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# بحوث قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها

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## Oriental or universal? The Arab character in Laurie Devine's *Nile and Saudi*

شرقي أم عالمي: الشخصية العربية في روايتي "نيل" و"سعودي" للكاتبة لوري ديفين

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### المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة تصوير الشخصيات العربية في روايتي *نيل* و*السعودي* للكاتبة لوري ديفين، وتحلل ما إذا كانت تُقدّم من خلال عدسة استشراقية أم بتعقيد إنساني عالمي. كما تكشف كيف تعزز روايات ديفين الصور النمطية الغربية، مما يؤثر على تصورات العالم العربي. من خلال قصص الحب بين الشخصيات العربية والغربية، تسلط الروايات الضوء على الانقسامات الثقافية، مما يعزز في النهاية ثنائية الشرق والغرب. يتم تصوير الأراضي العربية على أنها متخلفة وحسية، بينما يُنظر إلى الغرب على أنه عقلائي ومتقدم. تكشف العناوين، وصور الغلاف، والموضوعات مثل القدر والشرف عن تحيزات نيواستعمارية. ويخلص البحث إلى أن أعمال ديفين تدعم تفوق الغرب بشكل غير مباشر مع الإيحاء بفهم زائف للثقافة العربية.

### Key Words:

**Orientalism – Arab characters – Laurie Devine – Nile – Saudi – Stereotypes – East-West binary – Neocolonialism – Western superiority – Identity – Fatalism**

### Abstract

This study examines the portrayal of Arab characters in Laurie Devine's *Nile* and *Saudi*, analyzing whether they are depicted through an orientalist lens or with universal complexity. It explores how Devine's narratives reinforce Western stereotypes, shaping perceptions of the Arab world. Through love stories between Arab and Western protagonists, the novels highlight cultural divides,

ultimately reinforcing an East–West binary. The settings contrast Arab lands as backward and sensual with the West as rational and progressive. Titles, cover imagery, and themes like fatalism and honor further expose neocolonial biases. The study concludes that Devine’s works subtly uphold Western superiority while presenting an illusion of cultural understanding.

## **Introduction**

This study critically interrogates the representation of Arab identity in Laurie Devine’s novels *Nile* and *Saudi*, engaging with the broader discourse of postcolonial and neocolonial literary criticism. It examines the extent to which Devine’s characterization perpetuates orientalist paradigms and reinforces Western ideological constructs of the Arab world. By analyzing the thematic, structural, and narrative techniques employed in these texts, the study seeks to uncover the implicit biases embedded within Devine’s portrayal of Arab protagonists. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks advanced by Edward Said and other postcolonial scholars, this analysis situates Devine’s work within a lineage of Western literary productions that have historically positioned the Arab as the exoticized ‘Other.’ Through an exploration of character development, setting, and thematic concerns such as identity, fatalism, and cultural binaries, the study demonstrates how Devine’s novels subtly perpetuate neocolonial narratives. Ultimately, this investigation contributes to the ongoing scholarly discourse on the intersection of literature, ideology, and the politics of representation in Western narratives about the Arab world.

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## Objectives of the Study

This study aims to:

1. Critically analyze the representation of Arab identity in Laurie Devine's *Nile* and *Saudi* within the framework of postcolonial and neocolonial literary criticism.
2. Investigate how Devine's characterization reinforces orientalist paradigms and Western ideological constructs of the Arab world.
3. Examine the thematic, structural, and narrative techniques employed in these novels to uncover implicit biases in their portrayal of Arab protagonists.
4. Situate Devine's work within the broader historical context of Western literary representations of the Arab world.
5. Explore the role of setting, character development, and thematic concerns such as identity, fatalism, and cultural binaries in shaping the novels' depiction of Arab society.
6. Contribute to the ongoing scholarly discourse on literature, ideology, and the politics of representation in Western narratives about Arabs.

## Orientalist Narratives and Neo-Colonial Discourse

The current study tries likewise to unmask the ways Devine used to establish a stereotyped image of Arabs and the Arab world in the subconscious of the Western reader or at least reassure the previous image established by orientalists and other Western writers. In this

respect Marwan M. Obeidat indicates that “the nineteenth – century American development of an idea of the Muslim East has continuities and reiterations even into the recent past as reflected in such books as... Laurie Devine's *The Nile* (1983)” (5). The purpose of this investigation is to expose the factors that contributed to the state of animosity and prejudiced atmosphere against Arabs in the Western societies and the American society in particular because “European misconceptions of Islam and the Muslims were certainly at the root of the early American misconception, so the problem was partly fragmentary sources and faulty knowledge, but the root cause was the deeply established Occidental preconception.” (Obeidat 127).

