

# Positioning African American Slave Narrative Discourses in *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*

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*This paper examines Wolves of the Crescent Moon in order to centralize the subaltern voice of the slave narrator and illuminate the intersection between slavery and freedom underpinning the text narrative. The paper also explores the author's attempt to reconstruct thematic and aesthetic motifs latent in African-American slave narratives in order to engage Arabic-Islamic slavery unknown in modern western canons.*

Keywords: Arabic literature / Afroamerican literature / tribal culture / slavery / slave narratives / Saudi Arabia / Al-Mohaimed, Yousef

## Introduction

### Re-Imagining Slavery in *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*

In “Memory and Forgetting”, Paul Ricoeur points out that remembering the victims of history—the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten—should be a task for all of us. Like the author of *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*,<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur also emphasizes what he calls “the duty to remember and duty to tell” demonstrating that “a basic reason for cherishing “the duty to remember is to keep alive the memory of suffering over against the general tendency of history to celebrate the victors” (4). In the same context, he infers that the whole philosophy of history “especially in the Hegelian sense of this expression” is concerned with the accumulation of advantage, progress and victory. Finally, Ricoeur concludes: “All that is left is lost. We need, therefore, a kind of parallel history of, let us say, victimization, which would counter the history of success and victory” (5).

Drawing on the African American slave narrative tradition, the novel<sup>2</sup> substantiates the traumatic history of slavery, offering an insight into cultural and social entanglements inherent in the history of enslavement and racism in the Arab world. The narrative unfolds as an act of memory of the kind Ricoeur calls for reinforcing contemporary controversies about the perpetuation of new forms of slavery in the Arab world, specifically in

the rich oil-producing countries. Calling on history to grasp the nightmarish and tragic experience of slavery, the narrative unmistakably opens old wounds rather than imparting healing and reconciliation. In other words, the novel rekindles heart-breaking memories, dismissing the possibility of lamentation and shedding tears upon the destiny of innocent souls lost during slavery.

Invoking the history of slavery in the past and present, Al-Muhaimeed uncovers issues of marginalization and victimization in the Arabian Gulf region, a preeminent concern for many writers obsessed with the promotion of human rights in contemporary societies. In a related scenario, a scrupulous attention to historical events and evidence is made plain in the text. The focus on these events is replicated within the narrative by the use of registers, records, local tales documentation and witness accounts. As a whole, the novel traces the life-history of an ex-slave, Hasan, who is brought from Sudan to Saudi Arabia in his early childhood, together with other slaves, camouflaged as pilgrims. In Saudi Arabia, he is given a new name, Tawfiq,<sup>3</sup> and is brutally castrated and sold out to work as a servant in one of the palaces in Riyadh.

Since the ex-slave narrator, Tawfiq, is not able to reconstruct himself by means of a teleological social narrative in which he would figure as an agent who chooses his own actions, the readers, in the view of Homi Bhaba, are forced to see the inwardness of the slave world from the outside—that is through the ghostly returning memory of his past. Bhaba portrays this “ghostly return as intimating a reclamation” of the ex-slave’s voice and a restoration of a lost history that will survive in the “deepest resources of our amnesias, of our unconsciousness” (18). Convinced of the impossibility of abandoning history or healing it, the novelist reconstructs a racialized Arabic-Islamic identity resulting into a complicated perception of slavery in the past and at present.

Methodically, *Wolves* entails a historical and literary revision of slavery in the Arab world incorporating hybrid discourses and blending local storytelling—adapted from *The Arabian Nights*—and modern western moods of representation such as intertextuality, memoirs, collage juxtaposition, and flashback techniques. From a historical perspective, the evocation of slavery in the Arab world has many dimensions that to insist on one single paradigm for all contexts is to neglect specific contexts in which slavery and its effects are ideologically articulated. Further, the prolonged silence on slavery in Arabic literature and culture is basically due to religious, social and political reasons. Frequently, there was a tendency to marginalize or neglect any engagement with slavery discourses mainly because of the potential affiliation between slavery and Islam. For example, Bernard

Lewis argues that Muslim rulers were rarely at the forefront of passing abolitionist legislation. Lewis argues that Islamic abolitionism is a contradiction in terms, for it was “the West that imposed abolition on Islam through colonial decrees or by exerting pressure on independent states” (78) or due to other local political reasons integral to the hierarchal tribal structure of the region.

As in other parts of Africa, slavery in the Arab world comprises a complex system of labor use and a web of exploitation and coercion. Its form varied over time and place. Prior to the penetration of Islam into Africa, slaves were systematically recruited and brought to the Arab world. After the Islamic conquest of the African continent, there was a wide-scale existence of African Diaspora in Arab countries particularly in the Arabian Peninsula. Most of the local populations emanating from African origins were recruited as slaves and were gradually assimilated into the mainstream tribal systems in Arabia but still carry the scars of slavery until the present time because emancipated slaves remained stigmatized as the prevailing social laws were not changed by abolition and other legal measures. Reviving the issue of slavery would probably lead to social unrest jeopardizing the fragile social structure of these desert communities where ex-slaves constitute an extended mass of subalterns. Therefore, the complex representation of slavery in *Wolves* is considered as a pioneering endeavor which deserves exhaustive critical attention. The novel was censored not only because it uncovers the evils of slavery in the past and at present validating the continuation of slavery in new forms in the Arabian Peninsula’s oil-producing countries but also because it castigates<sup>4</sup> the velvet class in Riyadh and the wide divide between the poor and the rich in the Saudi society.

The text of the novel interweaves the fate of three downtrodden characters from the bottom of the social ladder in the contemporary Saudi society. Living on the fringes of society, these characters are puppets in the hands of powerful and evil people and are subjected to their whims. The events of the novel begin in Sudan, the native homeland of the central narrator, Tawfiq and ends in his Diaspora in the Arabian Peninsula. Through a flashback sequence, the old ex-slave recounts his narrative starting with the time he was kidnapped by the slave traffickers until he fell into the hands of slave gangs who took him and other slaves across the Sudanese jungles to the slave market in a spot called “Shindi”.<sup>5</sup> From there, they were taken to the port of Sawaken on the Red Sea—passing through “Barbar”—where a slave ship carried them to the shores of the Arabian Peninsula.<sup>6</sup> In Saudi Arabia Tawfiq and other children were sold as slaves to a local citizen named Abu Yahya Al-Halawani who castrated them and changed their names.

