FROM ANTIQUITY TO MODERNITY

STUDIES ON MIDDLE EASTERN AND ASIAN SOCIETIES

Asia in the Mirror





Self-Representations, Self-Narratives, and Perception of the Other

EDITED BY
Alessandro Achilli, Fiorenzo Iuliano,
Angela Daiana Langone,
Emma Lupano, Valentina Serra

"*Asia in the Mirror* offers a bold and necessary reframing of Asian studies by situating the continent not as a singular object of knowledge but as a site of intersecting gazes, representations, and epistemic dislocations. Drawing on postcolonial critique, comparative philology, and cultural theory, the volume triangulates self-perception, otherness, and Western reception to interrogate how Asia has been imagined, translated, and contested. In doing so, it provincializes Eurocentric methodologies, foregrounds plural and situated knowledges, and reorients the study of Asia as a dialogic, reflexive, and critically entangled enterprise."

—**Deven M. Patel**, University of Pennsylvania

As Asia's role in world politics becomes increasingly central, a deeper understanding of the cultural underpinnings of its global entanglements is urgent and overdue. What defines Asia from a cultural perspective? How has Asia represented itself and its diversity to both Asian audiences and different cultures? How has Asia represented other cultures and how, in turn, how has it been presented by them? How have contacts between Asia and other cultures shaped the continent? What is the role of postcolonial and decolonial approaches in enhancing our understanding of Asia and its relationships to other parts of the world in the past and in the present? *Asia in the Mirror* tries to address these questions through a multidisciplinary approach, bringing together scholars in literary studies, philology, and media studies working across multiple languages and cultures.

ALESSANDRO ACHILLI is an associate professor of Slavic languages and literatures at the University of Cagliari.

FIORENZO IULIANO is a professor of American literature at the University of Cagliari.

ANGELA DAIANA LANGONE is an associate professor of Arabic language and literature at the University of Cagliari.

EMMA LUPANO is an associate professor of Chinese language and culture at the University of Cagliari.

VALENTINA SERRA is an associate professor of German literature at the University of Cagliari.

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Jamsheed K. Choksy
General Editor

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Alessandro Achilli, Fiorenzo Iuliano,
Angela Daiana Langone, Emma Lupano, and
Valentina Serra (eds.), with the assistance of
Mittal M. Trivedi

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Encounters in West Asia: Perceptions and Self-Representations of Jordan and Saudi Arabia

Miriam Al Tawil—Fabian Spitaler

Introduction

Ideas and agendas such as imperialism, colonialism, and orientalism have historically shaped the European and North American perceptions of the people of West Asia. Travel records of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries serve as a starting point to trace the development of these perceptions and Western narratives. Nonetheless, developments of the last decades in West Asia led to a shift in this perception, resulting in a higher degree of self-representation of these populations.

This article aims to investigate the strategies employed by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to create, propagate, and market their individual identities in the era of globalization. Despite their geographical proximity and shared cultural and religious commonalities, various historical, political, and economic factors have led Jordan and Saudi Arabia to follow distinct trajectories in creating attractive perceptions of their respective countries for foreign tourists and investors.

Concepts such as "staged authenticity" (MacCannel's 1973, 595–6), "hyper-realities," and "simulacra" (Eco 1986, 7; Baudrillard 1993, 50), which have emerged in the last 50 years, are useful for the description and interpretation of these developments. These concepts have been applied to data collected during fieldwork in

Jordan[1] and observations made in NW-Saudi Arabia.[2] Strategy papers, UNESCO reports, public data, and online appearances have also been considered.

The colonial history of Jordan, together with the political impact that the creation of the state of Israel had on the region, forced Jordan to create an identity distinct from the Palestinian one. At the same time, this identity was also used to attract tourists, who are nowadays offered different glamping adventures in the desert and "authentic Bedouin experiences."

Saudi Arabia, having undergone a different historical trajectory with fewer external impositions on its identity, and being more independent, is progressively abandoning its relative global isolation, recognizing its economic dependency on its natural resources. The Vision 2030 program aims to modernize the country and diversify its financial portfolio by creating Giga projects. These initiatives position Saudi Arabia as a global tourist destination while consolidating the royal family's power.

Historical Background

The reasons that brought European explorers, diplomats, archeologists, and academics of the nineteenth century to what was, at the time, referred to as the "Levant" (French *lévant*: designating the area of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, and Cyprus) were diverse. We, however, prefer to use "West Asia" as a geographical term, in an attempt to distance ourselves from the eurocentric, imperialist, and colonial connotation that widespread terms like "Middle East" or MENA[3] imply (Culcasi 2023, 108–10).