No doubt that literature as a main component of culture has a profound impact on the collective thinking of people. The novel as an important genre of literature plays an important role as Kathleen Christison highlights “Novels in particular flesh-out and crystallize the media's general impressions by giving them substance. The impact of novels is greater both because they are geared to the widest possible audience and because they are dramatic presentations--they tell stories that hold one's interest.” (398). Therefore, a thorough examination of writings like Devine's should help understand and refute the Western neo-colonial discourse laying between the lines of these novels. The neo-colonial as well as colonial discourses and their umbrella term colonialism almost share the same aims, most important of all is the colonizer's endeavor for complete dominance over the colonized nations. One of the means of dominance practiced by imperial/colonial powers is to silence the voice of the original peoples by defacing their culture

and language and emphasizing the superiority of the Western culture vs the inferiority of the Eastern one. The current study discusses the possibilities of disguised colonial and neocolonial attitudes in Devine's two pivotal works *Nile* and *Saudi*. In discussing that, the essential elements of the novels such as: title, plot, setting, themes, technique, and characters are analyzed from a postcolonial point of view.

Laurie Devine is an American writer, and journalist born in 1946. She holds a M.A. in theology from the University of San Francisco, a B.A. in journalism and B.A. in political science. This combination of theology, political science and journalism shows itself clearly in Devine's works. She mixes history, politics and religion and most of her novels are heavily loaded with historical and political events, especially in the Middle East.

Devine wrote two extensive novels about Arabs. The setting of these novels is mostly located in the Arab region. *Nile* was published in 1982. It is Devine's first novel. Rasha Al-Disuqi claims that "*Nile* is said to be the product of a woman writer who spent a year and a half on a visit to Upper Egypt- Luxor and Aswan- starting 1979." (173). The events of the novel are located between Egypt and occupied Palestine which Devine refers to as Israel in some chapters and chapter titles. The novel's timeline spans from 1945 to about 1980. It takes the historical events of that era as the background of a love story that occurs between a Nubian-Upper Egyptian (Saidi) Muslim girl (Mona) and a Jewish Italian boy who was born and raised in Alexandria (Youssef). Devine speaks of the circumstances of writing *Nile* saying that: "In 1979 I took a two-

week holiday in Egypt, sailing down the Nile in a small primitive boat, camping out at night on islands in the river. I fell in love with Egypt and simply *had* to return to write about these people and this place.” (Devine, *Nile* 477). Later in 2024, Devine describes how she remembers writing *Nile* while residing in Egypt she says; “I could recall sitting at my lightweight little typewriter on *my* tiny Cairo balcony, choosing each word in every sentence” (Devine, “Critically reading...myself”).

The second novel Devine wrote is *Saudi* published in 1985. The setting is located mainly between Saudi Arabia and the United States of America. She says about the origin of *Saudi*: “I wanted to capture the emotional reality of living in that other world—to show not only the point of view of Americans living in Saudi Arabia but of Saudis living in America and the West—of people caught in the contradictions between the two worlds.” (Devine, *Saudi* 467).

Devin claims that the purpose of writing *Saudi* is to show the reality of both worlds from the point of view of the two sides but in her words, she admits two colonial facts. The first is the expression “that other world.” Otherness is an especially important concept in the colonial discourse where the colonial power defines itself by identifying the colonized as the other creating a binary opposition where the two sides are not equal. Therefore, in this context, Devine creates a binary where the other, in this case the East represented by Saudi Arabia, is inferior, exotic, and sometimes repulsive. The second colonial fact is the concept of contradictions between the East and the West. The colonizer always concerns himself with the contradictions not the common grounds that he

might find. The East is irrational and backward thus the West is rational, and advanced and superior. The two colonial ideas of otherness and contradictions are very close to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and the Orientalist discourse. Said confirms that "Orientalism is never far from (what is called) the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying "us" Europeans as against all "those" non-Europeans." (7). Therefore, to show the contradictions of the other world as Devine mentions is to indicate "the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures.," and "European superiority over Oriental backwardness" in particular (7).

Devine uses love stories as the main plot to connect between two different worlds and cultures in *Saudi* as well as in *Nile*. In *Saudi*, the love between (Sunny Shannon) the American young girl and (Rashid Al-Murrah) the Saudi young man is the main plot that shows the potentials of bringing together East and West in one relation. In *Nile*, the love story that occurs between a Nubian-Upper Egyptian (Saidi) Muslim girl (Mona) and a Jewish Italian boy who was born and raised in Alexandria (Youssef) is also meant to bring the East and West in one context. Whereas it seems romantic and of a noble purpose to bring two separate worlds close; the two love stories proof unsuccessful at the end. The result of both love stories is a failure to close the gap or even to make it narrower. In *Nile*, love cannot reconcile Youssef and Mona or in other words it cannot reconcile the West and the East.

Devine unequivocally asserts that powerful as it could be love cannot bring the two worlds even close because what the two



worlds carry for each other is death, hatred, and fear. These feelings are piled throughout a history full of wars, treachery, prejudice, and persecution so they are far more powerful than youth love and romanticism.

In *Saudi*, Sunny returns back to Saudi Arabia with Rashid, but she has her doubts, and she is not sure if their life is going to continue. She even wears the Saudi mask and cloak abiding by Saudi traditions of women clothing not because she is convinced but because she is obliged to do so. She hopes for a life of comfort and mutual understanding not for love.

The renewed relation between Sunny and Rashid in a way symbolizes the new relation between Saudi Arabia and the United States. In the past, the relation was established upon arrogance and the feeling of entitlement of the United States to the Saudi oil.