## ***Wolves of the Crescent Moon and the Slave Narrative Dynamics***

According to Robert Stepto, the slave narrative was originally triggered by “the quest for freedom and literacy” (15). A slave narrative is an exclusively aesthetic form dealing with the circumstances of being a slave. From a historical standpoint, slave narratives are identified as autobiographical or semi-autobiographical accounts written by American slaves or ex-slaves. In addition to folk songs, “the slave narrative” was the most valuable “African American contribution to American literature” (Loggins 41). In traditional slave narratives, slaves narrate stories of their escape from the bondages of slavery into freedom. Other details are included comprising issues such as social status, class, and racial affiliations. Unquestionably, the high caliber structures and diction of many slave narratives are attributed to “its unique status as textual evidence of the self-consciousness of the ex-slaves” (Davis and Gates xxxiv). Therefore, there is no surprise that a great deal of contemporary African American literature stems from the slave narrative tradition. According to Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr., the slave narrative became “the formal basis upon which an entire narrative tradition has been constructed” because it “has withstood the exigencies so often fatal to occasional genres of literature” (xxxiv).

Early slave narrators including Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs provided inspiration for their white and African American successors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. Novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Beloved* drew heavily on the slave narrative aesthetic heritage. Within this epistemological parameter, the slave narrative signals a pioneering endeavor on the part of African Americans to “write themselves into being”. Through the mastery of language, they emphasize their humanity (Davis and Gates xxiii). Unlike authors of slave narratives, contemporary novelists engaging the historical novel of slavery such as Al-Muhaimeed and his African American counterparts are not exclusively concerned with providing accounts of the conditions of slavery. For instance, the Saudi author painstakingly struggles to reconstruct the slave world of a prior era in order to juxtapose the miserable conditions of the receding past with a similar predicament in the living present.

In his engaging novel, *Wolves*, Al-Muhaimeed incorporates western narrative mechanisms to tackle the slavery motif, connecting the past with the present, leaking registers of slavery forbidden in Arab culture and criticizing the hegemonic conventions of his own country. Duplicating the slave narrative genre and introducing a modern poignant slave tale which derives its events from tangible history, Al-Muhaimeed aims to in-

criminate slavery and racism in the Arab world. The narrative starts in the African jungles of the Sudan where Tawfiq and other vulnerable folks are kidnapped and sold into slavery by local slave hunters. They are driven across the jungles and swamps of Sudan until they reach the Red Sea coast and from there they are shipped during the Hajj season to Saudi Arabia camouflaged as pilgrims.<sup>7</sup> In Saudi Arabia, Tawfiq suffers from a grievous bodily loss after being castrated to fit his role as a servant in the harems of palaces and the female quarters of houses of the rich class in the Saudi capital city. After the abolishment of slavery in the Arabian Peninsula during the early 1960's, he is forced to leave the palace and is turned out into the streets with no prospect and no job.

The incidents of *Wolves* take place in a variety of geographical locations including the vast territories of Sudan and Arabian Peninsula. The novel intricately portrays the miserable living conditions and interrelationships of three victimized and marginalized characters belonging to the extreme end of the social spectrum. One of them is called Turad, a Bedouin bandit caught between the contradictory worlds of the desert and the city. The second character is Nasser, an illegitimate child, an offspring of a secret love affair between a man and woman from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and finally Tawfiq, a Sudanese ex-slave who spent his life in exile.

Fearing the repercussions of criticizing the slavery institution, Tawfiq remains mute for years. When Tawfiq is alone he bemoans “the fate that plucked him out of the Sudan and cast him forth upon the high seas for so many days that he thought he would never set foot on dry land again” (Al-Muhaimeed 18). As a neglected subaltern, like his counterpart African American slave narrators, he is not allowed to speak, being silenced for sixty years and only articulating his suffering after his emancipation. Throughout the eyes of the ex-slave, the author displays the physical and psychological scars of slavery by probing the annals of Arab history as Tawfiq narrates his story with the slave hunters and traders.

Prior to the confession that encompasses the core of the slave narrative in *Wolves*, Tawfiq behaves as if he were a dumb person. During his time as a slave, he is not given sufficient space to express his agonies and hardships. After he is freed, due to personal reasons, he was also unable to articulate the evils of slavery or unveil the wounds afflicted on him by the slave traders and their affiliates. Consequently, he favors permanent silence and detachment from the surrounding community. From time to time, his face is “glistening with a flood of tears” as he speechlessly recalls the traumatic memories of his enslavement. His bizarre behavior attracts the attention of Turad, the Bedouin outcast who works with him in the same place. Turad observes that Tawfiq carries a heavy burden, a secret

deep inside himself that he is reluctant to disclose to anyone. After becoming close friends, the ex-slave, who has “a plumb round face full of old pockmarks” and “two broad and flat ears”, makes a harrowing revelation to Turad, a kind of modern slave narrative.

### **Engaging the African American Slave Narrative Tradition in *Wolves of the Crescent Moon***

Estimating the status of slave narratives as autobiographies and literature, James Olney refers to some of their literary aspects as including “interruptions of the narrative proper by way of declamatory and rhetorical addresses to the reader and passages that as to style might come from an adventure story, a romance or a novel of sentiment” (151). An initial reading of *Wolves* divulges a substantial use of rhetorical discourse. The novel embraces interruptions and oratorical dialogues embroiling chronological narratology and extended use of flashback devices and memoirs. Notwithstanding, the adventurous elements mentioned by Olney are scarcely integrated in the text because the novel is ultimately concerned with introducing a gloomy picture of domestic slavery rampant in the Gulf countries. The author concentrates on the story of the slave narrator, justifying its moral message by authenticating testimonies ingrained in the history of slavery in the Arab world. An intensive element of adventure would probably disrupt the thematic integration and the moral purposes of the narrative.

