Mishri’s The Scent of Cadi: The Individual in the Village and the Conflict between the Past, Present and Future

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ABSTRACT. Mishri’s The Scent of Cadi presents images of village life at a time of transition. He is concerned with highlighting the danger of having individuals steer away from the common practice of their fellow villagers. Mishri’s portrays characters that are contented and happy as long as they are functioning as members of a well-defined social structure that has no marked differences between its members. He points out that unhappiness begins to invade the village when a newer generation begins to take on new characteristics that make the behavior of individuals unpredictable and the communication between them difficult. The pastoral scene of the beginning of the novel is disrupted by the invading urban implements and values.

The Scent of Cadi begins with, “... A rooster crowed [called for prayer] from above the lowest stone steps of the highest house at the edge of the village. It was followed by the crows of another rooster and another in the yards that were full of people, cattle, and noise of the people going back to their homes from the fields before the day’s sun made it back to its western destination.” The sounds of roosters, people, cattle, the actions of children, fill the chapters of the novel. So do the vivid images of the items that fill the scene: a brass faucet, a white drinking metal bowl, a small pot, the diminishing light, milking of a cow, the stoking of fire, smoke and heat filling eyes, a larger pot being heated on a fire making noise as the extra water hits the hot edges. The scene is filled with the details of the simple belongings of the family of the gray-head, “Attiya.” The epithet gray-head, often used in Arabic to refer to one’s father or grandfather, is used throughout the rest of the novel to refer to Attiya.

The small stone home shelters the extended family of Attiya: his wife, son and daughter, his daughter-in-law, and his grandchildren. Nearby they have their
white cow, a red ox, a donkey, and some chickens. Mishri paints his canvass with the daily routines of this family and their daily concerns. He describes their activities inside and outside their simple home. The neighbors begin to gather close to the mosque waiting for, Maghreb, the dusk prayer. Again the colors, texture and sounds fill the scene. We feel the caller to prayer’s voice and movements. Then all go to where their shoes are. Outside, near the door, they put the shoes on in the darkness of the approaching night and hurry home. We see the interaction of the family on the return of the gray-head. We hear about the family’s relationships and about their troubles. They live a simple life. Everyone has her/his chores and the conflicts present are typical: a mother-in-law critical of her son’s wife, children being naughty, two young women friendly to each other since they see the affairs of the family from a point of view determined through their similar ages, a son being obedient and acting the way every one in the village expects him to act. We are lead to see the family as an ordinary family, typical of other families of the village with nothing to distinguish it from the others. Their actions and concerns represent the basic stuff of life. The details seem to give us the preliminaries of a novel without any hint of complications. Members of this family are living a basic existence. They could be considered poor but they do not consider themselves poor. They have to watch what they eat and the children do not get many treats but they manage to live contentedly. They know their place in their community and in life. The rest of the novel continues to tell us about the highlights of a family’s life in a village of the southern region of Saudi Arabia. These highlights are everyday events. They are the normal daily happenings that are seen to be significant. They are documented carefully to make us realize the essence of life that these people possess and treasure. The rest of Mishri’s novel relates not the rituals of an evening, as did the first chapter but some of the significant landmarks of a villager’s life.

Chapter Two tells us about buying a younger ox to replace the aging red ox. It is hard to come up with the cash but the new addition to the animals they have given the family a cautious joy. All the details contribute to show a part of the hard but cohesive life they lead: the rituals of supplication, the little acts of celebration, the chiding of the little ones for their insistence on getting a few dates, the little transistor radio that the old man listens to bringing a song that everyone loves. Another significant point comes in Chapters Three and Four: marriage. We hear about hard work and then the meeting for Friday prayer, a ritual all the men in the village attend. At the end of the prayer, a man from the village announces a coming wedding and invites all to come to the celebration. Every listener to the invitation knows that he is expected to attend the party and give help. The bride is a girl who had played with the groom when both were children. The villagers, we are made to see, are good people who simply work on the farm during the day hours and sleep at night. Small and old, with all the
wisdom and brawn they have, help each other. Everyone assumes that it would be shameful for the son and his bride to live anywhere but in the groom’s father’s house. The bride goes to her new home on a specially decked camel followed by another camel that carries her belongings: a box with some mirrors on it and a few dresses, two or three of which are embroidered, and everything is bathed with the fragrance of the screw pine. The scent emanates from all the clothes. The leaves of “Cadi” are white and yellowing and adorn the ears of the bride and some of the women. “The screw pine is beautiful, good smelling, expensive, and is often used to describe woman’s beauty.”

