Alī al-Shaʿalī's *The Living, the Living* as a Postcolonial Science Fiction: Neo-Imperial Reincarnation and (De)colonizing the Mind in Emirati Literature

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Abstract This article examines the poetics of reincarnation and identity erasure in the Emirati al-Shaʿalī's 2020 novel *The Living, the Living*. It argues that new forms of colonization reappear in the twenty-first century, including the transfer of the protagonist Yaḥyā's memory by a British center into the body of Joseph, a British veteran. The center claims to promote "peace" and prevent "terrorism," but Yaḥyā's role is revealed to be that of a spy reporting on Arab students and other immigrants in the UK. The protagonist repeatedly rebels against the roles assigned by the center by returning to his identity as an Emirati, a decolonial act demonstrating his determination to cling to his roots, memories, and history. Al-Shaʿalī's novel thus challenges neo-imperialist strategies of recolonizing the Other by featuring a diverse protagonist who rewrites, redefines, and ultimately deconstructs Western forms of power embodied by the British center and the emergence of highly advanced technology that may violate the human body. Therefore, the center's goal to "copy" the memories of an Arab and "paste" them onto the body of a British veteran is an unethical practice that exposes the dangers of science. Nevertheless, al-Shaʿalī's novel, as a piece of postcolonial science fiction, subverts scientific and technological

discourses to reveal the horrific reality of neo-imperialism that targets the minds in the Global South.

Keywords reincarnation; neo-imperialism; the Emirati identity; decolonizing the mind; the Emirati novel

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Introduction

The Emirati Alī al-Shaʿalī's 2020 novel *The Living, the Living* falls under the category of postcolonial science fiction, since it reevaluates the British legacy of colonization and reimagines the future of the UAE regarding science and economic boom. [1] The novel weaves a futuristic story of a British center, directed by Mark, who aims to transfer the memories of the protagonist Yaḥyā to the body of a British veteran named Joseph for espionage and secret services. Decoloniality here figures in Yaḥyā's rebellious streak in refusing to adhere to the center's demands despite the center's success in transferring the protagonist's memories to Joseph. Since science fiction, as Patricia Kerslake explains, is traditionally a byproduct of empire, al-Shaʿalī's novel subverts such a discourse by reimagining the future from the perspective of the Other. Kerslake argues that "the theme of empire, with the complexity and ramifications that postcolonial and other recent criticisms have brought to our attention (treatment of the other, of the exotic, of matters of power),

1 Alī Al-Shaʿalī, الحي الحي [*The Living, the Living*] (Dubai: Alloha Publishing, 2020). Al-Shaʿalī is an Emirati poet, novelist and writer, born in 1978. He got his Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering and Master of Business Administration in Project Management from the United Arab Emirates University. He was the director of the Knowledge Production Department at Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum Institute from 2008 to 2014 and the Executive Officer for Dubai International Festival for Poetry in 2009. He is also a member of the Emirati Writers and Literati League and Vice President of Emirati Publishers' Association. He founded Dar al-Hudhud for Publishing and Distribution, which mainly focuses on children's literature. He published three collections of poetry: *A Bee and Rababah* (نحلة و ربابة) (2000), *The Earth Has One Soul* (للأرض روح واحدة) (2013) and *Faces and Others Are Tired* (وجوه وأخرى متعبة) (2016). He has recently published his novel *The Living, the Living*, which has been longlisted in Sheikh Zayed Book Award in 2020.

is so ingrained in SF that to discuss the empire in SF is also to investigate the fundamental purposes and attributes of the genre itself" (191). Claire Chambers also posits that while science is supposed to be neutral and objective, "colonial scientific practitioners elevated their brand of science, presenting it as proof of their superior reasoning powers, and the cause of the West's material domination of the world" (58). Al-Shaʿalī's novel decolonizes science fiction by illustrating how science and technology may serve as tools for manipulation and neo-imperialist domination. Analyzing *The Living, the Living* as a postcolonial science fiction is thus timely and urgent to locate the perspective of the Other and consequently undermine the hegemonic discourses of science, technology and objective "truth."

The name of the protagonist and the title of the novel are derived from the same Arabic root: life and survival. The name "Yaḥyā," for instance, is related to life and is derived from the Arabic word *ḥayya*, which means life. Yaḥyā means "to make alive" or "to quicken" (Çoruh 3). Since al-Shaʿalī's plot revolves around the notion of death, life and memory transference, the protagonist's name, then, is linked to the main idea of reincarnation or life after death. The word "living" is repeated twice in the title to emphasize Yaḥyā's resistance and will to relate to his identity, language and history (Abḥmanī and al-Kurdī 116). The manipulation of Yaḥyā's life and death and the transference of his memories to another body point out the Western neo-imperialist power dynamics.