In James Olney’s critical perspective, the central point in the slave narrative is the life story of the slave, which is aesthetically vocalized in grandiose diction and punctuated with distractions for comments and feedbacks. Like the narrative of Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Al-Muhaimeed’s novel reveals such dimensions. The dialogue between the narrator, Tawfiq and his friend Turad involves spectacular passages of distinguished literary discourse. The narrative is periodically interjected by Turad’s contesting comments. Olney also demonstrates that the slave narrative comprises three major factors including theme, content, and form: “The theme is the reality of slavery and the necessity of abolishing it” whereas the content implicates a sequence of events and incidents which “will make the reader see and feel the realities of slavery”. The form, according to Olney, “is a chronological episodic narrative beginning with an assertion of existence and surrounded by various testimonial evidences for that assertion” (156). In *Wolves, the* author condemns slavery and racism including authenticated records of the slave trade in the Sudan and

Arabian Peninsula. In terms of content, the text introduces a series of events, emotionally engaging the modern audience in order to pave the way for the demolition of all forms of slavery. Assimilating authentic historical details in the novel, the author struggles to make the readers come to grips with the reality of slavery.

Like the famous slave narratives of Fredrick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs and William Wells Brown, *Wolves*, categorically denounces slavery. Contrary to narratives by Muslim slaves such as Omar ibn Said and Ayyub Bin Suleiman,<sup>8</sup> who did not incite their audience toward abolishing slavery, the novel expresses a highly provocative message, igniting anti-slavery sentiments on the part of the readers. In established narratives by Muslim slaves, the writers focus only on attacking the slavery system. Notwithstanding, they express no hostility toward their slave-holders and masters. Their life on the plantations is depicted as harmonious and comfortable. Thereupon, there were no attempts to escape from slavery to freedom in narratives by Muslim slaves. Antithetical to slaves who prefer to bury their pains and die peacefully, Tawfiq, the ex-slave narrator in *Wolves*, decided to make a confession exposing the evils of slavery. Unlike slaves in ancestral Muslim slave narratives who found a comfortable life within the system of slavery,<sup>9</sup> Tawfiq's experience was terrifying, notably after his rape and castration. He spent his life in total silence hesitant to talk with anybody and unwilling to reopen old wounds until he meets with Turad.

The text of *Wolves* fulfills Olney's prospect of the "form" identified as a chronological construct. The novel also complies with Olney's concept of content as a sequence of events stigmatizing slavery. Nevertheless, it does not adhere to the point raised by Olney regarding the adventure ingredient in the slave narrative. He claims that a basic characteristic of slave narratives comprises the incorporation of some adventurous occurrences. The adventure components deeply-seated in African American slave narratives are elaborately transformed in *Wolves* into elements of horror, distress, fraud and frustration combining chasing, raiding and hunting discourses intrinsic to the narrative. Tawfiq tells Turad that sixty years ago when he was an eight-year old child living in the village of Umm Hibab in the center of the Sudan, he passed through a gruesome calamity that dramatically devastated his life. The narrative moves forward and the awe-inspiring incidents prevail the events.

Tawfiq's descent into the world of slavery began one night when the slave drivers burned down the huts in his village. Tawfiq was living with his uncle Fadlallah and his uncle's wife after losing his mother, a slave who had run away from her cruel. As the hut of his crippled neighbor,

Idris al-Sayyed, is burning one day, Tawfiq manages to escape toward the north, but his uncle and his wife are kidnapped by the slave raiders. The traumatized child is shocked as he hear the cries of his neighbor screaming from pain as the fire burns his head and clothes. Before disappearing into the jungle, he sees Idris's wife running around her burning cottage: "She was like a human torch running around the hut screaming after her hair had caught fire" (Al-Muhaimeed 21). After more than sixty years, Tawfiq still hears her screams every day before he sleeps.

It is noticeable that conventional slave narratives are often fraught with exciting incidents involving escape episodes. In the African American tradition, slaves run away from slavery in the south to freedom in the north. Conversely, Tawfiq, submits to his fate and does not attempt to escape after his capture by merciless slave raiders who ship him along with a cargo of cattle and sheep to the Arabian Peninsula. Both during and after his enslavement, he is also disinclined to run away after being castrated and humiliated because of his awareness that there are no free societies in the surrounding countries.

While African American slaves who escaped from the South often found freedom in the North, for Tawfiq any attempt to escape from the slave hunters will inevitably end in disappointment due to lack of a safe sanctuary. Using the jungles of Sudan as a hiding place, Tawfiq, the eight-year old child, walks through the bush by night and sleeps by day in order not to fall into the hands of the slave drivers but his attempt to flee capture is later foiled. Escaping in the direction of the Shindi and Barbar regions in the north, Tawfiq arrives at a place called al-Hasahisa, where he stays more than one month and becomes with other runaways. Tawfiq and his companions live like animals "feeding off grass and vermin. Hunger began to take its toll, until we fell into the trap" (22).

The trap to which he refers is a false banquet that leads to their capture. In due course, the hungry mob is attracted to the delicious smell of cooking as the breeze carried a wonderful aroma. In the remote distance they see heavy smoke coming out of a fire. To reach the location of the cooking, they wind their way between tree trunks and clumps of bushes. The smell drives them wild, and when Tawfiq and his friends are about to rush toward the grilling skewers they "were surrounded by masked men. Some were carrying rifles; others had chains and ropes over their shoulders" (23). When one well-built youth among the group tries to escape he is killed by the gang and falls onto his face, lying as silent as a stone as "a bullet whistled through the air and thudded into his back". Accordingly, the rest of the mob fall to their knees in fear. The men carrying the chains rush forward and tie the hands of the captured slaves while rifles were

pointed at them. Ironically, Tawfiq and his friend realize that they were tricked; it was not real meat burning on the fire; instead, “The bastards had put lumps of fat on the skewers and placed them on the fire” (24).

In African American slave narratives, the slave’s life is radically transformed after his/her arrival in the land of enslavement, where names are changed and indigenous religion is replaced. The sea port, the final anchorage of the slave vessel—disguised as pilgrim ship—witnesses the inauguration of a new chapter in Tawfiq’s encounter with the hardships of slavery. Tawfiq conjures up terrifying memories as he narrates the incidents featuring his submission to the slave merchants in the Saudi harbor. From the edge of the harbor came some men in short white dresses with belts around their waists and red turbans on their heads. One of them who claimed to be a pilgrim guide heads toward the “the three black children” and hurries them in front of him. He is assisted by “another fat man who had enormous wobbling breasts”(59). Outside the port, there is a huge truck with wooden sides waiting in a dusty street. The three children are thrown into the truck and “Tawfiq watched the fat man as he paid two pieces of silver to the pilgrim guide and climbed into the truck next to the driver” (60).