In Chapters Five and Six, the days pass on. A crow lands on the donkey’s back and the oldest of the young children chases it away. The chapter ends with a hymn approving of life: “Oh what wonder you are, Oh world! Balanced ... connected ... what a universe you are. Your creatures are jewels.” The next chapter presents a woman as someone who has almost the same power and definitely the same rights as others. The woman stands up for her rights when an animal trespasses on her property and consumes part of her crops. She is treated fairly and the incident is forgotten very quickly.

Mishri continues documenting the important turning points or what he considers to be the significant events in the life of the village. Harvest time, a busy time for everyone in the village, is a time of joy and song while the people of the village, young and old, men and women, cooperate to complete the extra work they have. They separate the grain from the stalk and the neighbors cooperate by using two oxen or donkeys together to pull a stone over the wheat that has been gathered and dried for an extra period on the roofs of houses. We hear also about the way men dress and the side knives they carry. A tragedy takes place in the next chapter: fire strikes the harvest. The women shout from the top of the houses and call for help. The entire village comes to the rescue. The children throw dirt on the upwind side of the fire and the men throw the water that arrives in pots and pans and some leather bags carried by women and men. The fire is put out and the villagers see that everything has been consumed and they begin to console the family. The people gather in the gray-head’s house and then go together to the mosque. They all console the man on the loss he has suffered. They never talk about helping him make up his loss. No one needs to be reminded of that act of reparation. In fact he ultimately receives more wheat from everyone and ends up having more than he had lost.

The next chapter describes the trip to the market before the approaching winter. The little things the man brings with him bring joy and thanks from everyone. He counsels his neighbor on buying a cow and helps him shave his head. Then we see an act of cooperative work when a neighbor asks the congregation at Friday prayer to come help him put the roof on the home he has been build-
ing. After that work, they celebrate with traditional dances and the gray-head reminisces with another man about how their hearts used to be full of goodness when they were youthful. Then he expresses his fear that things could change and a day comes when some villagers would refuse to help or ignore each other's needs thus leaving what unites the group behind. The changes dreaded begin to appear in the following chapter.

The son wants his children, including his girls, to go to school. The son feels he lacks something when he sees that his children know how to read and write. He admits that their day is different from his and that of his father's. At this point we hear that the daughter had been married for a while and that she has two children. The girls are going to school and one of them, Mariam, talks to her grandfather about what she learns in school. We are also told about the death of Mariam's sister a while before, trampled to death by the ox. The ox was chased and slaughtered and its meat given to all the people of the village. The loss of the ox was followed by a decline of interest in farming. The son begins working for the school in town and receives a monthly salary. Cars come into the village now and the gray-head goes in a friend's car to do his shopping. Yet he refuses to sell his donkey ignoring his son's arguments to the contrary. He agrees to buy a car but remains adamant in refusing to sell his animals.