Saudi was the country everyone loved to hate. The West hated Saudi for quadrupling the price of oil and triggering the panic of the energy crisis and fueling an international financial recession. What we should do with those filthy Saudis, Americans sometimes told Sunny after they had a few drinks, is either bomb the place off the map or land the Marines and take back "our" oil fields (Devine, *Saudi* 12).

The Americans understood Saudis' pride in their lands and traditions as arrogance, they "despised Saudi for its arrogance" moreover they were not able to militarily subject Saudi Arabia in order to usurp their oil wealth therefore, they developed hatred and resentment they "ridiculed Saudi for its ignorance." (Devine, *Saudi* 12) and they tried to find other ways and create new relations with

Saudis built upon mutual benefit and understanding. Sunny and Rashid's remarriage is a symbol of this new relation between the East (Saudi) and the West (USA).

The relationship between Saudi and the West was also established upon infatuation with the Arab and romanticizing Saudi Arabia as a place of adventure, sensations, aromatic smells of spices, sounds of camels and dry weather. At the beginning, it was only a place of sensual pleasures, primitive life and exotic savagery. But after the discovery of oil the relation between Saudi Arabia and the West turned into an incredibly important economic relation of mutual benefit. "Saudi shore where he believed the biggest jackpot on earth was hidden. The rich oil fields of America were shallow puddles compared with the deep black vicious seas of oil that lay under the Middle East" (Devine *Saudi* 25). In a way the inconstant relationship between Sunny and Rashid resembles the variables in the relationship between Saudi Arabia, representing the East, and The United States, representing the West.

The beginning of that relation was established upon an infatuation from Sunny towards Rashid, an infatuation of all what is Eastern, of all what is exotic and Saudi about Rashid. However, Sunny realizes her false approach in loving Rashid and realizes the challenges of this relation, she discovers the other side of the East which she cannot adapt to for example she was shocked and trembled at the first time Rashid asked her to wear the Saudi veil and mask. After many years, she finds out that it is better to build this relation upon mutual understanding and sacrifice rather than upon infatuation and romantic love. "It was possible she [Sunny] could learn to treasure the new ambiguities of their loving as proof

of their own new maturity and mutuality and interdependency.” (Devine, *Saudi* 463).

The result of both love stories is not only a failure to close the gap or even to make it narrower, but the result is also disastrous. The children of both couples are dead by the end of the two novels. Ali, the son of Mona and Youssef dies in Jerusalem during a resistance action against Israelis. Khaled, the son of Rashid and Sunny becomes a fanatic and is executed. In the two novels Devine implies that the offspring of such relations is destined to death representing the destiny of the relation between the East and the West if established upon love and equality not upon hierarchy of power where the West is on top of this hierarchy. Devine suggests that both children became fanatics as though the result of a relation built upon love is corrupt and unnatural.

Devine uses love which is one of the highest and purest human relations as the main plot to highlight the differences between two diverse worlds living together in the two novels *Nile* and *Saudi*. She could have used other relations such as economic or political struggle, but she preferred to use love mainly for three main reasons, two of them are obvious and the third has a hidden agenda. The first is that love, and love stories are attractive factors for the readers. The second is that love is void of interest, is full of mercy, and human compassion. Love also includes sacrifice, patience, and forgiveness, all of which themes are traceable in the two novels. Still, the third hidden reason is that Devine is able to conceal her colonial attitude underneath the exciting and adventurous aspects of love stories. In *Nile*, these aspects appeared clearly in the relation between Mona and Youssef who are of two contrasting

backgrounds though their love lasted for more than twenty years. Their love was tested first by familial and social opposition then by separation and distance.

In *Saudi*, love between Sunny and Rashid is tested by the wide gap and contradictions between their cultures and also by separation and distance. The variance in the backgrounds of the protagonists in the two novels allows Devine to highlight the aspects of Eastern and Western cultures. Devine uses the differences between the protagonists in religion, culture and social status to construct juxtapositions and binary opposition between East and West that will be discussed extensively later in this study. In addition to love, history is used as a backdrop of the events of the two novels. The time span of the two novels allows Devine to investigate thoroughly the history of the two countries Egypt and Saudi Arabia. In her investigation she explores crucial and critical moments in the history of both countries from the point of view of a Westerner.

“The Western representation of Muslims and Arabs is not a recent fabrication, but it had been operational and deep-rooted in the West conceptualization ever since the first contacts with Arabs and Muslims.” (Ridouani 1). Therefore, studying thoroughly the two novels reveals Devine’s Western neocolonial attitude towards the portrayal of the Arab character. Though disguised, her attitude is palpable in the several aspects of the novel such as the title, the setting, the character construction, the narrative technique, the use of language, symbolism, and themes. There are also several aspects of colonialism and neocolonialism that are apparent throughout the two novels such as stereotyping and generalizations, fabrications and

falsifications of the Islamic and Arab cultures and societies, the use of juxtaposition and binarism in the description of the relation between the East and the West. Each of the previously mentioned points is discussed in detail in the current study.