The truck makes its way for a long time, swaying heavily as it lumbers down narrow streets. Finally, it reaches the end of an alley in the district of al-Mazlum.<sup>10</sup> The huge truck driver opens the back door of the truck and pushes the black children out in the street. Tawfiq ends up flat on his face and “sniffed the strange unfamiliar smell of the dust”. Plainly, the alien smell of the Arabian desert dust is contrasted with the refreshing smell of the Sudanese forest. After sniffing the smell of the dust, Tawfiq run in terror together with the other boys across a narrow alleyway and into the door of a tall building, pursued by the man with the dangling breasts and the huge man with big mustache. The slave children are locked in a small dark room full of sacks, crates, spare things, and tins of zinc. In the same building, the names of the black children were changed into Jawhar, Anbar and Tawfiq—whose original name was Hasan. The fat man sends each one of the three children a quarter loaf of bread, which Tawfiq says, “we gobbled up with trembling hands, we were very hungry” (62).

Dismally, Tawfiq recalls the events of the first night he spent in the Saudi city house asserting that he did not sleep until it was nearly dawn: “I slept standing up because the room was so narrow and in the morning I woke up to the smell of Anbar’s excrement. He could not hold it in, and had to do it squatting there like a stray dog in a space he had made between two sacks” (62). The narrative advances gradually as the narrator envisions the sad memories indispensable to his confrontation with the slavery insti-

tution in the Arabian Peninsula. In his next day in the city house, Tawfiq and the other slave children meet Umm Al-Khayr,<sup>11</sup> the black lady who is the housekeeper and assistant of the fat man, Abu Yahya. She “rubbed our bare heads and inspected our backs and shoulders” (63). She gave the other two children (Jawhar and Anbar)<sup>12</sup> new clothes and head-covers. Afterwards, the two young slaves disappeared and Tawfiq did not see them again throughout the rest of his journey in the Arabian Peninsula.

The journey motif comprising the passage from freedom to slavery is fundamental to both traditional African American slave narratives and *Wolves*. The Saudi author incorporates this constituent through Tawfiq’s recollection of the memories of his journey of suffering and pain down the road to slavery. The kidnapped group of slaves is driven for miles through forests and jungles down into valleys and up over highlands. Whenever they stumble or fall they are kicked or whipped with a switch of plaited leather: “We walked eastward for days until finally we climbed up into some mountains. They took us into a cave through a dark narrow entrance, but once we entered it opened up. It was their secret hideout and there they gathered around thirty slaves” (25).

From this spot, they are taken to Shindi but when they reach Barbar their number dwindle because many slaves die on the way under torture or due to failed escape attempts or because they are sold by the Bedouin slave traders. Thereafter, the gang herds the sheep from Barbar onto the deck and together with the slaves they are sent to Sawaken on the Red Sea coast. The slaves are placed in a medium sized boat with sacks of corn and sealed chests in the cargo area down below which was almost “pitch black”. The boat sets sail and pulls away from the port of Sawaken one month prior to the Hajj season.

Afterwards, the narrator vividly describes the moment the slave ship reaches the Saudi coast: “In his mind’s eye, he could still see, like some distant hazy dream, the bustle of an old port that ships could scarcely reach because the waters were shallow” (58). Near the harbor, the ships would drop anchor, then the porters would jump into sailing skiffs and vigorously shove the animals down the smooth gangplank which stretched down from the deck of the ship without steps. Then, the herds of sheep were transferred into the sailing skiffs—little boats—which navigated their ways uneasily through the channels and coral reefs toward other spots near the coast. In addition to the sheep, the cargo contains the slaves and sealed crates filled with leather goods, medicaments, and Indian sandal wood sold in Shindi as well as small boxes filled with Ethiopian gold.

An interesting point of similarity between *Wolves* and classical African American slave narratives lies in the resemblance between the ways in

which slaves were smuggled to the north after being packed in crates and barrels, Ali Baba style, and the ways in which Tawfiq and his fellow slaves were illegally transported through the pilgrim ship navigating to Arabia. While the slave ship called “the African Moon is in anchor,” hundreds of slaves including women, children, and men in white Ihram clothes are driven into a line on the deck of the ship. During the unloading process, the slaves, dressed as pilgrims, are brought up from the hold and ordered into a long queue, which inevitably breaks up into small groups.

The author introduces Tawfiq’s narrative as an indictment of the economics of slavery and as a testimony of the depravity of the Sudanese accomplices conspiring against their own people, particularly innocent children and vulnerable women. Registering historical realities and genuine details about the indigenous slavery trade, Al-Muhaimeed describes the situation in Sudan in the 1930’s and the 1940’s using documented records: “The country was awash with traders in human beings and the tribes that dealt in slaves were everywhere: the Kababish in the region of al-Bitana, the Ta’ayasha in the Kurdufan, the Ruzaiqat and Musairiya in Bahr al-Ghazal, and the Rashayda in Port Sudan and Sawaken” (22). Tawfiq, the narrator, introduces an account of the slavery scene in Sudan illustrating that the slave drivers were crawling over every inch in the country, archiving the names of the tribes that participated in the proliferation of slavery by providing logistic assistance to the Arab slave traders. Evidently, local tribes such as the Ja’aly, the Kababish, the Ruzaiqat, the Musairiya and the Rashayda<sup>13</sup> participated in slave smuggling and trafficking on a wide-scale.

In African American slave narratives, the narrators suffer from different kinds of humiliation on the psychological and physical levels. In *Wolves*, Tawfiq is subjected to the inhuman and brutal monstrosity of being raped during the journey from freedom to slavery. According to his confession, one of the most traumatic experiences for Tawfiq is associated with his rape. He tells Turad that after the slave ship pulls away from the port of Sawaken in Sudan, they spend days in the open sea. At that time they had to wear the Ihram pilgrim clothes<sup>14</sup> before they reached the Saudi harbor. When the slave ship comes near the shores, four men come down the pen below deck where Tawfiq and his fellow slaves are locked. One of them is a black man from Eritrea who give them used and dirty Ihram clothes. Not knowing how to wear them, the children put them around their waists.