Some of the best-known personalities who traveled to West Asia exhibited a scholarly interest, such as the Swiss Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (1784–1817) and the political officer and archeologist Gertrude Bell (1868–1926). They both left detailed notes and publications describing the languages, appearances, and customs of the local populations they encountered.

Among the few Western scholars who had access to Saudi Arabia, Harry St. John Bridger Philby (1885–1960) is noteworthy for having met Ibn Saud while employed as a British intelligence officer, also becoming the king's advisor. Later, he was often described as the most prolific explorer of the Arabian Peninsula (Goldberg

1 We refer here to the ethnolinguistic fieldwork campaigns conducted by Al Tawil between 2020 and 2022 in the governorates of al-Mafraq and Irbid in northern and northeastern Jordan.

2 We refer here to the observations provided by Spitaler, who participated in multiple archaeological fieldwork campaigns in northwestern Saudi Arabia between 2021 and 2024.

3 Acronym for the Middle East and North Africa.

1985, 223). Philby had a strong British antagonism, anti-modernist views, and his publications must be read through the lens of a cultural assimilation bias, which is evident in his book *Saudi Arabia* (1955, 12). Heavily criticized by other scholars (Gibb 1955, Goldberg 1985), his works have been for a long time the most extensive records of Saudi Arabia's history and geography available to English readership.

A useful genre for understanding the *Zeitgeist* of those scholars is the *hodoeporics*, consisting of travel recounts, full of personal comments, opinions, and perceptions of the authors. Some of these writers, according to their different sensitivity and knowledge, were not only able to delve into physical descriptions and linguistic remarks but also report the points of view of the encountered individuals and groups (see also Al Tawil 2024).

Western scholars and archeologists often promoted imperialistic or colonialist ideas through the instrumentalization of their field. This resulted in disconnecting the indigenous populations from their past (Greenberg 2021, 316), also contributing to ideas such as that of the "Immovable East" (Baldensperger 1913). In the aforementioned work, the author described a population that is so traditional and embedded in history that its society has become stagnant.

Another idea expressed is that the "civilization" that developed in West Asia has since moved to Europe and then to North America, establishing a claim to this heritage. This is visible through the proposal for the foundation of the Oriental Institute (Chicago) by Henry James Breasted who in 1919 wrote: "The study of these lands is the birthright and the sacred legacy of all civilised peoples […]." (Emberling 2010, 115).

The idea reproduced by Breasted, although in a more religious form, has been a driving factor in the scholarly endeavors of the nineteenth century. To settle the debate about the historical authenticity of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, Western scholars traveled into the region of modern-day Iraq, Syria, Israel, and Palestine. One of the staunchest defenders of the accuracy of the Bible was Edward Robinson (1794–1863) who, together with the missionary Eli Smith (1801–57), traveled through Palestine linking modern place names to places mentioned in the Old Testament. As an example, the location of Bir es-Seba was identified as Beersheba (Stiebing 1993, 87–88). The resulting map was successfully superimposed on the Ottoman province (Silbermann 1982, 45).

The Case of Jordan

During the nineteenth century, while Western scholars and tourists were motivated to visit Biblical sites, tourism in Jordan increased after the (re)discovery of

Petra in 1812 by Burckhardt. It was, and still is, one of the most visited sites in Jordan and has fascinated generations of visitors with its archeological remains of the ancient Nabatean capital and the natural beauty of its landscapes. In the first half of the nineteenth century, tourists were mainly directed to major cities or religious destinations such as Jerusalem and Cairo. Then, in the second half of the nineteenth century, they slowly started venturing out to the desert where the number of archeological excavations was growing, attracting more visitors. Nonetheless, visiting Petra was still hard due to the lack of facilities and the remoteness of the area, which was isolated from the government control of the Ottoman authorities (Shoup 1985, 279–80).