Victoria Louise Gibbons indicates that “Titles do not, however, only name. Those who study the title in its modern context dedicate much time to the question of its functions... the title also fulfils descriptive, connotative and temptation roles. The word title also evokes a complex of expectations, assumptions and ideals” (2). Gibbons here highlights the importance of the title not only as an address that provides a description for a literary text, but also as a functional element that carries expectations, connotations and sometimes temptation or an attraction element for the reader. The titles of the two novels *Nile* and *Saudi* are the practical application of Gibbons concept of the title. They are particularly important because they are of immense significance to the reader and to Laurie Devine the writer. If we imagined a common American reader who is searching for a novel to read during a weekend, and he encounters the title of the novel *Nile* immediately he will retrieve all the stereotypical images corresponding to Egypt in his subconscious, the image of the river Nile, the pyramids of Giza, tents, camels, palm trees, feluccas etc. As well, the title of the novel, *Saudi* is of the same effect it conjures almost the same set of stereotypical images about the Middle East. In *Saudi* the reader imagines the desert, horses, camels, tents, veiled women. Therefore, Devine’s choice of titles for the two novels is intentional. She relies on the established stereotypical images and prejudiced ideas associated with the Middle East in the readers’

subconscious to build upon her neocolonial hidden discourse in both novels. Thence, the titles in this case tempt the reader to meet his expectations and assumptions about the Middle East. Laurie Devine is considered one of the novelists who seek to “accommodate their work in order to appeal to the reading public” (al-Rawi 150). Unfortunately, novels with negative and distorted image of Arabs and novels with the stereotype Arabian nights atmosphere receive large Western audience. “Such indirect methods of influencing the public mean that the stereotyping of Arabs regularly appears in media designed to entertain because in this context the public is more likely to accept the information “unknowingly” and “without suspicion”.” (al-Rawi 148).

The illustrations on the cover pages of the novels are of as much importance as the titles themselves. Without doubt, they add to the function of the title and enhance the same kind of expectations. The cover of *Nile* is golden reflecting the sun golden rays on the Nile water surface. At the same time a crescent appears in the sky and a golden palm tree is hugging the capitalized word *Nile*. In the background of this picture is a pyramid, some lateen sail Nile boats (Felucca), and palm trees. Indeed, a perfect stereotype image of Egypt as if imported from one of the orientalist's old books about the Middle East. In another edition of the novel the cover illustrates a night scene of the Nile, some palm trees on the shore and a dark sad moon in the sky suggesting the miseries of this land. The recent digital edition's cover of the novel illustrates a pyramid overlooking the river Nile, palm trees on the shore, felucca sailing down the river and an orange sun about to go down.

The illustration on the cover page of *Saudi* does not differ much in concept from that of *Nile*. *Saudi* has three editions, and they are the same unless for their covers. The three covers express the same notion of the orientalist image of the East. One of the covers shows a blue-eyed masked woman in a black veil (suggesting that the woman is Sunny Shannon the American protagonist) and in the middle of the cover almost on the masked forehead of Sunny is a horse with an Arab knight, the shadow of a petroleum refining tower and the title *Saudi* in thick italics. The petroleum refining tower is suggestive of the importance of the Saudi oil as a motivator of events in the Middle East. The second cover does not go far from the same concept. It pictures a desert with some dunes and palm trees in the background, moreover in the middle of the cover a big tent with some camels standing next to it. The title *Saudi* is in white letters styled almost like white Bedouin galabia. The third cover is very similar to the second one except that it does not feature camels, and the dunes are in blazing orange color moreover the title Saudi is in black Andalusian style letters making the cover look more like a cover of one thousand- and one-night book. No doubt that the two covers are symbolic and suggestive. In effect, they function as motivational elements for the reader to expect an exotic experiment in the deserts of the Middle East both on tangible and moral levels.

The cover page illustrations along with the title produce the perfect fantasy for a Western reader about the Middle East in general and about Egypt and Saudi Arabia in particular. Orientalists established a stereotypical image about the East that helped marginalizing, dehumanizing, and demonizing the East in general

and the Arab region in particular. On the physical level, it is conveyed as a sensuous place that women are either promiscuous belly dancers or totally veiled and beaten up by bearded men who are married to more than one woman. People of that region live in utter poverty in tents or muddy houses and dirty streets. On the moral level they are ignorant, greedy, sensual, and at the same time religious fanatics.

In that manner Devine prepares the reader to expect a typical experience of Egypt and Saudi Arabia both on the physical and moral levels. On the tangible level Devine meets the reader's expectation describing streets full of dirt and noise, old muddy houses, oozing poverty. For instance, in the very first page of *Nile* Devine describes the house of the protagonist's (Mona) family as a black miserable and dusty place.

The setting of *Nile* starts in Kom Ombo, Aswan in the first chapter. Devine succeeds in depicting a hatful and negative view of the Nubian culture through her portrayal of a Nubian village detailing the decadence of the houses and the ignorance and harshness of the people living there. In one of her descriptions of a path near the Nile River in the Nubian village she charges the scene with as stereotypical images of squalor and filth of a Middle Eastern village as she can.

Under the stark silhouette of date palms, a line of women balanced water jugs gracefully on their heads. Heavily weighted with the three fat wives of a merchant, a felucca tacked ... Skimming the crest of the water were watermelon rinds. Discarded cartons, and near the shore rivulets of human feces ... But the shallows up and down the banks



were bunched with workers oblivious to the debris. Boys washed down a camel. Girls rinsed glasses and pots. Women spread laundry on rocks (Devine, *Nile* 26).