The angry-looking Eritrean takes Tawfiq into the toilet, cursing him with a language he is not able to understand. Tawfiq then recounts: “Before he tied the wrap he began to fiddle with my ass with his huge hand, then he grabbed the back of my neck and pushed me over and that’s

when I felt his cock like a hashaab.<sup>15</sup> Do you know what the hashaab is?” (27). Tawfiq is unable to cry or scream and says, “all I did was to clean myself up after he had finished. He rushed up the stairs onto the deck and I never set my eyes on him again”(28). He tells Turad that since “the Eritrean man pushed me on my face in the toilet and did it with me,” I learned that “people can do it with you dozens of times a day, in different ways, and in different meanings” (58).

Many African American slave narratives similarly include details about sexual abuse of slaves, as seen in the narrative of Harriet Jacobs. In addition to his rape, Tawfiq is also castrated in a vicious and savage manner. The slave castration ritual was a well-established custom in the Middle East for centuries. Since male slaves permanently stay in palaces and the houses of the elite, they could pose danger to the harems and female community in these places; therefore, they had to be stripped of their sexual powers by turning them into eunuchs. The rite is reminiscent of the lynching of black slaves accused of harassing white women in the antebellum American South and the subsequent process of cutting off their sexual organs and stuffing them in their mouths. In a flashback episode, Tawfiq recalls the tormenting memory of his castration and in a confessional mood he painstakingly narrates the incidents to Turad. For Tawfiq, castration remains the eternal wound of slavery that will not be healed: “I remember the day as if it were yesterday. I remember the face of the man who came into my room with a pair of glasses perched on his thick nose attached to a black cord behind his ears. He had a metal case with him. It was small and weird-looking, red, like he had brought it from Hell. It had pictures of minarets and domes and trees engraved on it” (63).

Continuing his recollection of this bitter childhood experience, Tawfiq reminisces about the hypocrisy of the housekeeper, Umm Al-Khayr, who insists on deceiving him: “As he opened the small black lock, Umm Al-Khayr stood behind him beside the door with two sad eyes saying: don’t be afraid Tawfiq, my boy. The barber is going to shave your head.” (64). The ex-slave evokes all the minute details associated with this decisive moment in his life. He remembers that the barber’s bag was full of different kinds of tools including razor blades, cotton wool, white gauze, a bottle of cologne, some matches and metal cones and a piece of locally made soap, “Abu Anz soap,” among other things that he is not able to recall. But he accurately remembers the hairy hands of the barber and how he was setting out “his tools with well-practiced precision,” slipping the razor blade into “the lip of the shaver.”

After shaving off Tawfiq’s hair, the barber tears off a small piece of cotton wool, rolls it into a ball between his fingers, soaks it in a yel-

low liquid, and sticks it into Tawfiq's nostrils. Tawfiq cannot forget the strong smell of the liquid that put him into sleep: "A strong pungent smell sneaked directly up into my head and I saw walls began to move." Under anesthesia, the face of the barber goes all misty and seems to hover around the room "as if he were a genie". Regardless of being drugged, Tawfiq could sense that there was "something going on lower down between his thighs". After the brutal operation, which was undertaken in a very primitive way, he begins gradually to regain his consciousness.

In a dreamlike trance, Tawfiq, under the impact of the yellow liquid that puts him to sleep, evokes previous excruciating memories affiliated with the plight of slavery: "I saw the faces of the slave traders one after the other in al-Bitana and Kurdufan and Bahr al-Ghazal and Bantio and al-Fasher. I saw my mother washing me on the banks of the Nile one spring day with other women around her washing their few clothes" (64). Patently, Tawfiq suffers from the devastating practices of slavery in his childhood such as being kidnapped and raped. Furthermore, his subjection to intensive psychological agonies in the aftermath of his castration leads to a disturbance similar to the Post Traumatic Stress (PTSD) syndrome.

After his operation, Umm Al-Khayr frequently refers to his great expectations in the future, offering the child false promises of wealth and prestige: "you'll find excellent work. You'll be able to work in the palaces. You'll know greatness and prosperity and you'll be a rich man. But I never became rich and I was not a man anymore. I learned a few days later that I had been castrated and all I would use my penis for was to urinate" (65). Umm Al-Khayr cunningly congratulates Tawfiq on the surgery that ironically obliterates his masculinity, stripping him of his manhood and turning the young boy into a eunuch. The ex-slave, instead, tells us a different tale about slavery as the narrative indicates.

*Wolves* underlines the existence of a slavery culture in the Arab world defined partly in opposition to holy Koranic texts to serve the interests of elite circles and local economies. Writers of famous slave narratives such as Olaudah Equiano and Harriet Jacobs heavily engage religion, quoting frequently from the Bible and judging their oppressors from a moral perspective. In Jacobs's narrative, Dr. Flint, her master is often approached from a Christian standpoint. Equiano's narrative is also packed with Christian allusions and Biblical references. Even in the narratives of famous Muslim slaves such as Omar ibn Said<sup>16</sup> and Ayyub Bin Suleiman, religion is an apparent factor. Dissimilar to other slaves who found solace and spiritual satisfaction in religion, Tawfiq, the central narrative voice in *Wolves*, denounces tribal societies in Arabia and their religious ethics and

moral traditions as an embodiment of hypocrisy. In the novel, religion is decentralized and issues such as exile, trauma, alienation, and related elements constitutive of the slavery narrative are given priority. Unlike African American slave narratives, which were contingent on an extensive manipulation of religious symbolism and rituals, Al-Muhaimeed's novel dismisses all forms of preaching and moral propaganda. In the Arab world, religion has been historically used as an exit dynamic and an outlet of escape to avoid clashes with slavery. The incidents of the novel designate that the inherited trajectories of slavery have constituted a complex construct which requires enormous efforts on the social, economic and political levels to be disrupted.

In addition to their emphasis on religion, African American slave narratives also often engage humor as a stylistic technique. Slaves also delighted in telling anecdotes in which their true and private feelings merged. With the exception of a few sarcastic references to the barber, the man with the dangling breasts, this element of humor is almost obscured in *Wolves*. Instead, the text is peppered with episodes of black comedy such the deceitful barbecue feast that resulted in the narrator's capture by slave hunters. One of the most vivid examples involves the unfulfilled sexual relationship between Tawfiq and Zahra, the female servant in the palace who was black and smooth skinned with protruding breasts that are "like suppressed anger" waiting to be released.