It was only under the management of the British colonial mandate and the government of Amir Abdullah that visitors started to feel safe, following the end of tribal raids and the increased security guaranteed by the government. During the 1920s, the British travel company Thomas Cook built the first hotel camp inside the archeological site of Petra, allowing the tourists to enjoy some comfort. The British archeological excavation of 1929 was one of the major attractions in Petra (Meskell and Luke 2021, 2–3). With the increase of tourism, for a big part of the population, the first encounters with foreigners took place. In the 1940s, the hotel was sold to a Palestinian family who expanded and named it "the Nazzal Camp." It was only in the 1950s that the Jordanian government opened its own local Rest House in the area and hired local staff. It was in the same period that one of the two main local tribes (Layathna) began exerting its control over the touristic trade, that is, selling souvenirs (Shoup 1985, 281). At the same time, at the end of the 1950s, UNESCO announced its participation in assisting with the reconstruction at Petra, heralding a new phase in the internationalization of the site (Meskell and Luke 2021, 3). During the 1960s and the 1970s, the other local tribe (the Bdul) also started to get involved in the tourism field, offering fresh drinks and tea. In the 1980s with the improvement of public transportation, a daily bus was provided from Amman to Petra. In 1983, the first first-class hotel (The Forum Petra Hotel) opened, hiring local staff. The management of the hotel was British and hired members of the Bdul tribe. The staff had to perform in dances, cook the Bedouin typical dish (the *mansif*), and offer "traditional Bedouin hospitality" in a tent bought and erected to offer the "real taste of Bedouin life." The year 1984 marked a pivotal point, when the Bdul experienced the trauma of being expelled from Petra by the government. On one hand, the government claimed that their flocks would annoy tourists and threaten the ruins. On the other hand, it wanted to limit contact between the Bdul and the tourists to preserve the morality of the tribesmen.

Consequently, after two decades of fighting, 400 people were forced to relocate to a specially constructed settlement called Umm Sayhun (Shoup 1985, 282–3; Meskell and Luke 2021, 10).

The 1980s was also the decade in which the tribalism debate in Jordan was elevated to a national level. Discussions on Jordanian society and Bedouin and tribal identity were popular among anthropologists, universities, and local news media. Local intellectuals and politicians took different positions: some were anti-tribalist, claiming that sticking to the tribal identity constituted an obstacle to the efforts of modernizing the country. Others were pro-tribalist, supporting the Bedouin values as ideals to be emulated and examples of noble—typically Arabic—morals (Layne 1994, 96–101).

In the last 30 years, the encounters with "the other" increased, making tourism the major source of income in the country, leading to capacity problems for the site of Petra (Tesdell 2007 in Steiner 2010, 240). While the archeological and natural beauties of Petra were already attracting tourists, the Bedouins were also used early on as a representative, later commercialized, image of Jordan. Both the Jordanian government and the private sector handled tourism similarly to what the British management previously did, taking advantage of the local tribal identity. Tourists were offered authentic Bedouin hospitality in tents, Bedouin coffee and dishes, as well as camel rides, despite them not being historically known for having used camels.

The state government created and reinforced through tourism a national identity, typically Jordanian, based on the tribal local heritage. This was not only helping the economy of the nation, but also the national political discourse. A delicate historical period in the 1970s saw Jordan promoting a distinctive identity to distinguish itself from the "other" *par excellence*: Palestine. Jordan made use of the pro-tribalism discourse—in vogue in those years—to hinder the threat of an Israeli-promoted Palestinian takeover (Layne 1994, 103).

If, on one side, economy, politics, and tourism used the Bedouin identity for their own interests, the Bedouin identity in turn is reaffirmed through tourism (Wooten 1996; Cole 2003, 254). In 2005, UNESCO rendered the Bdul tribe an intangible heritage. They were and continue to be associated with this social category in the presence of tourists. In front of visitors, they become even more "Bedouin" since they must sell a product: their original but marketed identity (Cole 2003: 254). They will show camels and offer rides, tell anecdotes and stories, and put efforts into reinforcing the pre-existing stereotypes, to meet tourists' expectations. This was supposed to leave them satisfied with the presumed "authentic" experience. These stereotypical images, once partially built through movies such

as "Lawrence of Arabia" or "Seven Pillars of Wisdom" are reproduced for the new generations through social media.

Despite that, new science-fiction movies such as "The Martian" (2015) and the "Dune" saga (2021), partly filmed in the Wadi Rum (defined as "a desert […] with an […] expansive cinematic history"), contribute to create an additional exotic image of Jordan. It is noteworthy that the local film industry does not usually make use of the Wadi Rum desert as the location for Bedouin TV series.

As time has passed, the concept of performing "bedouinness" has not changed in the tourist industry. Nowadays, members of Bedouin tribes still aim to attract tourists through images of "hospitality" and "primitiveness," while leading modern and comfortable lives removed from what they portray as the Bedouin lifestyle.