While it is well known that walls of Nubian villages are vibrant with colors, houses are neat and clean, women draw artful drawings with henna on their hands, men wear white galabias, and streets are simple yet clean. In her description of the Nubian village, Devine ignores the previous facts and always concentrates on negative dark aspects of the village. She uses unfavorable characteristics to portray everything in the village, she uses adjectives such as “hateful, dark” and the colors around the village are all darkish and shabby as if life itself is black and brown, there is no room for colors as though poor people cannot afford colors in their lives. The people of the village are described as primitive and rough living always in sadness “how could they laugh, when inside there was so much deep sadness and so many broken dreams” she affirms (Devine, *Nile* 22). Even when she depicts people laughing, she resembles them to dogs “they bark like dogs when they are happy” (Devine, *Nile* 23).

Devine portrays all villages and poor neighborhoods all over Egypt in the same way as dirty, poor, full of diseases and death as in Kom Ombo, Aswan. Karnak, Luxor also is a poor and ill place according to Devine “It was very dirty, far dirtier than Mona remembered Kom Ombo. Donkey dung lay in piles. Dusty chickens clucked sleepily. Somewhere acrid garbage was burning. Crooked little house leaning to the left behind a mudbrick wall.” (Devine, *Nile* 79) and “premature death all that waited for Mona in Karnak.” (42). Houses are hovels, toilets are holes in the ground, beds are sleep mats made of date palms and or infested with lice and

fleas. Such horrible images are engraved in the Western reader's imagination about the East and are listed in his reasons for seeing the people who live in such places as ignorant, savage and uncivilized consequently they are in urgent requirement for a civilized and well-educated Western savior. In spite of the fact that Nubia and the Nubian setting has been used only once in the novel in chapter one in *Nile*, Devine leaves the reader with a generally negative, ugly impression about Aswan and about Nubian people.

Far from Aswan and from upper Egypt into Alexandria's alleys of Karmuz (a poor neighborhood in Alexandria) Devine captures the poverty, dirtiness, shabby houses, and narrowness of the alleys, she pictures Youssef the main character in *Nile* walking down the alley, he "kept his eyes on where the boy's leathering bare feet slapped ahead in the dirt. Youssef tried to concentrate on side stepping the stray bits of barbed wire and the wobbling pyramids of broken glass and the garbage." (Devine, *Nile* 323). We notice that she concentrates the eye of the reader only on the bare feet of the boy representing the poverty of people and the pyramids of broken glass and garbage representing the lack of hygiene in these slums. She also adds the element of danger that might surround strangers in such places. When Youssef the upper-class young man walks the streets down Karmuz he senses himself in danger "as if pretending to be invisible would make him so, he did not look up at those fierce men he sensed lurking in every doorway" (323). In order to establish the picture of poor Egyptian neighborhoods and villages in the readers mind whether it was in Upper Egypt or in Alexandria, the Delta and Cairo she says

He at first tried to make himself believe that Karmuz wasn't so different from the *baladi* neighborhoods. Karmuz wasn't any dirtier. The peeling paint on the sagging buildings, the rusty metal checks on the rooftops, the clotheslines of soiled laundry, weren't anymore grim. Baladi Cairo, too, had smelled of urine and sheep dung and cooking oil fried too many times. Black-shrouded women, at his approach, pulled the course shawls around their brown faces. Swarms of small boys, as always, begged for baksheesh. (Devine, *Nile* 323-324).

It is clear that Devine intentionally follows a colonial discourse by distorting the image of Egypt specially the slums and villages where poor and ordinary Egyptians live. She calls the people who live in villages *fellahs* and those who live in poor neighborhoods or ordinary ones *baladi* people. The two epithets are very often used throughout the novel to express negative connotations. She emphasizes this image through picturing three different places all over Egypt from north to south (Kom Ombo, Karnak, Anfoshi, Minet el-Bassal, Karmouz, Imbaba) in almost the same vulgar repulsive portrait of places and of people.

As a means to manifest the contrast between the East and the West Devine follows a subtle strategy navigating the setting of *Nile* between the poor villages, the slums of Egypt and the rich, high-class villas of Alexandria. Through this navigation she creates a conscious colonial binary opposition. On one side of the binary stands poor places and villages of Egypt representing the East. On this side the reader can imagine the worst qualities of the Third World as described previously.

On the other side stands the whole neighborhood of villa al-Masri representing the West. The villa is owned by a rich Jewish Alexandrian family of Italian origin (al-Masri family) thus it does not represent Egyptians or Arabs. The villa is situated in a luxurious neighborhood which is clean and almost has no Egyptians unless servants who work inside these villas. The description of the neighborhood, the villa and the people who live there are totally unlike –almost the complete opposite of– the description of the dark, muddy, dusty Nubian village. The neighborhood is full of “graceful villas of salmon and Peach and the sun-colored stone.” (Devine, *Nile* 37). The villa is described in a very eloquent and graceful manner with words such as “stark white, sparkles of crystal, velvets” as opposed to the image of Mona's house in Aswan that is described in dark colors and mud.