The rituals of the village associated with death are next seen in relation to the death of the gray-hair's neighbor. We hear about new changes in the daily lives of the villagers. New concrete buildings begin to come into existence. The younger generation expresses its amazement at the hard life the older generation had lived. Rain does not bring the same joy as it did before and many people quit farming altogether. The days pass, the donkey dies, and the cow is slaughtered. The son wants to move to a new bigger house made of concrete and steel but the old man refuses to leave his old stone home. The valley does not have the same green look and the old man says: "The time I was afraid of has arrived. There are only a few friends left and hope is lost. "Roosters disappear and so do chickens. Electricity invades the village. The old men are sold to visiting foreigners who find them interesting. Women begin cooking imported frozen chickens. Telephones and loud speakers and televisions arrive and gradually people's relationships and behavior change. The narrator sums it up through the words of the old man: "What hard life this is; only few days are left in this house of mud and stones." The last chapter relates how two people falsely testify that a piece of a mountain belongs to a man who bribed them. The rightful owner comes to seek help from the gray-head to testify on his behalf. Attiya agrees and feels angry that someone had tried to take away something from its rightful owner. The novel ends on a sorrowful note mixed with a resolve to stand up for justice.
As a Saudi writer, Abdulaziz Mishri looks back at a critical period in Saudi Arabian history: the transitional years that marked the end of a predictable, comforting village life untouched by oil wealth, and the beginning of change in the lives of the villagers as their behavior gradually adapts to these changes some of which are seen as negative. As a tribute to his own roots in a Saudi village, Mishri depicts recognizable character-types taken from his experiences. In the process, he reflects a view of villagers whose lives have been molded by shared rituals and social customs that had remained constant throughout the history of the village. Mishri’s nostalgic look back, however, is gradually jarred as the villagers begin to exhibit unpredictable and unusual behavior. The ethical values that have always shaped the purity and simplicity of the villagers’ lives are slowly altered. This paper analyzes Mishri’s treatment of this period of change in a Saudi village that begins with life during the golden years and ends with the sad decline and loss of innocence depicted in the later years.

Mishri grew up in a village that became the preferred setting of his works in which he examines the experiences of his youth portrayed against the background of a small society undergoing change. He writes about the Saudi village during a pre-motor time. His love for the village is expressed in a lyrical portrayal infused with warm feelings towards the village and its people. The place he describes has small social groups in which individuals exist conscious of their position. This consciousness plays a pivotal role in Mishri’s character portrayal. In addition, Mishri documents the change in social settings and in the way people conduct their lives when confronted with change. Changes in the villages of the southern region of Saudi Arabia took place somewhat later than similar changes in urban areas. As the discovery of oil in the Eastern part of the country brought wealth, the changes that accompanied oil wealth gradually filtered to the villages, bringing the changes Mishri describes.

Adulaziz Mishri’s literary work has generated much interest in Saudi Arabia and in many other Arab countries. His novel Reeh Al-Cadi (The Scent of Cadi) (1993) was serialized in the widely-circulated Al-haras Al-watani, a Saudi monthly magazine, and it has also appeared in book form outside the writer’s home country, a fact that has given the novel a wide regional exposure. Arab critics often discuss The Scent Cadi, which arouses keen interest in Saudi literature and the modern Arabic novel. Despite its recent date of publication, several analyses have been devoted exclusively to the novel. Most of these emphasize the obvious fact that the village is the setting. Many literary scholars in the Arab world believe that the village is not a particularly suitable choice for presenting extended narratives of human relationships. Mishri points out that the novel has not thrived well in the Kingdom because, “The foundation upon which novels are written is lacking: a social structure that has the two essential
parts of humanity. The two genders are separated completely in public life. The essential ingredient of social interaction, which would exist with the presence of women among men, is almost non-existent, or is hidden on purpose.” (“The Contemporary Novel in the Kingdom,” 55)

Other critics discuss the novel’s poetic language, its documentation of village life, and its embodiment of genuine love for the village and its traditions. Samir Ahmad Al-sharif sees that the novel presents a conflict between an older generation and its contemporary counterpart. The older generation hates to up-date and change while the younger folks see no choice but to accommodate the new facts of life (78). At the same time, Al-sharif suggests that Mishri manages to present an elegy of the village where progress came at the expense of the devaluation of man (79). Mohammed ‘Alool suggests that Mishri may be termed the “novelist of Saudi nature”(84). To ‘Alool, the poetry of Mishri’s narrative style gives his realism a “natural symbolic quality” that avoids ambiguity. He adds that the theme of struggle between tradition and modern culture recurs in all of Mishri’s novels. Often, “The characters of his novels are preoccupied with change. Conflict is often presented as a bitter clash between nature and city, or more accurately between nature and machine” (84). ‘Alool adds later that Mishri’s works remain within the tradition of the social realistic novel that attempts to teach. Mishri, he points out, does not pay “much attention to form, and at some points interferes directly to make the characters of his novels mouthpieces of his opinions and positions” (85). Another critic, Salah Farooq, confirms ‘Alool’s opinion that the confrontation between generations is a major concern of Mishri’s attention and that the younger generation has more support on its side in the novel Alghoyoom wa manabet al-shajer (Clouds and the Tree Line, (102). Other critics, Talt al Subh Al-sayyed for instance, emphasize Mishri’s poetic language that carries multiple layers of meanings (154).

