander of the Turkish military garrison sent two soldiers to prevent people from building the wall on Qifar, so the citizens arrested one of them and interred him inside the city wall to serve as a lesson and a threatening message to other Turks: "Indeed, they carried one of the men and threw him into the middle of the wall, building the structure over him" (25). Indeed, when the soldier returned and saw his colleague buried alive in the village wall, he worked to spread terror in the hearts of the Turkish soldiers and their commander, who decided to take revenge on the people of Qifar in an unusual way (p. 25).

The image of the Turk as bloodthirsty and revengeful can be deduced from the plot of the novel. When the people of Qifar differed among themselves, Ghayad went to the commander of the Turkish garrison and asked him to intervene and stop the conflict, which led to the death of 15 people until that moment, but when he explained to the Turkish commander the details of the problem, his response was: "Bravo. . . . Bravo. . . .Qifar Bravo" (p. 39). When Ghayad asked what this meant, they told him that he said: Excellent, and that he was happy that 15 of them were killed and that this number is still small compared to the soldier who was killed by the people of Qifar (pp. 39–40).

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The building of the wall serves as a powerful symbol of protection against external aggression and of a close, self-sufficient economy, which manifested itself on the faces of the people. In contrast, on the other side of this wall, a vulturous enemy lurks. The Turks prowled like hungry wolves, and the people of Qifar sought the help of the ruler. The Turks required the people to pay them zakat from villages and cities, so the Bedouins fled to the desert like birds while the people of the villages remained to pay many times what they had to. Not only that, but they required people to pay huge sums of money for their protection even though no one threatened their lives in reality except the Turks themselves (pp. 44–45). The violence and cruelty carried out by the Turks were the catalyst for the emergence of force and counter-violence by the people of the village of Qifar, and then from all this, the biggest, most dangerous and destructive violence appeared, which was an epidemic that eliminated the people of Qifar and turned everything into mere stories that people told.

Together with the depiction of Turks as 'Terrible', they were also portrayed as 'lustful' tyrants by Europeans in the image of the Anti-Christ. The pashas "plunge themselves in all sorts of voluptousnesse"; they seek filthy pleasure in "a contrary course and demand of nature which she hath not" (Wheatcroft, 1993, p. 25). "The British believed that the Turks, with their foul lusts, enjoyed killing, and enjoyed rape and torture even more. Sadism was believed to be a dominant Ottoman quality" (Wheatcroft, 1993, p. 236). One after another, one gets the horrific accounts of rape by the Turkish army. For instance, "Byzantine eyewitnesses told how young girls and boys were raped on altar tables, and the great church echoed with their screams" (Wheatcroft, 1993, p. 22), as shown below through Fares' story who was sexually assaulted repeatedly.

In the West, such powerful stereotyping is brought home by an equally powerful narrative and autobiographical accounts given by British soldier T. E. Lawrence ("Lawrence of Arabia") in his autobiographical piece *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. He, himself, as he states in his narrative, was abused by the Turks at Deraa. The paragraphs giving the full account of sexual predation are shocking. Lawrence (1935) described how he was taken to the Bey's bedroom, a bulky man sitting on the bed in a nightgown, "trembling and sweating as though with fever" (p. 492). Bey flung himself back on the bed and dragged the autodiegetic narrator down with him in his arms. He began to fawn on him, saying how white and fresh he was. He tore away his clothes bit by bit. Then Lawrence records the bestiality of sexual perversion and cruelty meted out to him at the hands of the soldiers (pp. 442–445). This episode serves as "an allegory of the Lustful Turks toying with his victim" (Wheatcroft, 1993, p. 238). This archetypal narrative has long served its imperialistic purpose.

Safar Berlik likewise presents horrible images of the torture and bestiality of the abductors. Through Fares' story, he describes the disgusting bandits horrifically torturing the slaves and the captives to death as was the case with Fares, who has been serially raped by the gang until he died, and they buried him at the crime scene. The narrator describes the cruelties of the soldier in the following words:

> I raised my head when I found two people from the caravan holding helpless little Fares with force, and he was pleading with them (with folded hand). He wept when one of them slapped his face with such force that it ripped the peace of night. Then caravan people left him on the sand like a slaughtered sheep. . ... I understood what these people want from this helpless child.
>
> (pp. 30–31)

