
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Posthuman Dystopia: Algorithmic Control and the Erosion of Memory in Saudi Science Fiction, a Case Study of Al-Otaibi's *Today's Shelf*

Fatima Ali Al-Khamisi

Department of English Language & Literature, College of Languages & Humanities, Qassim University, Burayda, 51452, Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author: Fatima Ali Al-Khamisi, E-mail: F.Alkhamisi@qu.edu.sa

| ABSTRACT

This study examines posthumanism in modern Saudi fiction, focusing on Najwa Al-Otaibi's novel *Raf al-Yawm (Shelf of Today)* (2022). It looks at how the novel represents the effects of technology on human identity, memory, social relationships, and ethical responsibilities in a near-future dystopian world. A qualitative approach is used, blending close reading with recent literature on Saudi and Arabic fiction. The research identifies key posthuman themes in the novel, such as the decline of personal memory, algorithmic control of behavior, commodification of emotions, and the weakening of individual agency. The findings show that the novel portrays a complex posthuman dystopia where human experience is closely tied to artificial intelligence and digital systems, raising issues about authenticity, autonomy, and morality. Furthermore, the narrative illustrates how Saudi fiction interacts with global posthuman issues while reflecting specific cultural views on social norms, ethics, and the links between humans and machines. The study concludes that *Raf al-Yawm* highlights the transformative effects of technology on human life and situates Saudi literature in broader conversations about identity, ethics, and governance related to technology. This research adds to the growing field that investigates post humanist themes in Arabic literature, shedding light on how modern writers respond to the social and ethical challenges brought on by rapid technological changes.

| KEYWORDS

Algorithmic Control, Post Human Dystopia, Saudi Arabian Science Fiction, *Shelf of Today (Raf al-Yawm)*

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1. Introduction

Rapid advancements in artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and digital media have altered how societies perceive human identity and agency. In literary studies, these changes are explored through posthumanism, a framework that challenges the traditional view of humans as independent, stable, and separate from technology or ecology (Braidotti, 2013; Hayles, 1999; Haraway, 2016). Posthuman theory emphasizes the connection between humans and nonhuman agents, exploring how technology impacts the body, awareness, and ethical responsibility.

In Arabic literature, the study of posthumanism is still emerging. Egyptian productions are a major focus when considering artificial intelligence and its impact on Arab drama. Examples of how artificial intelligence themes are influencing Arab dramatic narratives include the television series *The End* (2020) and *A Robot is in our House* (2021) and the August 2021 release of the film *Mousa* (Salah, 2021, pp. 32–33).

While scholars have pointed out themes of social reform, urbanization, and surveillance in modern Saudi novels (Alshammari, 2017), few studies have examined how speculative Saudi fiction directly addresses artificial intelligence and technology-driven identities. Most regional critiques focus on sociological perspectives or postmodern fragmentation (Guth, 2019; Albalawi, 2022) instead of connecting these narratives to global discussions on posthuman identity. This represents a gap in research; there is a shortage of scholarship applying posthuman theory to contemporary Saudi narratives, especially those that address futuristic or dystopian themes.

Najwa Al-Otaibi's *Raf al-Yawm (Shelf of Today, 2022)* exemplifies this new literary trend. The novel explores personal relationships influenced by artificial intelligence, questioning whether love, trust, and moral responsibility can survive in a world where personal experiences are commodified (Almehaidly, 2024; Al-Quds al-Arabi, 2022; Riyadh Review Board, 2024). While initial reviews recognize its dystopian and poetic elements, no in-depth academic study has positioned the novel within posthumanism or analyzed its contribution to Saudi speculative literature.

The study aims to introduce posthumanism as a valuable lens for examining contemporary Saudi fiction; to analyze how *Raf al-Yawm* depicts human-machine connections, intimacy, and ethical responsibilities; to address the research gap by situating Saudi speculative fiction in the context of global posthuman studies; and to evaluate how this novel adds to ongoing discussions about identity, technology, and cultural specificity in Arabic literature.

By integrating theoretical insights with detailed literary analysis, this paper underscores the significance of posthumanism for Arabic studies and illustrates how Saudi fiction engages with and critiques the technological and ethical shifts of the twenty-first century.