Al-Shaʿalī's *The Living, the Living* unfolds as a multilayered narrative composed of interwoven subplots, all tied to a central theme: the transference of memory. At first glance, the plot appears disjointed, with fragmented episodes that make it challenging to follow. Yet this seeming disorder is deliberate by the author. Al-Shaʿalī adopts a non-linear, shifting structure because the story moves fluidly between past and present, and from one narrative thread to another to capture the workings of the human mind. Through these fragmented yet thematically connected episodes, Al-Shaʿalī constructs a complex narrative that resists straightforward chronology while addressing such important themes as modern reincarnation and neo-imperialism. The novel's shifting structure mirrors the fragmented nature of memory and trauma, blending personal and historical narratives to explore the blurred boundaries between life, identity, and the persistence of consciousness across time.

The narrative opens in the twenty-first century, introducing the protagonist, Yaḥyā Saʿīd al-Ṣayād, an Emirati dentist who resigns from his job to open a clinic and beauty center. He lives with his three children—his daughter Sarah and his two sons, Rashid and Saʿīd—following the death of his wife from cancer. Struggling with grief and mental illness, Yaḥyā repeatedly refuses his daughter's pleas to seek

therapy. His emotional distress, compounded by financial failure, eventually drives him to leave his family and travel to London to end his life. From here, the story takes unexpected turns. One subplot transports the reader to nineteenth-century British colonial India, where Winston Churchill and a British soldier engage in a conversation about the Indic concept of reincarnation. This moment sets the stage for the novel's speculative exploration of memory and consciousness. Joseph repeatedly visits an Indian philosopher to learn about the Indic concept of soul transmigration. When Joseph tells Churchill of what he has learned, Churchill laughs it off and disregards reincarnation as a myth. However, in the same conversation, Churchill tells Joseph that reincarnation can benefit the British Empire by protecting British veterans in new human bodies. Churchill's proposal distorts and ultimately violates the Indic belief in reincarnation because it is fundamentally tied to the moral principle of karma. However, he is not concerned about such sacrilege, as he aims to serve the interests of the British Empire. Though set in the nineteenth century, this subplot foreshadows Churchill's vision materializing in the twenty-first century through the center's neo-imperialist project of mind control.

The narrative then shifts back to the present, and his planned trip to London, where he commits suicide, becomes a pivotal moment. It is at this juncture that the British center, a mysterious institution, intervenes to transfer Yaḥyā's memories into the body of a British war veteran. This revelation recontextualizes much of what the reader has encountered since, at this moment, there is no indication of the British center's intervention to transplant Yaḥyā's memories. His family thought his death was voluntary. But after the suicide scene, the novel flashes back to the 1970s when he was young, describing Yaḥyā's visit to London with his family and his fall into the River Thames, causing him brain damage. This event is later revealed to be the British center's first step in initiating memory transference and a form of modern reincarnation. Mark, the director of the British center, tells Yaḥyā's father that his son has undergone a successful brain surgery. The novel then transitions to old Yaḥyā waking up in an unknown center in London and meeting the director Mark, who tells him the center transplants his memory into the body of Joseph, recently killed in a car accident. This memory transference aims to assign Yaḥyā confidential missions, including spying on Arab students in Britain. In an act of defiance, Yaḥyā (in Joseph's body) resists the center's colonial project, refusing to falsify the reports about Arab students in London since his reports are all positive and never mention any harm by Arab students. Additionally, the British center warns Yaḥyā not to visit his family back home, yet he never abides and meets his daughter Sarah and his son Rashid. Although Yaḥyā cannot return to his previous life with his children, he fails

as an experiment, a decolonial act that thwarts the center's neo-colonial project and upholds his Emirati identity.

Emirati Literature

Emirati literature is relatively new, and poetry was the most prominent genre (Tijani 121).[1] In terms of prose, a number of short story collections appeared in the 1970s, but the late 1970s witnessed a surge in literary production, particularly short story collections.[2] Barbara Michalak-Pikulska states that Abd-Allah Saqr Aḥmad published his short story "Merciless Hearts" in the late 1960s and followed by *A Piece of Wood*, "The first collection of short stories in the history of Emirate literature" (145). This collection, according to Michalak-Pikulska, was banned and burned, for it vehemently criticized British colonialism (145). Overall, the Emirati novel depicts the transformation of the Emirati society and played a major role Emirati literary scene.[3] It introduces new themes, experiments with Arabic language and reflects the rapid changes in society, influenced by globalization and modernization.[4]

The Emirati novel varies in topics and themes, ranging from the long history of fishing and pearl hunting to the discovery of crude oil and the transformation of the Emirates into a modernized place (Michalak-Pikulska 145). These new realities have posed a threat to the cultural and traditional aspects of the Emirati society.[5] In the 1970s, three novels were published, including Rāshid ʿAbdallah al-Nua'imī's

1 Nabaṭī poetry, common among Bedouin tribes in the Arabian Peninsula and the Levantine areas of Jordan, Syria and Palestine, was and is still the most prominent genre in Emirati literature (Michalak-Pikulska 146). There were many prominent Emirati poets in the 1970s and 1980s, for example, Ousha Bint Khalifa Al-Suwaidī, Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al-Maktoum, Mānʿa Al-Otaiba, Khalid Al-Budūr and others (See Aḥmad).