After the trauma of his castration, Tawfiq was transferred to live in the palace of a rich lady – from the local elite community – called Madawi. As time passes, Tawfiq grows into a handsome young man. Zahra, who is a few years older than Tawfiq, falls in love with the adolescent Tawfiq, falling lustily upon his lips whenever possible. One night when they are alone "she had got all hot and horny and was waiting for him to shove it inside her" (95), but he obviously fails to satisfy her sexually due to his castration. After discovering that Tawfiq is a eunuch, Zahra yells angrily that he is "only good for pissing". He tastes the ultimate sense of disappointment and from that moment on "Tawfiq withdrew into himself, and maintained a stubborn silence throughout the subsequent years" (95), particularly after Zahra divulges his secrets to her female companions in the palace. When Madawi gets married and goes to a new palace, Tawfiq is happy to become her driver in order to avoid the sarcasm of Zahra and her friends.

In African American slave narratives, the narrators often discuss a spy network that supplied information from the great house or the master's quarters in what was called "the grapevine system". In the secrecy of the night slaves met in a central cabin to discuss forbidden topics associated with their masters and mistresses. Unlike these slaves, however, Tawfiq

never engages in gossip about his owners. When Tawfiq goes to work as the private driver for Madawi, he becomes aware of several palace secrets. For example, he learns the real story of Khairiya, the daughter of the famous perfume seller, who was involved in an illicit sexual relationship with a young boy from the neighborhood, but he never unmasks her misconduct. The girl became pregnant by her lover, and her family are able to contain and conceal the disgrace thanks to the ignorance of the folks in the alley. The superstitious folks in the district are convinced that Khairiya became pregnant because she married the moon. According to the fabricated folklore, the girl commits a transgressing act by hanging her seductive underwear on the roof of the house during crescent moon nights. The moon falls in love with her and she becomes his wife, bearing his child in her belly.

Unfortunately, Tawfiq is not rewarded for his honesty and integrity. Instead, he is later expelled from his job. In the aftermath of the royal decree proclaiming the emancipation of slaves in the Arabian Peninsula in the 1960's, Tawfiq's life ironically becomes more miserable. He tells Turad: "I had to walk out of the palace gates carrying the deed of my freedom and wander about the streets and alleyways without owing my daily bread or possessing any skill or trade from which to make any living" (110). Hugh Auld, the slave master of Fredrick Douglass, states: "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. If you teach that nigger how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave" (qtd in Austin 47). The slaveholders in the Arabian Peninsula had a similar attitude toward the slave community in their land. Under the slavery system in Arabia, Tawfiq is dehumanized, stripped of his masculinity and denied all human rights including education. He is not allowed to be skilled in any trade or craft. He was deprived of a suitable job that would help him earn his living in an honorable way. Additionally, he faces racial discrimination at his job as a porter on the docks and when he applies for jobs as a sales assistant, plumber, builder, and laborer. He manages to find work as a guard of a building but loses it after the owner sells the building. Finally Tawfiq got a job in the ministry as office boy through a Sudanese friend, where he meets and becomes close friends with Turad.

## Conclusion

### The Hybrid Structure of *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*

In *Wolves*, Al-Muhaimeed struggles to escape from the limitations of both the traditional slave narrative and Arabic conventional fiction by incorporating modernist western techniques, resulting in the hybridity of his marvelous novel. The traditional slave-narrative is a literary form entirely dedicated to describing the ex-slave writer's experience in the world of slavery. It differs from the historical novel of slavery since it initially focuses on the manner in which ex-slaves wrote themselves into being through the account of the circumstances of being slaves (Carby 128). Since the emergence of the slave narrative genre until the present time, it was a major concern for African and African-American authors to engage or disengage themselves from the experience of slavery. Whereas famous writers of slave narratives such as Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs recall slavery as ex-slaves, modern authors of a similar genre—the historical novel of slavery—attempt to recapture slavery in order to reveal its destructive impact in a post-slavery era. For African American writers, a deeper understanding of their history is contingent upon an exploration of the experience of slavery. According to Arnold Rampersad, the investigation of “the reality of slavery is necessarily painful for a black American, but only by doing so can he or she begin to understand himself or herself and American and Afro American culture in general” (123).

In the last decades of the twentieth century, American literature witnessed a resurgence of the historical novel of slavery beginning with the publication of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), followed by the dazzling success of Alex Haley's *Roots* in the late 1970's up to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1988). In the process, African American writers “have taken a new interest in revisiting America's slavery past and have appealed to a wide audience” (Levecq 160). While the experience of slavery has been an obtrusive involvement for all African American writers since the time of slave narratives up to the present, very little attention was given to this conspicuous issue in Arabic literature. Witnessing the horrendous consequences of slavery in his own society, Al-Muhaimeed in *Wolves* appropriates aesthetic praxis and agonizing discourses rooted in African American slave narratives in his unique and pioneering novel about the history of slavery in the Arab world to explore indigenous motifs and socio-political landscapes subdued in domestic culture.

The author illuminates how the crucible of slavery in Arabia continues to mold the future of ex-slaves, providing a pre-text for modern forms of

slavery such as the exploitation of wealthy oil-producing countries of poor laborers from Southeast Asia and the Middle East. In contrast to the writers of African American slave narratives, he reconstructs slavery trajectories in order to link the ebbing past with the current present. This point of difference calls attention to the variation between recollecting slavery as an ex-slave and remaking slavery as one who would recognize how its history continues to construct one's present. Like slave narrative writers who concentrate on inventing their free selves, the Saudi writer attempts to resurrect the free self of the slave narrator and protagonist of his tale.

Contrary to the novels of writers such as Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, Gloria Naylor, Ernest Gaines, and Ishmael Reed, where the subject of slavery has become a kind of literary "free for all" (McDowell 144), Al-Muhaimeed's narrative introduces a diametrically opposing view of slavery in the Arab world. While the preceding novelists articulate how African American identity was fashioned during the ordeal of slavery, and how that identity continues to be created at present, the Saudi author affirms the impossibility of reclaiming the wounds of slavery in the Arab world. The author deliberately invokes the ghost of slavery in order to spotlight the continuation of slavery in the contemporary society of the Arabian Peninsula during the post-oil era.