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Cruelties by the state during the Ottoman rule of Madinah have been highlighted throughout the narrative about Theeb. Disgraceful treatment of the people occurred in the streets of Madinah during this forced deportation. Anyone caught in the street is thrown into the train, which is already piled up with people, and atrocities of various kinds take place in it. For example, soldiers catch a mother and put her on the train despite her pleading with them to be allowed to bring her newly born daughter along with her. Overcoming the pain of delivery, she decides to search for her husband, who has gone to bring her something to eat, but the soldiers capture him and put him on the train to Damascus, leaving her baby to the unknown (p. 104). The writer further portrays social ramifications in *Safar Berlik* as Jeddah is described as the centre of the epidemic with lots of infection and death: "I refused to take your father to the quarantine center in Jeddah. What we hear of diseases spread among its inhabitants makes one think a thousand times before going to it" (p. 34). It is told that a neighbour known as Marjana leaves with her master Abdulrahman Almadani to Jeddah to stay with his daughter after the violent acts in Madinah and "dies in one of the quarantine centres there of typhoid which killed many people at that period" (p. 156). The life of the soldiers had been no less miserable:

> Out of twenty thousand soldiers, except one thousand and eighty only, all died! All of them had been physically and psychologically in wretched condition on account of scarcity of food and medicine, therefore, most of them fled, and in a few of them, disease broke out.
> (p. 136)

The novel uncovers many of the cultural patterns that reflect the class division by monitoring the perceptions of people who believe that the epidemic has affected masters and not slaves. The novelist is merely foregrounding the popular belief that the black race people were working hand in glove with enemies; he is reiterating the prevalent assumptions that the blacks were part of the conspiracy against the townspeople who were in revolt against the Turks (p. 48). The texture of the novel sees slaves as part of the conspiracy with the Ottomans to poison the water of wells, as the narrator wonders, "The thing that baffles me is why the fever did not affect the slaves but only their masters? Were they aware of the poisoned wells? Has oppression reached them to cooperate with the enemy to poison the wells" (p. 48). Vague doubt is generated with reference to the collusion of blacks with Turks. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator presents the news of his friend Abdul Karim's grandmother, who seems to have died due to Qifar fever (p. 4). He states that she "drank from the water of Qifar, considering that the infested water of Qifar does not harm her, as it is known it harms masters, not servants because they know where they drink from" (p. 4).

Black race people are at the receiving end in *Humma Qifar*; since they are spared the ravages of the plague that decimates the whites, they are blamed for it. The division of people into masters and slaves essentially leads to the division into whites and blacks. This idea is reflected in the description of how Qifar fever began: "Fever began to appear when a person of the white-skinned people drank water from wells of Qifar, and he/she was stuck by a headache and a high temperature. His/her stomach swells for several days, then dies" (p. 46). Such an episode is not an isolated case study. It echoes the accusations, humiliation, and persecution of the minority groups such as lechers and Jews during the Black Death's time. In late medieval Europe, minority groups such as lepers, Jews, and others were accused of conspiring to poison drinking wells to cause widespread illness and mortality. The purpose was, allegedly, to eliminate the elite and subvert the social order. For these alleged crimes, they were persecuted as well. However, this myth of poisoning of wells expanded to other groups such as Muslims and Basques.

CONCLUSION

The paper presented the manifestation of European hegemonic universalism during pandemic outbreaks as depicted in both European travel literature and two Saudi novels, *Humma Qifar* and *Safer Berlik*. By employing a cultural imperialism perspective, the analysis uncovered parallels between historical European narratives and the cultural, ideological, and the social dynamics represented in the novels. The findings indicate a multifaceted interplay of influences. As anticipated, the novels echo certain European stereotypes regarding Muslim responses to the plague, particularly concerning the perceived lack of scientific understanding and reliance on traditional practices.

Humma Qifar revisits the familiar idea of attributing disease to supernatural forces, mirroring pre-scientific explanations for epidemics. The novel's portrayal of characters preferring the desert over quarantine, despite its mismanagement, underscores the intricate relationship between trust in authority and traditional beliefs during crises. Its depiction of accusations against Black individuals for well-poisoning is reminiscent of similar allegations against minority groups during the Black Death. Similarly, *Safer Berlik*'s depiction of corruption during plague times, particularly in handling the property of deceased individuals, resonates with European narratives of Ottoman administrative failings. The novel aligns with European narratives of Ottoman cruelty and corruption during World War I, particularly in its depiction of troop mobilization, deportations, and alleged desecration of holy sites; this alignment might also reflect historical realities and local experiences of Ottoman rule.

In conclusion, though the novels engage with and, in some instances, reproduce elements of European narratives about disease and cultural differences, they also offer unique perspectives on their respective historical contexts' social and political realities. Further research, including the examination of other Middle Eastern texts, is essential to disentangle the intricate web of influences at play and to discern to what extent these narratives reflect genuine local experiences versus the adoption or adaptation of external tropes. This nuanced understanding will facilitate a more accurate assessment of the role of cultural imperialism in shaping literary representations of pandemics in the Middle East, moving beyond simplistic interpretations of influence. It will also aid in appreciating the artistic merit of these works, allowing them to be understood beyond a purely jingoistic reading.

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