2. Literature Review

Posthumanism challenges the conventional notion of an autonomous, rational human by situating humanity within broader networks of technology, ecology, and nonhuman agents. Posthumanism, described by reviewers as a "dystopia," examines human relationships shaped by AI and data systems (Al-Quds al-Arabi, 2022; Riyadh Review Board, 2024). Haraway's "cyborg manifesto" (1985/2016) introduced the idea of hybrid human-machine identities that can be both liberating and dangerous, blurring the boundaries between living beings and machines. Hayles (1999) emphasized how information technologies alter our understanding of the body. Braidotti (2013) positioned the posthuman subject within the biopolitical frameworks of global capitalism. Together, these concepts portray a "distributed" self whose ability to act is closely connected to technological and material environments.

Arabic literary studies have only recently begun to explore posthumanism as a critical framework. Guth's (2019) *Arabic Literature in a Posthuman World* shows how Arab writers employ posthuman themes—like cyborgs, artificial intelligence, and hybrid identities—rooted in cultural ethics and language traditions. Rather than simply adopting Western techno-utopian visions or fears, Arabic narratives often utilize satire, allegory, and lyricism to critique modernization while retaining a distinctly human moral viewpoint.

Most English-language research on Saudi fiction has concentrated on postmodernism, urban development, and social change rather than specific posthuman issues. Alshammari (2017) addressed fragmentation and surveillance in Saudi novels, while Albalawi (2022) examined how Saudi authors are "rebranding" national fiction through speculative elements and global genres. This shift has enabled a closer examination of Saudi literature within the context of global posthuman discussions, particularly with recent works that explore artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and digital mediation.

Najwa Al-Otaibi's *Raf al-Yawm* (2022) represents a key moment in Saudi speculative fiction. Reviewers describe the book as a dystopian yet poetic tale that explores human relationships shaped by AI and data systems. Almehaidly (2024) interprets the novel as a critique of how artificial intelligence influences emotional connections and undermines personal identity.

Three posthuman themes are prominent in this novel. First, cyborg intimacy and emotion. The human-machine relationships portrayed in *Raf al-Yawm* raise questions about whether genuine love can exist when identity is modular and alterable. This ties into Haraway's (1985/2016) view of the cyborg as both a tool of oppression and a source of unexpected connection.

The second theme is commodified subjectivity. In Al-Otaibi's imagined world, emotional ties are reduced to commodities, reflecting Braidotti's (2013) critique of how neoliberalism can exploit desire and existence.

The third theme involves language that challenges the boundaries of the human. Arabic critics have noted the novel's sharp and indirect language (Al-Quds al-Arabi, 2022), which aligns with Hayles' (1999) perspective on the "posthuman condition" as a struggle for identity and meaning amid an overload of information.

Earlier Saudi novels—such as *Girls of Riyadh* (al-Sanea), *Throwing Sparks* (Abdo Khal), and *The Dove's Necklace* (Raja Alem)—were mainly analyzed for their sociopolitical commentary rather than for hybrid human-machine identities (Alshammari, 2017). Yet, these earlier works also tackled issues related to reduced personal freedom under surveillance and institutional control. In contrast, *Raf al-Yawm* emphasizes AI as a central narrative force, linking Saudi cultural discussions to global posthuman themes. Reading *Raf al-Yawm* alongside Haraway, Hayles, and Braidotti offers valuable insights into the evolution of Saudi fiction in relation to technology. Instead of seeing machines as mere tools or threats, Al-Otaibi creates a world where technology and humanity are intricately connected. The novel neither entirely rejects humanist ideals nor blindly embraces future technologies. Instead, it engages in an ethical dialogue, supporting Guth's (2019) claim that Arabic posthuman writing explores a path that resists complete dehumanization while critically assessing the costs of modernization.

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive method to explore posthumanism in contemporary Saudi fiction, with a focus on Najwa Al-Otaibi's *Raf al-Yawm (Shelf of Today, 2022)*. The methodology includes textual analysis, a critical literature review, and

contextual interpretation to investigate how the novel depicts human-machine relationships, ethical concerns, and the role of technology in social and emotional life.

3. 1. *Research Design*

The research design features a qualitative case study approach, allowing an in-depth investigation of a single text as a representative example of emerging posthuman themes in Saudi fiction. This method facilitates a thorough examination of narrative strategies, thematic content, and stylistic techniques, placing the text within broader theoretical and cultural contexts. The case study approach is particularly suitable for literary research, where textual nuance, cultural specifics, and theoretical interpretation are crucial (Yin, 2018).