2 Major short story collections include, including Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Ḥarbī's *Revolting Against the Tribal Tradition*, Abed al-Ḥamīd Aḥmad's *Swimming in the Eyes of the Wild Gulf*, *That Time*, Abed al-Rida al-Sajwanī's *The Virgins' Mistake* and Muḥammad al-Murr's *A Different Kind of Love*, *The Last Chance*, *Friendship*, and *The Soft Voice.*

3 Sheikhah Mubārak al-Nakhī, Salmah Maṭar Seif, Layla Aḥmad and Maryam Jam'a Faraj were among the Emirati women who contributed to the publication and dissemination of Emirati literature. For example, Sheikhah Mubārak al-Nakhī wrote three collections of short stories: *Winds of the North* and *Ash* and *Departure*. Maryam Jam'a Faraj wrote *Turquoise*, *Faces* and *Water*, and Salmah Maṭar Seif [Maryam Abu Shibab] wrote *Herb*, *The Wedding* and *Anthem*.

4 See Ṣalḥah Ghabish, Sarah al-Jarwān, Nūrah al-Nomān, Ṣalḥah Obeid, Manʿa Al-Otaiba, Maisūn Ṣaqir and Emān al-Yūsuf.

5 According to the United Arab Emirates' Government portal: The official guide to living, working, visiting and investing in the UAE, the UAE population is estimated to be ten million by the end of 2021. The number of UAE citizens is around one million<https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/preserving-the-emirati-national-identity/population-and-demographic-mix>.

1971 *Shahindā*, Abdallah al-Nawirī's 1976 *A Neck Searching for A Necklace* and Muḥammad Ghubāsh's 1979 *Always Happening at Night.* Al-Nua'imī's *Shahindā* was the first Emirati novel, dealing with the topic of slavery in the nineteenth century, a social issue popular at that time. Thābit Malkāwī describes the novel's narrative as simple and categorizes it as a popular story (34). Additionally, al-Nawirī's *A Neck Searching for A Necklace* is the first Emirati detective fiction, relating the story of murdering Salwā who puzzlingly disappears (Al-Kilanī 475). Finally, Ghubāsh's 1979*Always Happening at Night* centers on the alienation of the Emirati individual, causing social issues such as attempted rapes and murders, incarceration and fugitives of law. In *Narrative Point of View: Critical Studies in Modern Emirati Novels*, Dhiab al-Ṭaʿī explores five recently published Emirati novels: ʿAlī Aḥmad al-Ḥimyrī's 2014 *The Princess of the Mountain's Quarter*, Alī Abū ar-Rīsh's 2014 *Exceptional Woman*, Bāsimah Yūnis's 2010 *Perhaps You*, Lamīi Fāris al-Marzūqī's 2013 *Every Now and Then (Mīrah Told Us*) and Maysūn Ṣaqir's 2003 *Rayḥānah* (Al-Ṭa'ī). Influence by modernization, recent Emirati novels, al-Ṭaʿī explains, experiment with narration and point of view, challenging the chronological sequence of the events and offering polyphonic voices and various perspectives.[1] Although these novels, al-Ṭaʿī argues, shed light on the Emirati history of fishing, pearl hunting and the notorious British colonization, the country's transformation is evident, carrying both negative and positive implications.

Al-Shaʿalī's *The Living, the Living* is an experimental novel, venturing into the perils of science and depicting the human mind as a mere device that can be used to transfer a person's memories. The novel pictures the UAE's transformation by juxtaposing the country before the economic boom with the present industrial reality, highlighting the complex relationship between the past and the present and between the fast-paced technological advancement and the human body (Michalak-Pikulska 145). Additionally, the theme of reincarnation and erasure of the Emirati identity are surreal in al-Shaʿalī's novel, in which technology and scientific advancement serve as dangerous tools for emergent forms of neo-imperialism. Yet the novel as a postcolonial science fiction offers a decolonial critique that questions the ethics of science regarding neutrality, authority and objective truth, especially when science functions as a means for the West to manipulate other peoples and nations in the Global South.