Mishri was not silent about his writing experience. A statement he made (in 1997) was socially bold. While discussing the society that appears in contemporary Saudi novels, he said, “These novels present no distinctive features of the social structure that distinguish us from others except our clothes; nothing distinctive shows the important and necessary connection that should exist between a place and man ... except in those novels that pursue the identity of the village world, a world that kept its unique identity until very recently” (55). He adds, “I tried to put in my novels the communal characteristics, concepts, and life philosophy that society gained throughout history. These were gained through interaction with nature, a distinctive way of life, and through farming”(58).

When composing a memoir of his writing experience in Revelations of The Sword and the Rose, Mishri points out that he made his heroes village people who react as his own village people would and suffer like them from life in the
city. To him, village people understood the tempo of life of the city and were able to be successful; however this success came from within, not as a result of the city acting on them. He responds to the objection that the novel in Saudi Arabia did not develop because of the lack of social material by saying, "The world that I treated and still do in my work has clear identity and character. Man in this world exists and asserts his human values and his productivity without allowing room for a division of men and women....In this world, all the inhabitants earn their living the same way....Everyone works in farming and in raising cattle. They work as shepherds. All wait for rain after sowing the land with seeds" (64).

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The Scent of Cudi has the label, "novel," which makes the reader expect an incremental sequence. Such a sequence exists. However, most of the chapters can be read separately and would have almost the same effect as that of an autonomous text. However, some of the chapters can be sequenced differently. Chapter Five, for instance, the scene of the crow landing on the donkey, could fit in the sequence a bit later or earlier. Chapter Ten, where a neighbor makes a visit to the family of the gray-haired man, could have come earlier in the sequence without damaging its impact in the novel. The narrative is not consistently linear. Two significant events occur out of sequence: the marriage of the gray-haired man’s daughter is mentioned late in the novel; and, the death of the granddaughter also comes late in the novel. In terms of temporal sequence, both events take place earlier; Mishri chooses to place them out of their "proper" sequence.

Marriage and death are landmarks in Man’s existence which Mishri could not but include in his novel. He presents a chapter that revolves around a wedding and one about death. Both events, however, are about neighbors and not about the family that occupies center stage. Both incidents convey a sense of normalcy, for such events occur regularly in the villagers’ lives. While important to the families, such events also act as milestones for the rest of the village, marking the natural flow of life.

Chapter sequence is important though for the rest of the novel. The different significant moments in the lives of Mishri’s characters are highlighted in separate chapters. He emphasizes descriptions that seem at first glance to be only attempts at providing the background for the action that is taking or will take shape. However, these numerous incidents heighten the reader’s awareness of the importance of the present moment as opposed to the past and future moments. The concentration on the present moment generates in readers an awareness of the details of life, the small, often overlooked details that jolt people into
discerning the essence of life, a realization that the moment embodies enormous possibilities. Whether the realization happens to be happy or not for the characters, readers still come away with the realization that the present moment continues to be all a person has. Such awareness makes one feel the vibrancy of life. It may seem at first that Mishri provides simple descriptions of specific settings, but it is soon evident that the descriptions are often generic and could be descriptions of any small town or village. They exist to heighten the readers’ sense of the moment. In Chapter One, the neighbors begin to gather close to the mosque waiting for Maghreb, the dusk prayer. Colors, texture, and sounds fill the scene. A woman washes her hands with the water coming out of the loose brass faucet at the edge of the yard. She washes the white metal bowl and vigorously rubs a small pot on the top of which she put the bowl. She prepares herself to walk slowly towards her cow, at the last breath of daylight. She milks the cow and mentions God’s name a lot as usual. She asks for His blessings and His help in warding off devils.... A pot, larger than the milk pot, collects soot and heat from the bottom and the sides. It makes the gurgling sound of food cooking; indicating that it holds more water than necessary for that water can be heard splashing on the sides on and off (6). Then the sound and motion of the caller to prayer become evident: He lifts his hands to the level of his ears, puts all his strength in his voice trying to make it sound as touching and pathetic as possible, and finishes the call with “There is no God but the Almighty.” He whispers and those present repeat after him some supplications that cannot be heard clearly.... The Imam asks for God’s help. He moves his arms to place his hands on his knees to stand up and he leads the small group into the mosque. He begins by reciting aloud the opening chapter of the Holy Quran and a few other verses and ending by sitting and saying, “Peace and Mercy of Allah.” Then, the worshipers exit to retrieve their shoes and leave the mosque. Outside, near the door, they put their shoes on in the dust of the approaching night and then they hurry home (7-8). Since the majority of Arabic-speaking readers know the rituals of the call to prayer and the performance of prayer itself, one must assume that Mishri supplies the description for a purpose other than informing the reader of these details.