This phenomenon can be described as "staged authenticity," in reference to Bedouins playing on stage for an international audience. Performing "bedouinness," as stated by Laaber[4], renders this part of their collective identity an integral part of their daily life (Laaber 2025, 186).

Nowadays tourists are offered a romanticized, simple, nomadic life amidst Bedouin camps in a secluded desert, advertised through social media and travel blogs. The advertisements promise an untouched environment from where it is possible to hear the call to prayer and admire the starry sky. At the same time, though, some of the hotels offer a luxurious glamping experience in the middle of Wadi Rum, providing soft beds and AC, in rooms styled like Bedouin tents but "more comfortable." Tourist agencies offer a "glimpse of what life is like for these nomadic tribes" through spectacles and coffee-making rituals. Some luxotels offer even better services such as loungers and Jacuzzis positioned close to the "bubble domes nestled among the Petra mountains that have their hot tubs."

Other blogs advertise hotels and touristic Bedouin camps claiming that "being with the Bedouins makes you feel the real Jordan," implying that the real Jordan is the Bedouin one only. Bedouins are usually defined as the autochthonous, "hardy people" that have lived in Wadi Rum for centuries, and some of them still live in goat-hair tents. In the desert, tourists have the chance to walk in the footsteps of historical legends such as Lawrence of Arabia. Finally, in a news article published in June 2021 by the Travel Courier (a Canadian weekly online and monthly print magazine established in 1965), the Jordan Tourism Board North America wrote "Your clients give Jordanians purpose, alleviate hunger, increase educational

4 Who conducted fieldwork among the Bedouin tribes of Wadi Musa, Umm Sayhun, and Petra between 2022 and 2023.

opportunities and gender equity, allow local communities to thrive, and sustain their livelihoods" (Travel Courier 2024). It is from these passages that we can still confirm the interdependency that exists between tourists and the Bedouins working in the tourist industry in Petra. Their sustenance inexorably depends on tourists and tourists need the exotic holiday. They seek naturalness and believe in what Bedouins present to them on stage. Paradoxically, the economic stability guaranteed to the Bedouins by tourism allows them to live a modern and comfortable life. In the last century, Bedouins wanted to live close to the sites but far enough from tourists to preserve their way of life and morals.

Another important aspect is the environmental one. Considering the small area of approximately 740 km^2 that the natural reserve of Wadi Rum covers and how it has been exploited for touristic purposes, the management of the high number of visitors has become problematic. UNESCO started denouncing the issue in every report over the last few years, highlighting the lack of proper conservation and maintenance of the archeological sites, and an absence of traffic and visitor management plans as well as housing. Since 2014, all reports focused on the impact of tourism and recreation, and how to deal with solid waste, listed as "factors affecting the property." To be sure, glamping and luxotels are among the main causes of solid waste disposal problems, all of which is generating worrying effects.

Moreover, since the 1960s, American archeologists and heritage practitioners have become entangled with the tourism development scheme of U.S. foreign policy. Foreign expertise led to the corporatization of culture, exclusion of the communities (Meskell and Luke 2021, 2), and over-tourism[5], causing undesirable effects on the natural reserve and the site. Nevertheless, heritage practitioners have claimed that before their intervention there was no national or site policy for preservation (Meskell and Luke *ibid.*). Tourism proves to be, at least for southern Jordan, the problem and the solution altogether. Even so, according to Meskell and Luke, "capitalizing culture […] has had detrimental impacts not only on conservation, […] but more importantly, on connected communities, ways of life, and legacies of heritage" (2021, 12).

5 UNWTO defines this term as "the impact of tourism on a destination, or parts thereof, that excessively influences perceived quality of life of citizens and/or quality of visitor experiences in a negative way."

Redefining Bedouin Self-Perceptions—Disappearance of Lifestyle and Shifting Identity

Jordanians say that the "real Bedouin" nomads of the past do not exist anymore, and the Bedouin lifestyle has disappeared. However, their customs and traditions still exist. This is, at least, the conclusion that has been drawn from recent fieldwork campaigns in northern[6] and southern[7] Jordan. During them, the interviewed speakers have always stressed their strong sense of belonging to the Bedouin tribes and their maintenance of Bedouin identity. For the tribes of the north, one of the ways this is expressed is through the organization of their houses, which reflects the structure of a tent (Sekhaneh 2017, 208–9). The presence of a representative tent near the main entrance, the preservation of traditional Bedouin dishes, the practice of Bedouin poetry, and their adherence to Bedouin laws are part of this proud identification as Bedouin (Al Tawil 2023, 254–6). In the south, according to the fieldwork data of Laaber, Bedouinity (a term proposed by Prager 2014) means holding onto their strong sense of morality dictated by their religious beliefs, traditions, and lifestyle. Nonetheless, they also acknowledge the role of tourism and its influence on their customs and livelihoods (Laaber 2025, 198–199).