Postcolonial Science Fiction

Western science fiction participates in promoting racial hierarchies and entangles

1 Michalak-Pikulska, "Modern Emirati Literature."

historically with "the nineteenth-century Euro-American preoccupation with imperial expansion and utopian speculation" (Kilgore 1). De Witt Douglas Kilgore argues that it often appropriates indigenous knowledge, justifies colonial oppression and practices in colonized regions to reinforce racial stereotypes and justify colonial rule over distant lands. Patrick Sharp elaborates on the misuse of Darwinism to rationalize the colonization of foreign places and states: "Scholar of SF have long been recognized the importance of evolution for the scientific extrapolation of authors such as H. G. Wells, whose revolutionary parables about class and technology dependence provided a touchstone for twentieth-century science fictioneers" (1). It started with the doctrine of discovery and exploration in the 15th and 16th centuries, venturing into Asia, Africa and the Americans and bringing back the colonized resources and knowledge about geography, plants, animals and human beings. For example, *The Voyages of Captain James Cook Around the World* (1768-1779) relates the expedition of Captain James Cook to the Pacific for scientific endeavors of studying botany, geography and astronomy. These expeditions result in the British Empire's colonization of such places as Australia and New Zealand and in the dispossession of the Māori and other Aboriginal Australians. In the nineteenth century, scientific advancement, colonial expansion along with the influence of Darwinism contributed to science fiction as a literary genre. Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein or, The Modern Prometheus* offers the reader a mesmerizing, horrifying and thrilling story of a monster created by science. Although a gothic novel, it stands as science fiction due to the interference of science in developing a terrifying monster. Science fiction often depicts the link between humans and science/technology (Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*) or serves as a social commentary (Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*).

In examining the European novels mainly from France and England in the nineteenth century, Edward Said explains that the novel as a cultural artifact cannot be separated from the European colonization of distant land. Said writes, "Imperialism and the novel fortified each other to such a degree that it is impossible, I would argue, to read one without in some way dealing with the other" (71). Science fiction as a genre became prevalent in the late nineteenth century when colonial expansions and European encounters with non-European nations reached an apex. John Rieder states, "Scholars largely (though not universally) agree that the period of the most fervid imperialist expansion in the late nineteenth century is also a crucial period for the emergence of the genre" (2-3). Science fiction is thus a cultural product that must be read and analyzed with reference to the European colonial project, especially when the topic of science fiction is on conquering

faraway lands and colonizing the alien natives. To respond to Western genre of science fiction, Eric smith also argues that science fiction be decolonized in order to "detect and decipher the ideological mystifications of global capital, the unique manifestations of globalization in particular national cultures, the emergence of technology as a cognitive mode of awareness, and the processes whereby individual national cultures exist alongside and engage the polymorphous bad infinity of the new global habitus" (2). Decolonization also entails responding to these epistemic forms of knowledge, which perpetuate the superiority of the West.

Postcolonial science fiction provides imaginative narratives that disrupt traditional science fiction aligning with colonization and other power dynamics (Chambers 2003). It is an evolving paradigm that reconstructs the structure of oppression and domination under the guise of globalization, international capitalism and scientific advancement. Postcolonial science fiction creates a platform in which non-Western writers can approach a plethora of themes and topics, including the horror of colonization and Western expansion through futuristic imaginings. Jessica Langer expounds the silence surrounding the topic of postcolonial science fiction, suggesting that the association between colonization and science fiction leads to "real or perceived silence" (1). Lack of translation of science fiction from other languages, coupled with "intense politics of selection and exclusion," Langer argues, marginalizes postcolonial science fiction written in non-English languages. Finally, Langer argues that the publishing industry has contributed to the diminishing number of postcolonial science fiction writers, creating "an elephant-shaped hole" (2). Hence, many writers have shifted towards the Internet: "The elephant-shaped hole here is being filled, not by traditional publishing channels, but through the Internet, new media and other novel methods of idea transmission" (2). It is through postcolonial science fiction that new territories, themes and ideas come to light, rewriting and reconstructing the European scientific fiction that often perpetuates the inferiority of the Other.

Al-Shaʿalī's *The Living, the Living* employs science fiction to imagine and reimagine the colonial legacy in the UAE and subvert the discourse of science as being neutral and objective. In al-Shaʿalī's novel, science serves as a neo-imperialist means to recruit the protagonist Yaḥyā against his will to serve the British center in spying on Arab students and immigrants and to engage in foreign espionage. In *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy*, the coeditor Uppinder Mehan suggests that "If we do not imagine our futures, postcolonial peoples risk being condemned to be spoken about and for again" (463). Hence, Al-Shaʿalī speaks for the Emiratis by creatively mixing the past with the present and

linking it with the future to illustrate the risk of science and technology.