In *Wolves* the issue of identity is ornately problematized. The resurrection of the identity motif widely disseminated in African American novels about slavery is not the focus of Al-Muhaimeed's novel, which aims to expose the marginalized identity of the ex-slave protagonist. Unlike the happy mulatto marriage, "unprecedented in American fiction" (Little 143), typifying Johnson's *Oxberding Tale*, for example, *Wolves* ends on a tragic note with the ex-slave thrown into the streets of the unwelcoming city in a post-slavery era after he is stripped of his freedom and manhood. The main figure in the narrative is a subaltern ex-slave epitomizing the ordeal of slavery and incarnating the continuation of racism in the Arab world. In the era of abolition during the 1960's, Tawfiq, the slave narrator, fails to make the transition as he attempts to cross the barriers between slavery and freedom because the stigma of slavery follows him even after emancipation.

Regardless of some similarities in content and form with both the African American slave narrative and the historical novel of slavery, Al-Muhaimeed's vision of slavery is unique and more pessimistic. The ex-slave narrator in the novel exemplifying the victims of slavery is totally stripped of his racial identity and is destined to live in eternal Diaspora. Tawfiq suffers from discrimination and marginalization in a society where ethnic distinction and class differences are crucial. After spending his life

as a slave in the Saudi capital city, he is ranked as an outsider, a stranger like the guest workers recently recruited from foreign countries. While slaves in American slave narratives find refuge in vital African cultural traditions to recreate identities able to resist the institution of slavery, Al-Muhaimeed's slaves, represented by the character of Tawfiq, have no heritage to rely on. Tawfiq is cut off from his roots in the heartland of Sudan at an early age and is never able to regain any form of his past except the bitter memories of kidnapping and enslavement by slave hunters. On the contrary, the African cultural inheritance available to the slaves in African-American slave narratives laid the foundations for a generative African-American tradition that was part of and distinct from western American culture. The attempt to isolate slaves from their African heritage made them adhere to their ethnic roots and traditions as epitomized by the blues, the spirituals, and slave songs.

Antithetically, this element is totally absent in *Wolves*. Due to his vulnerability, Tawfiq, the archetype of a dehumanized slave, completely surrenders to his captors when he is kidnapped by the slave drivers. However, in the hierarchal society of Arabia which despises him, he uses the strategy of silence as a way of passive resistance and an adaptation to an inhospitable surrounding environment. For sixty years, he lives as an exile in a supremacist community that ostracizes him. Though he stays in Saudi society for a lifetime, Tawfiq suffers from an identity crisis. He is totally alienated from the aspirations and expectations shaping the core of the social and cultural consciousness of native Saudi citizens. While ex-slaves in the historical novels of slavery retreat to their past after being acculturated into a secular western society into which they were thrust, Tawfiq has no past, no roots, and no ethnic culture to fall back upon.

In *Witnessing Slavery*, Francis Smith Foster observes that those born in slavery and who knew little of their own history, either social or familiar, "have less assurance of their identity" (59). Tawfiq's identity crisis is more severe because he is not born a slave and witnesses his transformation from free man into castrated slave. Throughout the narrative, he dreams of returning to a pre-slavery world of innocence and simplicity. Nonetheless, his fantasies and escape attempts into the past are also punctuated by the frightening memories of human trafficking and enslavement at the hands of slave traders and their affiliated gangs who burned the cottages of his village and kidnapped his folks. At the moment of castration, Tawfiq recalls the names of his family and the cities and sea ports associated with his journey from the Sudan to Arabia: "All I could remember was the Nile and the forests and the huts and Umm Kidada and Shindi and Umm Durman and port Sudan and Sawaken and my mother and my

uncle Fadlallah Adam and his wife Bakhita Osman and Idris al-Sayyid, the cripple and his wife al-Sabr Zayn” (Al-Muhaimeed 64).

Tawfiq’s frustrations, integral to the cruel experiences of his enslavement in the past and his failure to be assimilated into the social fabric of the Saudi community, simultaneously bring about self-hatred and reverse hostility toward the native inhabitants of Riyadh city. Tawfiq’s reaction to the xenophobia and racial prejudice of the local society culminates in his regressive attitude toward life as a whole, hindering any attempt toward self-recreation and reconciliation with local culture. Tawfiq’s narrative underlines the historical stigma entrenched in Arab communities well-known for racialism, chauvinism, and bigotry. He tells Turad that his days on the slave ship were easier than his life in modern Riyadh in a post-slavery era. He even castigates the royal emancipation decree that led to adverse and unfavorable consequences: “That was not emancipation. What freedom would I enjoy after my whole life had gone by without a career, or a wife and children to keep me company in my loneliness and isolation?” (Al-Muhaimeed 112), he asks Turad.

In *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an Ex-Slave* (1845), Frederick Douglass portrays the victory of his own humanity over the inhuman conditions of the slave society. On the contrary, Tawfiq’s slave narrative in *Wolves* undermines this assumption, which signifies that freedom is opposed to slavery. Instead of struggling to obtain his liberty, Tawfiq ironically longs for the days of slavery after his emancipation. Unable to find a job or a decent income in a tribal society that despises strangers, Tawfiq fails to claim the ownership of his freed self. The sense of salvation is attainable only after recovering the self that has been lost in slavery. Encountering the catastrophic circumstances at present, Tawfiq skeptically longs for the chains of slavery.

Additionally, in some novels negotiating slavery or post-slavery motifs such as *Native Son*, *Beloved* and *Sula*, the process of recovering the self is an act of self-possession often reached through murder or rebellion, resulting into the creation of identity and self-assertion. In the oppressive and tyrannical societies of the Arabian Peninsula, where free citizens are governed by fire and sword, there is no place for slaves or ex-slaves to express themselves and construct their lost identities. Therefore, Tawfiq is compelled to live on the margins of a hostile society that categorically annihilated his humanity. His journey from slavery to freedom ends nowhere, uncloaking no sense of metamorphosis in his own identity or attitude toward the self and the other. Tawfiq’s excursion in slavery and freedom is not an individual involvement but a collective experience epitomizing the communal history of slavery in the Arab world derived from the shared awareness of oppression.