Differently from the Bedouins of the north, those of the south tend to stress the *karam*, "hospitality" (Laaber 2025, 199). On the other hand, for the Bedouin of the north, this value mostly belongs to the stories of the past. Hospitality nowadays is translated into accepting visits from guests and offering tea and coffee, without expecting the guest to stay a few days. Nonetheless, there is a general nostalgia. During the fieldwork, the older people referred to the past as a period when the tribespeople used to care more about each other. "Before, people were affectionate […], they used to pay a visit to each other. […] Nowadays it is not like this, everyone is locked in their houses." (female speaker, 65, Muġayyir as-Sirḥān, Al-Mafraq, Jordan).

Some Bedouins in northern Jordan, when asked to be visited, usually accepted and offered to stage a performance of Bedouin poetry and music, in exchange for compensation. This allows a twofold interpretation: on one hand, it means that not everyone is willing to welcome guests and honor Bedouin values; on the other hand, it happens so often that they are prepared and expect payment. In the south, since the Bedouins deal with tourists who tend to

6 Al Tawil (2020–22).
7 Laaber (2022–23).

consume more than locals, the rituals have been commodified and standardized, as also proven by Laaber's fieldwork, with the presence of "automated responses" (Laaber 2025).

The Case of Saudi Arabia

The second case study of our article focuses on the self-representation and perceptions of Saudi Arabia, where the area of present-day Saudi Arabia (excluding the Hejazi region) was never the object of strong colonialist interests from European imperial powers. The unification of its various tribes under King Abdulaziz Ibn Saud between 1902 to 1932 into the state of Saudi Arabia demanded a common national factor. This collective identity was predominantly based on Islam and Arab culture, and a sense of nation on a local level (Nevo 1998, 34). Islam has always served to consolidate the legitimacy of the royal family since it has the custody of the most important religious sites of Sunni Islam, which lie within Saudi Arabia's territory.

Concurrently, in reaction to the former Ottoman rule and to the colonial atmosphere in neighboring countries, from the 1920s to the 1940s of the last century, Saudi scholars began to investigate and document their history and heritage in Arabic (Masry 1981, 228). In this context, the efforts of scholars such as Abdullah Masry and Abdulrahman al-Ansary during the twentieth century are noteworthy (al-Rashid 2005, 209–13). Their contributions resulted in a strong, nationally managed body for Saudi heritage, avoiding dependence on Western institutions. This high degree of autonomy was further assured by the increased importance of crude oil, extracted and refined by ARAMCO[8], a state-owned company since 1974. After the overtake of ARAMCO by the Saudi State, the percentile contribution from the oil-based sector to the GDP started to decline. In 1970, 63.45 percent of the total GDP (peaked in 1973 to 84.39 percent) came from oil-based industries, and in 1996 it only amounted to 30.95 percent (Choudhury and Al-Sahlawi 2000, 238). The twenty-first century saw at first an increase to 54.10 percent in 2008, followed by the oil crisis in 2014, dropping it to 20 percent in 2016, before hitting an all-time low in 2020 with 16 percent (World Bank, 2024).

In the twenty-first century, the drawbacks of overdependency on hydrocarbons became evident and forced the Saudi state to develop a strategy. The Vision

8 Acronym for Arabian American Oil Company, it is the official Saudi Arabian oil company.

2030 strategy program was presented in 2016 as a reaction to the 2014 oil-price collapse, aiming to modernize Saudi Arabia, diversify its economic portfolio, and become a stronger global player. This proved to be a sensible decision since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, and the inefficient mitigation measures, directed at controlling it, further contributed to a detriment for the oil sector (Shehabi 2022, 1, 14). A key point of the program is the development of the tourism sector to transition from an oil-based to a service-based economy (Abuhjeeleh 2019, 13).