History, Identity and the Transformation of the Emirati Society

Al-Shaʿalī's novel sheds light on the legacy of British colonization and wars while it addresses the negative side of science, especially when misused and abused to serve colonial foreign powers. The turning point in the novel, therefore, is when twelve-year-old Yaḥyā visits London with his family. While chasing a butterfly, he falls into the River Thames and suffers from brain injury. A person named Mark tells Yaḥyā's father that his son has undergone a successful brain surgery. Yet unbeknownst to his father, Mark, in his capacity as the director of the center, decides to prepare Yaḥyā for his future mission, a clear violation of medical ethics. The process of memory transference starts when Yaḥyā is young. However, what is disturbing is the center's unethical practice of performing brain surgery on a child without his parents' consent, not to save him, but rather to use him when he becomes an adult as a spy and secret agent. After Yaḥyā's return to London, he suffers from a mental disturbance and is thought to be possessed by a ghost. For example, young Yaḥyā recites one of Churchill's [the British center is part of Churchill's project of immortalizing the British heroes] speeches in English despite his young age. Although his parents review the VHS to see if their son has learned Churchill's speech from these cassettes, they find no traces of the specific speech delivered by their son. On several occasions, Yaḥyā wakes up and acts like a soldier on the front line, shouting, saluting other soldiers, carrying a stick as a gun and shooting at imaginary enemies. While the family believes that their son is possessed by an evil spirit, it is the memory transference that causes Yaḥyā to hallucinate and act like a British soldier.

The reference to the empire and British colonization paves the road for the theme of memory transference. Since *The Living, the Living* is a postcolonial science fiction, it writes back against the empire and fictionalizes the underbelly of British colonization, which evolves and takes different forms and shapes after the UAE's independence. Specifically, the topic of souls moving from one being into another in a conversation between Churchill and Joseph in India—both are on a British colonial mission in 1896—lies at the heart of British emergent neo-imperialism. Al-Shaʿalī employs these characters to address the notion of reincarnation, showing how British soldiers like Churchill belittle other cultures and

beliefs.[1] Ironically, when it comes to the service of the British Empire, Churchill believes that the great minds and bodies of British soldiers should be preserved and immortalized. When Churchill asks Joseph about his repeated meetings with an Indian philosopher and what he has learned, Joseph says, "I don't know death has a plethora of interpretations. It is said that the soul does not perish, but rather regenerates in different forms, and those who die from our families and friends may come as a butterfly flapping around us or become a bird checking on us every morning through the windows and pecking on windows to say hello or converse with us" (79-80). For Joseph, the beauty of reincarnation is that the soul of those loved ones may appear in other beings, including a bird or a butterfly. It is this Indic eschatological understanding of death and rebirth in different forms and shapes, which Joseph embraces. Yet Churchill finds this idea silly: "Umm, it may appear, to many people, nonsensical but very interesting. I read about it before and thought it was a speculation of books or a record of human beliefs that have disappeared!" (80). Churchill disregards the Indic tradition as nonsense, promoting Western forms of knowledge as superior to other epistemologies and forms of knowledge. As a person who thinks Indians are less civilized when compared to British people, it becomes easy for Churchill to downplay the Indic beliefs and traditions, a position justifying the presence of the British Empire on a foreign soil. Therefore, the dichotomy between the colonized's "inferiority" and the colonizer's "superiority" makes Churchill arrive at this racist conclusion.

Al-Shaʿalī thus contrasts the mentality of the colonizer with that of the colonized. Churchill, embodying the British colonial history of oppression and dominance, dismisses reincarnation as a myth. Yet he thinks that the notion of reincarnation is a great idea when a soul moves from one human to another human. Hence, "the heroes" of the British Empire, he thinks, must be reincarnated. Churchill thus violates the Indic concept of ethical causation, for he believes in the superiority of the British people. While talking to Joseph, he says, "You know, the heroes of the empire deserve, yes, they deserve, and their families deserve, that they return in another body" (82). For Churchill, those who die fighting for their country deserve respect for their service. Consequently, their souls must be preserved in other human bodies. In the Indic tradition of reincarnation, *karma* is

1 Reincarnation refers to the transmigration of the soul into another being (Obeyesekere 1). Reincarnation figures in different South Asian and East Asian traditions along with the Middle East, yet the deep-seated belief in reincarnation and rebirth of the soul can be traced in Indic religions, including Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism (Obeyesekere 3). In the Hindu understanding of reincarnation, soul transmigration is an ethical causation of *karma—karman* means act.

often considered a sort of after-life judgment in which those with good actions are turned into something good while those with bad actions are turned into something bad. Churchill celebrates soldiers' service to the British Empire. But for Indians, that service often causes terror, fear and violence to indigenous peoples. Al-Shaʿalī, therefore, unmasks the abominable reality of colonialism to point out Churchill's contradiction in rejecting reincarnation as nonsensical. Yet he seemingly embraces it in a twisted way, envisioning British soldiers (the colonizers) being reborn, body and soul, which Al-Shaʿalī exposes as a violation against the colonized bodies.