The people of the villa al-Masri are also the complete opposite of the vulgar description of people in the Nubian village. Devine describes their voices before even they appear as “the murmur of well-bread foreign voices in well-versed foreign tongue” (37). The association of descriptions like “well-bread and well-versed” to the word foreign embodies the writer's prejudice towards Egyptians as compared to foreigners. Egyptians in the Nubian village were vulgar, and their voices were loud and their “zaghareit” were like howling of dogs, on the contrary to the foreigner's voices that were murmurs and well-versed foreign language.

This comparison shows the prejudice that Devine carries against Arabs. The setting always reflects the kind of people who live in it and reflects also the type of manners, ethics and traditions they live by. The characteristics of both places are set against each other, and

the reader would imagine a picture that has the two settings in contrast for later to build upon his conception about the East and how different it is from the West. This picture illustrates the colonial binary notion of “us” versus “the other”. In this manner Devine attempts to proof “the other world” (Arab World) a more distant and stranger place in every way possible.

The comparison comes to its peak when the Jewish Italian physician, Doctor Baruch, visits houses in the slums of Alexandria to help poor people and when he visits Mona in upper Egypt. He starts to contemplate the filthy place around him and wonders how it is possible that there is no decoration at all on the walls, something that he noticed in all poor houses of Egyptians.

In *Saudi* the setting is not different than in *Nile*, as it meets the reader’s tangible preconception about Saudi Arabia as well. Sand, Desert, blazing weather, flies, tents, filth, and more importantly the sense of danger around the characters are to name a few of the characteristics of the setting described by Devine. The first chapter is set in Saudi Arabia where all the colors around Sally Shannon – Sunny’s mother– are “sepia and monotones” (*Devine, Saudi* 17). Gold color arouses a new unfavorable feeling as it is the color of sand, sun and even the sky, which is supposed to be blue, here in Saudi Arabia everything is either gold, orange or yellow except for the endless sea. Moreover “danger and menace were everywhere” and “always, there were the filth and the backwardness and the suspicion of hostile Arabs who wanted the infidel Americans to stop looking for oil and go away and leave them to their medieval squalor.” (18). For these reasons, Sally would call Saudi a “cursed

land”, and Tom would think of Saudi as a hell “this hell of Saudi ... Yes, he decided, that was it. Saudi was his own private hell.” (49).

Devine portrays the Saudi setting exactly as if she was describing a scene from T. E. Lawrence’s book *Revolt in the Desert* or as an orientalist portrait of the desert, camels roaming the dunes, and of brandished swords in the moon light. But actually, underneath this image there is a very subtle message. In a very vivid image, she mixes the elements of the gothic together with the oriental and the Islamic to come up with a perfect stereotype setting of Saudi Arabia:

in the flickering light of the desert campfire it seemed that savage ghosts of the fabled tribal past, spirits of the Islamic warriors ... Were alive and dancing. It seemed that the decadent ghosts of the opulent future, the oily spirits unleashed by the subterranean steel drills, were on their feet and rehearsing new steps and dancing. It seemed that the ambivalent ghosts of the uncertain present, the ambiguous spirits of a world neither here nor there, were dazed and unsure and dancing. (*Devine, Saudi* 79).

In the previous quotation Devine brilliantly blends together the space-time setting in Saudi Arabia in one image that highlights the threads of Saudi character, where spirits of the *past* and ghosts of the *present* and *future* are all present under the crescent moon of the Arabian desert and in the presence of brown-skinned, white-robed men with their swords brandished. In this image she reminds the reader of the past of Saudi Arabia that consists of savagery of the tribal life before Islam and Islamic conquests and “Islamic warriors who had once swept out from Arabia to secure much of the world

for Allah” (79) to highlight the Eastern Arab/ Islamic identity of the Arabian Peninsula. At the same time, she gives the reader a glimpse of the future of the peninsula that depends on oil to indicate that the future carries with it a new kind of modern and civilized Western identity. Both, past and future, meet in an ambivalent, uncertain, complicated present where the Saudi character is baffled between two worlds: the East with all its Pre-Islamic savagery, tribal traditions and Islamic legacy, and the West with all its promises of civilization, prosperity and modernity.

It is worthy of mentioning that the setting in *Saudi* is related, not only to the place or the time of incidents, but also to the weather conditions. Heat is a genuine part of the setting especially in Saudi Arabia and a potent motif in the actions. For, Devine uses long detailed descriptions of the climate to highlight the contradictions between the Saudi and the American settings. In Saudi Arabia the climate is “awful, damp, disabling heat.” (*Devine, Saudi* 18). It is the cause of discomfort to American characters who are in Saudi Arabia. After all, for Sally Shannon (Sunny’s mother), for instance, heat is a source of disquieting new tendencies toward superstition, it is also a source of illness for her. Tom Shannon became “a sunburnt, weather-beaten, grizzled old man” because of the blazing climate. (174). Heat and the hot weather are very important elements of discomfort that Devine emphasizes in *Saudi* as though they define the Saudi people and make them different, in a negative way, from the Americans. “The heat of the day turned the desert into a burning hell”. (154). Almost in every each and other page in the novel Devine reminds the reader of the heat of Saudi Arabia

“Saudi’s enervating climate was all scorching heat and damp humidity.” (156).