Historically, predominantly religiously motivated tourism (pilgrimage) within and to Saudi Arabia has been a constant factor in the country. With some exceptions (e.g., ban on Iran in 1992), the number of pilgrims has increased annually in the last sixty years due to new and affordable modes of transportation. In 1965, 300,000 Muslims from abroad made the pilgrimage and by 1983 this number had already reached one million (Doumato 1992, 92). The fear that Philby expressed in 1955 about the West corrupting Saudi Arabian society was still present at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The government was concerned about how possible offenses caused by foreign behavior and appearance would affect the conservative local societies. Since the oil revenue represented the major income, there was little incentive to promote tourism. Additionally, working in tourism was perceived as undignified for a Saudi citizen (Nadia 2014, 65).

Nevertheless, this has changed drastically in the last two decades. In 2009, 48 percent of the 33.5 million domestic and 13.3 million international trips were driven by religious purposes (Mufeed 2014, 169). Data from the Ministry of Tourism (Ministry of Tourism, 2024) indicate a significant decrease in religious trips from 33.46 percent in 2015 to 14.83 percent in 2022. This decrease is partly due to the enhanced mobility of Saudi residents, who are now additionally traveling for leisure, and to the lifting of restrictions, allowing easier access to the country. Moreover, the introduction of more accessible visa processes has opened Saudi Arabia to foreign tourism and investors, contributing further to this shift.

To capitalize on this trend and attract more foreign tourists, the Vision 2030 strategy also includes five Giga projects aimed at transforming various sectors of the country: housing and society (ROSHN), entertainment, sports, and arts (Qiddiya), cultural heritage and tourism (Diriyah), nature and tourism (Red Sea Global), and urbanization and technology entrepreneurship (NEOM) (Vision 2030, 2024). To realize these projects the Public Investment Fund (PIF) was created, claiming to manage 925 billion USD (Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute 2024). The symbol of these changes in the country is NEOM, the prime destination for international tourists.

NEOM is a 26,500 km^2 special economic zone in the northwest bordering Jordan which features an abundance of projects with new ones progressively introduced. With 40 percent of the world's population within a six-hour flight, and with all the commodities, NEOM is set to become the hub for business, trade, services, and tourism. Particularly, "The Line," as it is called, has gained much media attention since it claims to revolutionize living, urbanization, technology, sustainability, and much more. It constitutes a futuristic project, in which an international team is creating a 170 km long, 200 m wide, and 500 m high city with the intent of housing nine million residents upon completion.

Other projects in NEOM follow the same trajectory, gaining media attention. OXAGON, a floating business hub, aims to capitalize on the 13 percent of world trade that passes through the Red Sea. TROJENA and SINDAHLA are specifically destined for tourists, offering unusual experiences, such as skiing and snowboarding in the Hejaz. Everything in NEOM is catered toward Western tourists. Common themes in advertisements include futuristic architecture, luxurious lifestyles, well-being, nature, sustainability, technology, sports, arts, and entertainment. The protagonists of these images and videos are often well-styled, elegant Western women. This entirely disconnects the product, in this case, the sub-projects of NEOM, from the religion, history, and culture of Saudi Arabia, offering a commodified version for European and North American tourists interested in a high-class lifestyle.

Another project that is worth mentioning is the development of the Al-ʿUlā region. The "Journey through time Masterplan" aims to transform part of the region into a "living museum." Through the utilization of ancient heritage, natural landscapes, luxury, entertainment, and "Arab hospitality," the region is becoming attractive to affluent tourists. Shuttle services provide a connection between the archeological sites, such as Dadan, Jabal Ikmah, and the UNESCO site of Hegra (modern Mada'in Salih) and the commodities of the town. The transformation of "Al-ʿUlā Old Town" into a commodified surreal experience of an Arab Souk, and the construction of luxurious hotels aim to render the location more attractive. Tourists are offered "traditional crafts," concerts, exhibitions of contemporary art, and performances. An important role is played by nature, made accessible to visitors, emphasized by projects such as Shaaran resort, and Arabian Leopard program. Both have the aim of reintroducing wild animals into the natural environment.

While these state-funded projects allow us to outline the image that the country wishes to portray and create for the international community, literature shows a more internal view. Arabic literature in Saudi Arabia, whose most popular genre

has since pre-Islamic Arabia been oral poetry (Britannica, 2024), was not revolutionized as in the neighboring countries until the 1970s. It is during the second half of the past century that Saudi Arabia developed a written canon and started incorporating modern Western genres such as short stories or novels. One of the first writers, Abdullah Ibrahim, even added the Gulf colloquial variety into the tales, often having a working-class community set. It is with his literature that Saudi fiction got success (Culture Gate, 2024).