Churchill's subscription to the notion of reincarnation does not reflect the Indic belief in *karma*. After fighting two wars (World War I and II) and becoming a Prime Minister, he wants to invest in human minds and pay tribute to British soldiers who have died for their country, a project he calls "immortalizing the heroes":

> I see that keeping them (soldiers' experiences) in books and thesauri, though important, is not enough. This approach aims to benefit the researcher and the learner, but we are not released from our obligation towards our military, which does not accept delay. If we are content with the white and the black (i.e., books and thesauri), we certainly fail to achieve the goal of preserving the information (soldiers' experiences). We must preserve it in the minds of new heroes and transfer it to new minds et cetera. It is an indisputable duty that we instantly start the process of immortalization …." (86)

Again, Churchill's address highlights the colonial mindset, which credits British colonial achievements while eclipsing the horrors brought by empires in distant lands. The British Empire brought violence, destruction and war. As Edward Said explains in *Culture and Imperialism,* the businesses abroad that many British families brag about are built on the corpses and bones of indigenous peoples. Not satisfied with material acquisition and land occupation, Churchill seeks to conquer the Indic belief in reincarnation and exploits the concept of soul transmigration to serve the British Empire. In depicting the British colonization of India in the late nineteenth century, al-Shaʿalī suggests that colonization means material acquisition. Yet this territorial acquisition shifts from conquering lands to conquering minds, a violation justified by the belief in the West's superiority. By exposing these horrible realities regarding colonization and abuse of science, al-Shaʿalī illustrates the importance of postcolonial science fiction in speaking for and about the other and in subverting other discourses of science and technology that may legitimize the West's structure of oppression.

These historical allusions and references are illuminating and link the history of the UAE with its current modernized status. The constant shift from the past to the present and going back to the past is a stylistic feature of the novel, disrupting the chronology of the story. However, this shift is important to trace the protagonist's development as a character and the center's implementation of its neo-imperialist plan. In the twenty-first century, almost four decades after Yaḥyā's first visit to London, Yaḥyā becomes a successful Emirati who establishes his beauty center after working for years as a dentist. Yet the brain injury sustained in London never heals and continues to bother him as a child and as an adult. Yaḥyā's daughter Sarah "recalled what she had heard many times of her father being haunted by evil spirits in another world of distant history and geography. When he was young, he was treated for hallucinations by sheiks, nearly sorcerers and energy specialists" (22-23). His daughter also notices her father's strange behavior, forsaking the Emirati traditional dress of wearing *thūb* (a long, often white dress) and *ʿaiqal* (a black circular object put over the head) and a suit for formal meetings and jeans at other times. One time, Sarah enters his room to find his *thūb* and *ʿaiqal* thrown in the trash can, a clear indication of Yaḥyā's parting away from his culture and identity. Maya, his psychotherapist, explains, "The action of taking off clothes would never have happened had he not been so sad. He wanted to change everything, starting with the closest things to him. I am afraid that the action of getting rid of things would set him apart from his responsibilities and his closest people" (24). Neither Sarah nor Maya do not knows that Yaḥyā's transformation starts when he is a child. Therefore, Yaḥyā's act of throwing his traditional clothes in a trash can and wearing new clothes suggests a mental transformation, but this mental transformation is not recent and is certainly caused by human intervention. While Yaḥyā embodies the UAE's transformation to a country known for a thriving economy, Mark's surgery on Yaḥyā's brain is the main reason for the physical ailment.

Yaḥyā's clinic represents the danger of science when compared to the past life of fishing and pearl hunting. It erases the core values of the Emiratis and replaces them with artificial, cosmetic surgeries. Although the country looks beautiful from the outside due to economic upturn and scientific progress, behind these cosmetic surgeries lies a frail body: "He saw his clinic without retouches, Botox, firming, refilling, or augmenting. He saw his clinic in different situations, droopy, wrinkly, flaccid and atrophied. Perhaps, he did not have a long experience in calculations, though he knew from the beginning that numbers do not lie, and that his medical team at its utmost power could not give her (his clinic) a fake injection. His clinic stripped naked" (124). Although al-Shaʿalī acknowledges science and

celebrates his country's thriving economy, he critiques the malpractice of science in facilitating such neo-imperialist endeavors embodied by the British center.