Mishri paints the canvas of the scene but often seems to add nothing to the movement of the narrative. Rather, the descriptions he provides freeze that movement. Although the past and the future are mentioned, the present moment remains the center of attention. This awareness and emphasis on the present moment, through cataloging of its details, occur repeatedly. The love Mishri has for the villages he writes about comes through this technique. The continuous presentation of the little things of life in the village, the things that constitute all that the characters of the village have and know make them affective objects. The minute details draw the reader to respond to them as elements of the common human experience.
Some of the details Mishri give, such as the motions and sounds of a communal prayer are examples that evoke a response in Moslem readers; however, many details are more general. One of the best examples is located in Chapter Five. Peace dominates the scene. Man, beast, and bird exist not to do something else the following day or to remember something that happened before. The tranquility suggests peace, ease of mind, symmetry, and a congruous universe, as well as it creates elements of mystery and excitement. After the preamble to the chapter, the narrator tells us that on the road that “stretched like a rope” away from the gray-haired man’s house a white donkey stopped comfortably and quietly. It seems as it is to be enjoying the pecks of a crow on a wound on its back. A grandson goes out to obey a call of nature when he notices the crow and picks up a stone to throw at the bird that flies away before the stone could reach it. The donkey kicks as if objecting and runs down the road to the valley. The grandson quenches his thirst and then enters the house where he sees the whole family asleep (29-30).

In addition to the description of the benign nature, the relationships between the characters of The Scent of Cadi follow patterns that are comforting and which readers can understand and expect. The gray-haired presides over the household and as such his wishes are treated as commands. No one challenges his authority or his behavior. His wife takes care of his needs and of their home. His son, like all the sons in the village, acts according to his father’s expectations and never questions or objects to any of his father’s wishes. His wife gets some flack from her mother-in-law but accepts such thing without a whimper, representative of an expected, typical mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationship. She and her sister-in-law are friendly, being of similar age and doing the chores of the house together. The children are obedient but a little naughty for they ask for treats a bit beyond the means of the family as children are eager to do.

Another trait of the characters in The Scent of Cadi is that they communicate with each other with ease. In fact, words are not always necessary for a thorough understanding among the citizens of the village. The words expressed sometimes seem like stock responses, yet they are always uttered with genuine feelings and connect people. The characters understand each other and help each other as they feel that they are part of the group and are not separate entities unable to understand what others want or unable to make others understand their wishes; they achieve thus, an organic unity. Examples of this abound in the novel. Every statement is understood by the person addressed who in turn always responds positively in an expected fashion.
In Chapter Two the gray-haired man talks in hyperbole to the children, "Yes, you'd die for one date! Don't you have any personality? I'm afraid a day will come and one of you will sell his land to buy dates and sweets; what a shame." The two young women and the son stay silent as if nothing was said. They know that these words are meant to teach (17). A second example comes at the end of the chapter. At the end of Friday prayer, a man from the village says: "Good people ... next Thursday I have a wedding and I'd like you to come over, young and old ... God bless you. They say, or the eldest one says for all present: May God help you and reward you. Every listener knew that he has to give help and not just attend to eat meat and rice, drink coffee and tea, and dance" (22). Additional words are not needed. Everyone knows what will take place. Chapter Six has another example. An altercation takes place between the daughter of the gray-haired man and one of her neighbors when the white donkey trespasses on that neighbor's land. They both know what should be done but they persist in advancing their arguments until men from both sides intervene. The problem resolves itself automatically when the women find the first opportunity to talk to each other as if nothing had happened between them. Words are not needed when a fire consumes the family's harvest and the village people come to the family's house to show their solidarity. No one mentions that they'll share in filling the larder of the family, for what has been lost. Words are unnecessary to explain the needs of the family for the village people to come forward with the necessary help (56). However, when language ceases to communicate, that is when language is used to lie, the novel has nearly reached its end, and change has taken hold of the village. Some people have gone to court and given false witness that a certain piece of land belongs to someone other than its rightful owner. This untruthful language announces the end of the type of life the gray-haired man has known throughout his life (116-117).