Another author, considered the father of Saudi novel, despite being born in Jordan, is Abdul Rahman Munif (1933–2004). He studied in Baghdad, Damascus, and Paris, and in his works he explored themes of decadence and despotism in the Arab world. Munif gained popularity in Saudi Arabia during the 1970s with works such as *Cities of Salt* and *East of the Mediterranean*. However, following the resurgence of Wahhabism, catalyzed by the Iranian Revolution and the so-called Siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, both in 1979 (Al-Rasheed 2010, 142–3), this trend of critically examining Arab history and self-constructed cultural narratives was largely suppressed. The strict Islamic interpretations of Wahhabism imposed significant restrictions on the arts and led to the banning of Munif's works (Qantara, 2024).

In the past two decades, a new wave of Saudi novelists has emerged, addressing subjects such as class inequality, gender discrimination, censorship, repression of sexuality, violence, and cultural identity, which provide a critical lens through which the complexities of modern Saudi society are investigated. Female writers also start denouncing the repressive society through their works, describing arranged marriages, women's oppression from men and even old women, and the restrictions imposed by religion, which were previously taboo (ArabLit, 2024; Rivearabe, 2024).

Literature, on a national and international scale, is also at the center of the International Book Fair, which takes place in Riyadh. At this event, visitors are offered the opportunity to discover foreign and Arab publishers, meet readers and writers, and explore international literary culture. Riyadh will also host the Riyadh Fashion Week for the second time, welcoming local and international designers to foster the fashion industry and become a reference point for style.

Discussion

As stated at the beginning of this article, the two case studies present different trajectories in the development of their modern identity and how they market it for

the tourist sector. Jordan, with its colonial past and heritage tourism destinations, and Saudi Arabia, with limited Western influence and religious tourism, have exhibited different degrees of self-determination. Through tourism and media advertisement, we can also conclude their self-representations.

Western representations (or, to quote Said, *dynamic exchange*) "invented by Europeans" (Varisco 2007, 40), have been imprinted on West Asia. Western descriptions of the "Near East" as an exotic, sensual, picturesque, romantic, and spiritual "Other" contributed to creating the Orientalist image, through literature, paintings, and arts (Said 1978), which attracted European tourists. In the past, the "Orient" was depicted as the place of lascivious women in harems, of Bedouin sheikhs on horseback, and *Arabian Nights*. However, nowadays, Jordan exploits part of the same perceptions to market its *oriental* image. Presently, those who take advantage of this created concept are not only the Western powers, but also the Jordanian government, tourist agencies, and, to a lesser degree, local populations. Both the government and agencies portray Jordan not only as an exotic destination but also depict it as a Bedouin country.

Drawing on the work of Steiner (2010) and his postmodern interpretation of the (re)structuring of tourism spaces (Steiner 2010, 241), we also interpreted the tourist spaces in Jordan and Saudi Arabia as "hyper-realities" (Eco 1986 in Steiner 2010). Hyper-reality refers to an entity that appears to be real although it is not and is based on the imitation of it (Steiner *ibid.* 245). Hyper-realities appear to be more real than the archetype since they are the direct object of perception. Bedouins, exhibiting their identity through tents, performances, hospitality, and so forth, make these appear real, by imitating reality. Since these spaces and this reality are the only ones that tourists have access to, the distinction between the original and the copy is erased (Eco 1986, 7–14).

We observe at once the disappearance of the Bedouin lifestyle and the reproduction and imitation of it for marketing purposes. Later, drawing on Eco, Baudrillard developed three levels of hyper-realities that he named *simulacra* (Baudrillard 1993, 50). First-order simulacra are imitations of the real by using signs of the signified. This applies to the hotel rooms in the Wadi Rum, designed to imitate Bedouin tents. Second-order simulacra identically reproduce reality, therefore disintegrating the border between the copy and the original. Mass-produced souvenirs that identically reproduce Bedouin artifacts such as a coffee-mortar or teapots fall into this category.

The third-order of simulacra is represented by something real that does not have an archetype and is characterized by permutation of signs. This third-order can be attributed to the Martian Domes which are spaceship-like tents, whose

design creates the idea of a futuristic tent (an arbitrary and mixed combination). Another third-order simulacra or hyper-real paradox is constituted by the presence of ACs, Jacuzzis, spas, and other luxurious comforts in the supposedly "Bedouin" desert. The "hyper-real Orient is completely commodified and easy to consume for tourism purposes" (Steiner 2010, 246).