Since Yaḥyā's clinic is on the verge of collapse, he decides to leave his family and move to London to commit suicide. His decision to commit suicide comes after a series of setbacks that have troubled his life, including his wife's death and the inability of his clinic to compete with other beauty centers in the area. But beyond these debacles, the British center's plan to violate Yaḥyā's body lies at the heart of his psychological problem. Conducting a surgery on Yaḥyā's mind underscores the center's racist ideology rooted in the belief of the West's superiority. Though Yaḥyā's suicide seems to be inadvertent, as the narrative unfolds, the reader gradually becomes aware of the center's role in orchestrating Yaḥyā's death. For example, his friend Walīd—Yaḥyā belatedly finds out about Walīd's position as an Executive Secretary for the center—encourages him to commit suicide, telling Yaḥyā not to fear death since death is a transitional period into another life. Walīd says, "Do I need to remind you?! Behind this mountain of concerns and troubles exists another world, an uncharted territory. All you need to do is push the door out to be overwhelmed by the light. Push it hard and remember that your ticket was booked when you signed the contract for donating your organs. You only decide the time of crossing. But as for the place, where else should you do it but here in the land of the brave!" (139). When Yaḥyā discovers Walīd's complicity, he concludes, "Your friend has engineered your death and witnessed it clapping like a dirty chimpanzee" (143). Walīd's characterization of London as the land of the braves points out his involvement in the project of reincarnation, reminiscent of Churchill's project of "immortalizing the heroes." But immortalizing the British heroes comes at the expense of innocent individuals like Yaḥyā, violating his body and reinforcing Western forms of knowledge. Al-Shaʿalī is a postcolonial science fiction *par excellence* in representing futuristic modes of Western domination from a postcolonial perspective.

Al-Shaʿalī elaborates on the misuse and abuse of words to justify Yaḥyā's suicide. One of these words is "voluntarily," referring to Yaḥyā's consent to donate his organs after his death. But "voluntarily" does not align with the center's systematic targeting of innocent people, including children— Yaḥyā was a child when the center started the process of transmigration. After committing suicide, he finds himself in a room with a blond man: "My name is Mark. I am responsible for hosting you in this building. You are now in London, and you voluntarily entered this well-reputed research center to cooperate. I and all other team members will do the very best to help you fulfill the requirements of the contract. The success

of this cooperation requires patience, deeper understanding of the nature of the relationships …" (182-183). The problem is that Yaḥyā donates his organs for medical research, not for serving the imperial project of immortalizing the British heroes. Therefore, Mark manipulates the word "voluntarily" to justify the unethical act of using Yaḥyā's memory, soul and language for the service of the center. Between Mark and Yaḥyā, there is a war of words in which Yaḥyā is deceived into being part of that neo-imperialist project. Hence, the project lacks ethical causation as conceptualized by the Indic *karma*. Additionally, the center's decision to implant Yaḥyā's heart and transfer his memories to the body of a dead British soldier goes beyond saving a human life. The aim of immortalizing the British soldiers is to create individuals with British bodies but Arab minds, to surveil immigrants and students from other countries, particularly those hailing from the Arab world. Nonetheless, Yaḥyā's challenge to the authority of the center and its director, Mark, reveals his growing distance from their ideals and his act of rejecting the Center's hidden neo-imperialist agenda.

Although the center successfully transfers Yaḥyā's memories to Joseph's body, his soul is rebellious and nonconforming, disrupting this center's project through relating to Islamic and Emirati traditions and practices. He disturbs Mark by asking him about the *qibla* (the direction towards Mecca, which Muslims use for their prayers). It is one of the initial, shocking signs that destabilizes and hence decolonizes the British project: "Mark gets confused and then spins around himself twice with random pauses, his palms in the form of a sword pointing forward. He then turns towards the window: I think it's like this, yes... yes, in that direction" (190). While it is early for Mark to decide if Yaḥyā's case is a failure, the request for the *qibla* surprises Mark and suggests that the center does not completely control Yaḥyā. The ellipses reflect Mark's surprise and confusion since the center has been working on this specific project since Yaḥyā was a child.

Additionally, Yaḥyā performs *wudu'* in his new home (Joseph's home)—*wudu'* is an Islamic act of cleansing the body before performing the prayer. Like the *qibla*, al-Shaʿalī mobilizes *wudu'* as a sign of Yaḥyā's rebellion. Consequently, the act of *wudu'* constitutes a subversion of the center's objective to exert control over Yaḥyā's cognitive faculties. In addition to these two warning signs of Yaḥyā's deviation, he continues to rebel against the center in his daily practices at Joseph's house. For instance, after being trained on how to deal with Joseph's wife, Yaḥyā does not fit well in the new house, refusing to sleep in the bedroom with his (Joseph's) wife Juana and preferring to sleep on a couch. Juana suspects her husband's strange behavior: "This is not Joseph, who was full of energy. He used to get excited about

a new adventure. But what is strange about the new Joseph is that after he goes to the bathroom to take a shower, he gets the bathroom floor wet. He then goes to a room for a few minutes and comes back" (246-247). Although Al-Shaʿalī leaves it to the reader to interpret Yaḥyā's behavior of taking a shower and going for a few minutes to his room, it seems that Yaḥyā here performs *wudu'*. It is notable that despite Yaḥyā's lack of religiosity in the UAE, al-Shaʿalī deploys these religious signifiers as forms of decolonization. By doing so, al-Shaʿalī disrupts the British center's objective of colonizing the protagonist's mind.