In *Wolves*, the author struggles to reveal the unrevealed in order to keep the memory of slavery alive in contemporary consciousness. He also endeavors to re-historicize slavery in the Arab world. Nevertheless, history-making should not be taken as a healing process for the ex-slave narrator or the reader or the author. Instead, this method seeks to condemn a racist society that wears the mask of religiosity for decades while concealing a stagnant history of enslavement and dehumanization of other races. Exploring the dialogic of slavery and racism, the novel emerges as a serious attempt to put the authority back into the slave. Ostensibly, this approach reflects the author's concern with the historical reclamation of the forgotten memories of slavery; however, it carries risks and does not bring about an end to the status-quo in a post-slavery era.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The novel was written by Yousef Al-Muhaimeed and it will be referred to in the text as *Wolves*.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Muhaimeed's most famous novel *Fikhabkh al-Ra'eha* translated as *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* was published in 2003 and banned in Saudi Arabia in the same year. The author had to publish it outside the Arab world in 2006, then it appeared in English translation in 2007. It has also been translated into other languages such as Italian, Spanish, and German.

<sup>3</sup> During the slave era in Arabian Peninsula, peculiar male and female Arabic names were given to slaves to distinguish them from local tribal folks with similar black skin.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Mohaimeed suffered from the censorship of his fiction because it deals with taboo motifs prohibited in his country.

<sup>5</sup> Names of all geographical locations in Sudan including sea-ports, cities, districts such as al-Bitana, Kurdufan, Bahr al-Ghazal, Bantio and al-Fasher etc., mentioned in the novel are genuine.

<sup>6</sup> All events in the novel associated with slavery in Arabia reflect reality including the issuing of the royal decree to abolish slavery in the late sixties.

<sup>7</sup> Historically, slave-smuggling activities reached their zenith during the Hajj season.

<sup>8</sup> According to documented archives, slave narratives were composed by both famous African American ex-slaves like Olaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs as well as other, less famous Muslim African slaves such as Abu-bakr Al-Siddique and Prince Abdulrahman, who fell from wealth and power to poverty, humiliation, and slavery. Validating Muslim slave narratives, Allan Austin mentions that more than 30,000 Muslim slaves were shipped to the American South. Further, John Blassingame also writes about those he calls the "Mohammedan slaves" who prayed to "Allah" as a way to protest against slavery, attempting to retain their link with their past. Major narratives by Muslim slave writers such Omar ibn Said and Ayyub Ibn Suleiman /Job Ben Solomon were considered as an extension to the African American slave narrative tradition.

<sup>9</sup> The relationship between the Muslim slave narrators and their masters was characterized by mutual respect. For instance, the events comprising the slave narrative of Abu-bakr Al-Siddique were initiated in Jamaica when the Irish abolitionist, Richard Madden, reveals admiration for a slave from an African origin (called Abu-bakr) who was an educated person and a man of "exalted rank in his own country" (cited in Austin 534). Thanks to Mad-

den, who bought Abu-bakr from his master in Kingston, Jamaica, the African slave was emancipated in 1834. Another African slave, Prince Abdulrahman, basically from Liberia, was used as a laborer in the plantations of the American South. Then he was liberated and sent back to his home country as a missionary to preach Christianity after reaching an agreement with the American Colonization Society. Ayyub/Job was also enslaved in 1730, then was emancipated and sent to England. From there he was sent back to Africa as a missionary.

<sup>10</sup> This Arabic word means the one who has been mistreated and abused.

<sup>11</sup> Her Arabic name ironically means “the Mother of Goodness”.

<sup>12</sup> Famous Arabic names attributed to male slaves in ancient Arabia.

<sup>13</sup> Names of all Sudanese tribes and clans such as the Ja’aly, the Kababish, the Ruzaiqat, the Musairiya and the Rashayda... etc., mentioned in the text are authentic.

<sup>14</sup> Two separate cloth wraps called “rida’ and izar” in Arabic. These special clothes should be worn by males during the Hajj rituals according to the Islamic doctrine.

<sup>15</sup> The hashaab is a rock hard plant from which gum is extracted in places such as Kusti and al-Qadarif in Sudan.

<sup>16</sup> Omar ibn Said was an educated slave who was also well-acquainted with the Arabic language. According to Osman and Forbes, the 1831 slave narrative of Omar ibn Said is “the earliest piece of extant Arabic writing on American soil, and the only existing autobiography of an American slave in Arabic”(Osman and Forbes 2004: 331).

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## Umestitev afroameriških suženjskih pripovednih diskurzov v romanu *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*

Ključne besede: arabska književnost / afroameriška književnost / plemenska kultura / suženjstvo / Saudova Arabija / Muhaymid, Yusuf

Ena osrednjih pripovedi v delu *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* nadarjenega saudskega romanopisca Yousefa Al-Muhaimeeda odlično predstavi poti razvoja lokalnega suženjstva, ki vključujejo diskurzivna srečanja in grozljive dogodke, ki niso bili samo izpuščeni iz kronik hišnega suženjstva in javnih arhivov, ampak potlačeni tudi v osebnem spominu. Avtor je z vključitvijo realističnih zgodovinskih dogodkov in dokazovanjem avtentičnosti brutalnih grozodejstev, ki so jih zagrešili lovci na sužnje in trgovci s sužnji v Sudanu in na Arabskem polotoku, stopil na področje, ki je v lokalni plemenski kulturi prepovedano, zaradi česar je bil njegov izredni roman prepovedan in cenzuriran. Članek kritično analizira roman *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*, pri čemer se osredotoča na podrejeni glas suženjskega pripovedovalca ter osvetluje zapleteno stičišče suženjstva in svobode,

na katerem sloni celotna pripoved. Poleg tega preučuje pisateljev poskus rekonstrukcije tematskih in estetskih motivov, skritih v afroameriških suženjskih pripovedih – pri čemer gre za prvi tovrstni poskus v avtohtonih književnih tradicijah –, z namenom izpostaviti nova območja pripovedi o suženjstvu, ki se jih sodobni zahodni zgodovinski romani o suženjstvu še niso dotaknili.

Oktober 2015