Other interpretations of touristic places in Jordan are offered by MacCannel. He coined the expression "staged authenticity" referring to those settings arranged to produce a specific impression and support the tourists' beliefs in the authenticity of the experience (MacCannel 1973, 595-6). MacCannel applied Goffman's (1959) front-back dichotomy to tourism. He claimed that visitors want to enter back regions to experience the intimate reality, but touristic settings are front regions arranged to appear like the back ones to support tourists' beliefs (MacCannel 1973, 589). Visitors cannot always easily access back regions where locals live and retire. This is what travel blogs and agencies suggest and advertise for Jordan, where visits to the off-beat, original places are promised to tourists. What we can observe in both Petra and Wadi Rum are stage-two front regions (MacCannel, 598). It is the case of shops inside tents that imitate Bedouin ones and decorated as such in the Wadi Rum, where visitors can drink tea and buy souvenirs.

As for Saudi Arabia, the first and second-order simulacra are applied to the region of Al-ʿUlā, though to a lesser degree. Despite the non-commercialization of Saudi culture, a role is played by "Arab" features, such as hospitality and architectural elements. This can be seen in Al-ʿUlā where commodified simulated souks and traditional crafts are at the disposal of visitors. Tourists are also offered various accommodations in the form of resorts and other luxurious apartments that reproduce the architecture of a tent. For example, "the Palm" in the Emirates (Steiner 2010, 247–8), and the tent-shaped apartments in Al-ʿUlā, represent a generic place and not a specific culture, such as the Bedouin one. While the tent in Jordan serves as a symbol for Bedouin identity, in Saudi Arabia this association is not made explicit. The use of the rich pre-Islamic archeological heritage can be interpreted as a strategy to dissociate the region from the state religion, which might be a disincentive to Western tourists.

This dissonance from their own cultural and religious values is a deliberate choice by the engineers of the modernization process. Contrary to the Jordanian context, Saudi culture and identity cannot be commercialized because of the negative associations of the country in the West. Anti-Islamic sentiments in the West have been at an all-time high since the events of 9/11. Additionally, media representation of Saudi Arabia in major western newspapers formed a negative image of the Kingdom, associated with restricted women's rights, anti-LGBTIQ+

policies, modern slavery, and severe punishments including beheadings. As of October 2024, 213 people have been executed, despite the country competing for a seat in the UN Human Rights Council (Middle East Eye, 2024).

Consequently, hyper-realities are the preferred tool to represent and advertise the country. Because they lack social, cultural, and historical embeddedness, these hyper-realities can be imbued with a new narrative that is attractive to foreign visitors and investors. The Line exemplifies the advancement of technology, futurism, and sustainability, while reinventing civilization and urban lifestyle. There are no references to the country of Saudi Arabia, its culture, or its society.

The same applies to the other projects located in NEOM. As already pointed out by Steiner for Dubai and the Gulf countries, these new large-scale projects are reshaping the tourism landscape in the region (2010, 242). Due to the extent of these macro-projects, they are progressively establishing a new image of these West-Asian countries, which does not bear negative connotations. Another benefit of these hyper-realities is that the only connection they have is with their architect and is therefore used to consolidate their power. Other sectors that are contributing to the establishment of a new image for the kingdom, on a minor scale, are the cultural events offered. Especially in the realm of literature which, on one side, is now opening to Western and international readers and writers through its book fairs in the capital. On the other side, it is witnessing more women taking part in the social discourse. A similar strategy has been applied in fashion, with the purpose to both internationalize the sector and open it up to make Saudi Arabia a reference point in the industry.

Economic power is not the only aspiration of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which also strives for global influence by force of its religious legitimacy. The Kingdom claims to be dominated by a kind of true Islam which it embodies. It then makes use of religion as a tool in foreign policy in the Islamic World and beyond (Lohlker 2020, 21).

In a globalized society, where tourism is one of the major contributors to a country's GDP and competition is strong, the creation of superstructures such as the Burj Khalifa in Dubai or The Line in NEOM offer symbolic capital to their creators. The symbolic capital, the sum of cultural and social recognition (Bourdieu 1979), is used to create an image and place it on the global map to attract investors and tourists and spread its influence. Hence, their benefits far exceed the economic resources invested in their creation (Junemo 2004). This exchange of people, cultures, and ideas with the globalized Saudi society inevitably forces it to change and adapt to an international audience, although this transformation is controlled and regulated by Saudi authorities.

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