The dialectical relationship between Yaḥyā and the center pivots on the notion of the West versus the East, in which those who come from the East are often viewed as potential enemies, or as Edward Said puts it in *Orientalism*, "the mysterious East" (ix). The center assumes that some Arab students who come to the United Kingdom are mysterious and can be potential "terrorists." The center's plan proves counterproductive because Arabic serves a dual purpose: it reconnects Yaḥyā to his Emirati identity, fostering a sense of self-awareness and cultural grounding; it also facilitates communication and fosters a sense of community with fellow Arab students and immigrants. In reclaiming his linguistic and cultural heritage, Yaḥyā transcends the racist generalizations that align Arabs and Muslims with terrorism. Yaḥyā, recruited as "an anthropologist" to write reports on immigrant students in the UK, finds these students normal and describes them as "harmless sheep" (259). He keeps sending his reports to the center and calls his targets, namely, the Arab students, "the very humans," but his reports are all shredded and end up in a trash can: "Thank you so much for your eagerness. We are not concerned with your feelings! Please, keep it to yourself. We want a complete report on the movement of every group to help us anticipate their next step. In short: Do you think they are terrorists?" (259). Mark's racist remarks concerning immigrants unveil the abominable reality of the British center and draw a demarcation line between the center's mission and Yaḥyā. Mark tells Yaḥyā: "In the past years, but rather the past decades, there were catastrophic events that no one can deny. Those people were the main suspects. I do not want to call them your people as you did recently. Ever since you followed the butterfly near the river, you have become one of us. We only want to make sure that anyone who sits with us on a metro or a morning bus will not detonate himself in the evening. We want to be certain that those who stay with us come to live or die! Isn't this our right?!" (273). Mark's racist remarks in considering those who come from Yaḥyā's region potential "terrorists" perpetuates the clash of civilizations, highlighting his xenophobia and pointing out the colonialist mindset of labeling a group as a terrorist just because they come from

a certain region, speak a different language or believe in a different religion.

The failure to complete all missions assigned by the center points out the novel's decolonial act of presenting Yaḥyā as a dissenter who refuses to succumb to Mark's dictates. It is Yaḥyā's insurgency that renders al-Shaʿalī's *The Living, the Living* postcolonial science fiction, for it imagines the political and cultural reality in the UAE, whereby a British center mobilizes science and technology to colonize and manipulate the other. The novel, therefore, is a mimicry of science fiction, not to credit Western expansion in alien lands, but rather to show how a person's identity, language and history serve as protective shields against neo-imperialist projects such as the one promoted by the center.

Conclusion

Al-Shaʿalī's *The Living, the Living* contrasts between the modernized UAE and the old UAE, which prides itself in its long tradition of fishing and pearl hunting. Yet modernization and economic growth are not always positive and may appear dangerous, as is the case with the British center. Although Yaḥyā is forced to believe his service to the center is voluntary and based on a contract, where he agrees to donate his organs for medical research, the contract is misused by the center to recruit Yaḥyā for espionage. Yet as the story unfolds, it becomes evident that the project of transplanting Yaḥyā's memory does not start after his suicide. Instead, transference was initiated years earlier when Yaḥyā was a child. Therefore, the center uses science to violate human bodies by distorting the protagonist's contract of organ donation. This violation discloses the abominable reality of the British center in its neo-imperialist, unethical mission. Despite the center's efforts, the protagonist's roots, whether familial, historical, linguistic or religious, disrupt and hence decolonize the center's attempt to manipulate the protagonist's mind. To a large extent, the novel, too, challenges and extends science fiction as a genre by offering postcolonial, resistant strategies to neo-imperialist endeavors to control people in the Global South.

Al-Shaʿalī's novel is a futuristic and imaginative story, exploring urgent concepts of reincarnation and memory transplant through abuse of science. Despite the attempts to manipulate Yaḥyā's memories to colonize his mind, he proves that such a project can be thwarted and challenged. Al-Shaʿalī's novel stresses the degeneracy of the center's neo-imperialist project in mobilizing science for the service of the center. The novel also shows that the soul, memory and language of a person cannot be easily transferred to another body because one's identity and cultural background can overpower external and foreign interventions.

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