In *Saudi* there is always a reminder of the rugged terrain, the colors of the dunes in the desert and the might of the mountains. Devine establishes a close relation between the setting and the Saudi and the American characters. The gathering of rough terrain along with the hot weather seem to sharpen the Saudi character and give it certain qualities such as a kind of cruelty, harshness, ambiguity, superstitious and introvert attitudes. The setting also affects the American characters because the Saudi lands seem alien and aggressive against strangers even if they understood its nature, still they are unable to adapt to it “none of them were at their best in this heat.” (*Devine, Saudi* 18).

Tom Shannon lived in Saudi for almost more than twenty years and still he is not able to adapt to the climate nor to the land even though he is a geologist who is supposed to understand the geology of Saudi Peninsula. Sally is also intimidated by everything around her, the heat, the land, even the people and gradually is affected by the atmosphere and becomes superstitious, “it was the maddening heat that had made her do as their Arab houseboy suggested. Just last week she had put a bluestone charm in Sunny's crib to ward off the Evil Eye.” (*Devine, Saudi* 18). Sunny also is intimidated by the heat. Inside the plane that was heading toward Saudi Arabia Sunny had felt the heat when it entered the Saudi atmosphere even before the plane landed. Therefore, Devine highlights emphatically the setting specially the element of the climate along with the terrain because they have a huge impact on the characters both Arab and Americans.



Laurie Devine uses the same contrast technique she used in *Nile* to compare the setting in *Saudi*. She moves the setting from Saudi Arabia to The United States of America and vice versa to highlight the contradictions of the two societies. As discussed earlier the Saudi setting is pictured as gloomy, unwelcoming and hostile to foreigners, for instance yellow dunes stretch across infinite deserts. Whereas the American setting is portrayed in joyful colors, hills are in the nest of green meadows and the orchards on the farm lands. In Saudi Arabia the sky is either yellow or orange as hell whilst the sky is heavenly blue in America. Her description of the mountains in America is vibrant with colors such as the white mountains of New Hampshire and the Green Mountains of Vermont.

On the other hand, the Saudi mountains are only black or brown. Houses and buildings in America are vastly ornamented and sophisticated with gardens and all the facilities that modern houses have. Whereas houses in Saudi Arabia are tents made of goat hairy skin, with no beds, only sheets on earth and there is no mention of toilets or other facilities. As discussed earlier, the setting reflects the type of people who live in it therefore the reader is left with the two pictures in mind and the rest is the work of his imagination.

This way in depicting Saudis living in tents substantiate the stereotypical image of the Bedouin Arab. This stereotype is used to dehumanize Arab and portray them as colored savages who need the help of the White civilized man to introduce them to modernity and civilization. This colonial attitude is derived from and inspired by the notion of “the White Man’s Burden”. In this notion “Colonization could be (re)presented as a virtuous and necessary ‘civilizing’ task involving education and paternalistic

nurture.” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 55). In this way, Devine describes Tom Shannon’s attachment to Saudi Arabia and the Saudi people as a sense of moral obligation. The relation between Tom (the American) and Abdullah Al-Murrah and his sons (the Saudis) symbolizes the relation between the East and the West. Tom feels the burden of guilt because he left Abdullah to die a horrible death in the sea in order to save the corps of his deceased wife Sally.

Tom feels morally obliged to nurture Abdullah’s two young boys Muhammed and Rashid therefore he adopted the paternalistic figure role in their lives. As if Devine wants to say that America has a moral obligation towards the East because she left it drown in the sea of savagery and ignorance too long and it is about time that the West saves the East and helps its people into civilization. Tom sends the boys to England and America to be educated and return to Saudi Arabia with the light of the Western education to change the darkness of the Arabian reality. However, Muhammed returns corrupt, and Rashid is unable to return to the tents of his tribe.

The same colonial, imperialist notion of the “White Man’s Burden” is also echoed in *Nile*. Baruch the Italian Jewish physician “took it upon himself to show Mona how to use a fork and to curtsy instead of kissing an elder’s hand, he had been surprised how much fun it was to watch the little girl laugh over these strange new ways of behaving.” (Devine, *Nile* 68). Baruch wants to replace the Egyptian traditions of Mona the upper Egyptian girl with Western traditions thinking that it is his duty to teach her the civilized ways of Europe and the West instead of the old obsolete Eastern traditions of her own country and people. For example, he tries to teach her French language and decorum; he even plans to make

her a nurse instead of a servant implying that service is for illiterate Egyptians while nursing is the job of educated European girls. But as in *Saudi*, the Arab are incapable of being or adopting Western values for it is more sophisticated and more liberated than the wretched souls of the Arabs who are bound by limitations of the mind and the soul. Devine Claims that Mona “knew she had more in common with the peasant women balancing baskets on their heads than she ever could with the Frenchified al-Masris” (*Devine, Nile* 71). The limitation that Devine assumes in Mona’s character in a way is due to her representation of the colonized subject.