Throughout the novel, Mishri's characters communicate successfully. They live harmoniously with their fellow villagers: they all think alike and act alike. Conformity and homogeneity, prized traits, give them strength and comfort. The lack of separate individual ideas gives them their secure, comfortable life. The characters are separate people with names and families and duties. But they do not stand out among their group in any unique way to be seen as different from others. What is expected of them is known. The way to dress, eat, work, marry, and pray are all agreed upon rituals that give meaning to their lives and give strength to their resolve to do right by themselves and others. The way to act in any situation is known to everyone. Clarity of their vision, clarity of their place in the universe, clarity of destiny all make for a happy scene, a "happy mountain" for all. Outsiders and their newfangled trinkets and modern ways
that start chipping away at the solidarity of their existence, as it has been going on for thousands of years, are the real problems they fear in the beginning of the novel and sadly suffer from at its end. The basic elements of life are all that Mishri’s characters have. They do not ever think of themselves as poor for they are like everyone else in the village. Cohesion and cohesiveness of the villagers are paramount. Mishri does not tell us the name of the village nor are the names of the main characters used except on very limited occasions. None of the names of the other characters are given. The names are used more frequently when the characters begin to have lives that are different from others in the village. By the end of the novel enough changes have come about that some dissonance manifests itself in the way life is lived in the village.

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The first paragraph of Adularia Mishri’s novel tells us: “Using one hand from the same plate they ate: As one hand in the affairs of life they worked; They’d leave in the morning and to their home in the evening they would come back. The land gave; it treated the same, a woman and a man; everyone received the share his hard work earned him.” (5). Indeed, this sameness represents the conduct of their lives until unwelcome changes arrive and people begin to think separately and differently. The last chapter delivers a real shock when someone in the village falsely claims something as his own. The fact that witnesses are found to give false testimony about the ownership of the land upsets the gray-haired man and his wife most. This moral decline happens only when the villagers start abandoning their communal way of life, Mishri shows love for a disappearing happy way of life. By the end, he declares his regrets for the way things have changed; yet he has a slender hope that days ahead may have some measure of fulfillment. Mishri’s gray-haired man continues what is right and proclaims that he will continue to do so. He persists on living in his old stone house refusing to move to concrete newer housing. Hope in his case lies in his refusal to abandon his village, yet the village, as he knew it dwells only in memory.

Works Consulted


ريح الكادي، لعبدالعزيز مشري: الفرد في القرية والصراع بين الماضي والحاضر والمستقبل

أحمد رامز حمدي قطرية
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المتخلص. تقدم رواية عبدالعزيز مشري "ريح الكادي" صورا من حياة القرية في فترة انتقالية. ويهم الكاتب بتوجه الاهتمام نحو الخطر الناتج عن تحول الأفراد عن الاهتمامات والتصورات المتعددة لأفراد القرية. كما يقدم شخصيات سعيدة وراضية طالما تصرفت كجزء من منظومة اجتماعية ذات أطر واضحة تمتد فيها الفروق بين أفرادها. وبين الكاتب أن عدم الرضى يبدأ في غزو القرية تشهش الأجيال الجديدة صفات جديدة تجلع من تصرفاتها أمورا لا يمكن توقعها كما يجعل التواصل بينها أمورا صعبة. أما المشهد الريفي الأمين الذي يسود الرواية في البداية فتجزوه القيم والأشياء الحضارية الغربية عن حضارة القرية.