Devine’s *Nile* and *Saudi* explore the colonial tendency to establish Western-style enclaves within Arab societies. In *Nile*, foreign communities in Egypt, particularly Jewish and European settlers, create self-contained spaces that reflect Western lifestyles, distancing themselves from the indigenous population. In *Saudi*, the American-founded Aramco compound mirrors life in the United States, insulated from Saudi society. Devine portrays these enclaves as unsustainable, suggesting that colonial structures are ultimately rejected by the land and its people. The demise of these communities underscores the historical cycle of colonial intrusion, exploitation, and eventual displacement

### **Narrative Structure and Literary Techniques**

Devine constructs her narrative using a sophisticated interplay of setting, characterization, and thematic juxtapositions. Drawing upon Seymour Chatman’s theory of narrative structure, the study highlights how Devine’s novels employ contrasting elements to reinforce colonial narratives. Her use of auxiliary texts, particularly

poetry, functions as a form of *paratextuality*, setting the ideological tone of her works. *Nile* opens with Salah Abdel Saboor's *The People in My Country*, emphasizing themes of fatalism and moral decay among Egyptians, while *Saudi* begins with Walter De La Mare's *Arabia*, evoking a romanticized yet ultimately illusory vision of the East.

### **Themes of Fatalism and Orientalist Representation**

Devine's depiction of Arab characters reinforces orientalist stereotypes, particularly regarding fatalism. In *Nile*, Egyptians are portrayed as inherently indolent, corrupt, and resigned to destiny. The repeated references to *baksheesh* (bribery) and the fatalistic phrase *Inshallah* frame the Arab character as passive and defeatist. *Saudi* extends this portrayal, suggesting that Arab fatalism is an excuse for laziness and lack of accountability. Devine presents Islam's emphasis on divine will as a cultural weakness rather than a theological tenet, reinforcing Western notions of Arab inferiority.

### **Love as a Symbol of Cultural Division**

Both novels employ romantic relationships to illustrate the insurmountable divide between East and West. In *Nile*, the affair between Mona, an Egyptian Muslim, and Youssef, a Jewish Italian, is doomed by cultural and religious constraints. Similarly, in *Saudi*, Sunny's marriage to Rashid highlights the futility of cross-cultural unions, as their ideological and societal differences render their relationship unsustainable. Devine's narrative implies that love between Arab and Western characters is an illusion, reinforcing the notion that cultural integration is unattainable.

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### Family Structures and Gender Dynamics

Devine contrasts Arab and Western familial relationships to emphasize cultural differences. In *Nile*, Um Mona embodies the archetype of the oppressive Arab mother, dictating her daughter's fate and imposing rigid moral expectations. This portrayal stands in stark contrast to the Western father-daughter relationship in *Saudi*, where Tom Shannon exhibits selfless love and concern for Sunny's well-being. Devine's depiction suggests that Western familial bonds are rooted in individual freedom and emotional support, while Arab family structures are authoritarian and oppressive.

### The Colonial Gaze and Historical Distortions

The study critically examines Devine's historical fabrications and orientalist depictions. Her portrayal of Jewish persecution in Egypt, particularly the so-called *Cairo Bloodshed* of 1947, lacks historical substantiation, exaggerating violence against Jews while omitting documented colonial atrocities. Similarly, her depiction of female circumcision in *Nile* is dramatized to evoke shock, reinforcing stereotypes of Arab barbarism. In *Saudi*, Devine perpetuates the colonial trope of the decadent Eastern ruler, portraying King Saud as weak, indulgent, and morally corrupt.

### Symbolism and Cultural Hierarchies

Devine's use of symbolism reinforces colonial binaries. In *Nile*, Mona's name represents unattainable dreams, while Youssef's name alludes to the Jewish exodus from Egypt. In *Saudi*, Sunny symbolizes Western enlightenment, while Rashid represents Eastern wisdom tempered by tradition. These symbolic constructs uphold the Western perception of cultural superiority, framing Arab identity as conflicted and regressive. Devine's meticulous use

of sensory imagery immerses the reader in a stylized Orient, reinforcing familiar Western stereotypes about the Arab world.

### **Conclusion: A Subtle Neo-Colonial Agenda**

Laurie Devine's *Nile* and *Saudi* encapsulate a complex neo-colonial vision that, while cloaked in the guise of cultural engagement, subtly reinforces Western ideological dominance. The novels' narrative architecture, thematic contrasts, and selective historical framing coalesce to construct a portrayal of the Arab world that is deeply embedded in orientalist discourse. By juxtaposing Western rationality with Eastern sensuality and fatalism, Devine reaffirms the long-standing binary of the civilized West versus the regressive East, thereby upholding a literary tradition that privileges the Western gaze.

Despite presenting themselves as explorations of Arab life and intercultural relationships, these texts often function as instruments of epistemic control, offering depictions that conform to and perpetuate stereotypical Western narratives about Arabs. The illusion of empathy and cross-cultural understanding ultimately collapses under the weight of implicit cultural hierarchies and essentialist representations.

This study calls for a critical re-evaluation of such narratives within the broader framework of literary production and reception. It advocates for a decolonizing approach to literature—one that dismantles orientalist constructs and centers authentic, self-represented Arab voices. Decolonizing literary spaces involves not only critiquing hegemonic texts but also amplifying narratives that reflect the lived realities, complexities, and subjectivities of Arab identities beyond Western projections. In doing so, literature can

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move toward a more equitable and inclusive discourse that resists cultural appropriation and epistemological dominance.

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