3. 2. *Data Collection*

The primary data source is Najwa Al-Otaibi's novel *Raf al-Yawm* (2022). Secondary sources include scholarly works on posthumanism (e.g., Haraway, 1985/2016; Hayles, 1999; Braidotti, 2013), critiques of Saudi and Arabic literature (e.g., Guth, 2019; Albalawi, 2022; Alshammari, 2017), and reviews, interviews, and media discussions about *Raf al-Yawm* (e.g., Al-Quds al-Arabi, 2022; Riyadh Review Board, 2024; Almeahidly, 2024). Data were collected through both library and online research, including academic databases, journal archives, and trustworthy media sources.

3. 3. *Analytical Framework*

The analytical framework for this study employs a posthumanist theoretical lens based on three main approaches: first, cyborg and hybrid theory (Haraway, 1985/2016) to explore human-machine interactions; second, information and embodiment theory (Hayles, 1999) to investigate how technology affects perception, subjectivity, and emotional experiences; and third, posthuman ethics and biopolitics (Braidotti, 2013) to assess themes of commodification, agency, and moral responsibility in the text. These frameworks help pinpoint key motifs, such as cyborg intimacy, algorithmic sociality, and the commodification of desire.

3. 4. *Textual Analysis*

The analysis followed a structured, multi-step approach: first, close reading of the primary text, paying attention to narrative structure, character dynamics, and recurring themes linked to technology and human identity; second, coding and categorizing, organizing textual segments according to posthumanist themes (e.g., AI-mediated intimacy, ethical challenges, social alienation); third, contextualization, placing themes within Saudi cultural and literary contexts while referencing secondary sources; fourth, comparative analysis, connecting findings to global posthumanist literature to showcase similarities and differences in narrative treatment; fifth, interpretation, integrating insights into broader implications for Saudi literature and posthuman discussions.

3. 5. *Reliability and Validity*

To ensure thoroughness and credibility, the study cross-references interpretations with diverse sources, including scholarly critiques, reviews, and media commentary. Direct textual evidence from *Raf al-Yawm* supports claims, while theoretical alignment with established posthumanist frameworks strengthens the validity of the analytical conclusions.

3. 6. *Ethical Considerations*

This study relies on published texts and publicly available commentary, meaning no human subjects were involved. Appropriate citation practices were followed to credit all sources and avoid misrepresentation.

4. *Findings*

The discussion of *Raf al-Yawm* shows a deep engagement with posthuman dystopian themes. In this context, technology reshapes human agency, weakens memory and identity, and turns even the closest human connections into commodities. Through its aesthetic and narrative methods, the work examines the ethical and existential issues of living in a world filled with digital technology. It places these questions within Saudi literary traditions and wider global discussions about posthumanism. The depiction of "digital magic" and the resulting memory loss serve not just as a storytelling tool but also as a symbol of how fragile human identity has become in an age of algorithmic control. Altogether, these elements reveal how *Raf al-Yawm* encourages readers to face the price of technological advances and rethink what it means to be human in a rapidly changing world.

4. 1. *The Posthuman Dystopia in Raf al-Yawm*

Najwa Al-Otaibi's *Raf al-Yawm* depicts a striking posthuman dystopia where human identity, agency, and social relations are fundamentally altered by pervasive technological systems. The narrative is set in a near-future Saudi society where artificial intelligence, algorithmic surveillance, and digital infrastructures dominate daily life. This dystopian vision is both technological and existential: human experience is fragmented, mediated, and commodified, reflecting critical posthumanist concerns about the diminishing of the human subject (Braidotti, 2013; Hayles, 1999; Haraway, 2016).

4. 2. Technological Mediation and Human Agency

Al-Otaibi portrays a society where human actions, thoughts, and emotions are continuously monitored and influenced by AI. The protagonist reflects, "Even my gestures were anticipated, and my moods predicted, before I could feel them fully" (Al-Otaibi, 2022, p. 51). This quote highlights how the posthuman dystopia undermines traditional ideas of free will, suggesting that individuals exist in a feedback loop governed by intelligent systems. This depiction aligns with Hayles' (1999) assertion that in posthuman contexts, human cognition and agency become intertwined with technological infrastructures, blurring the lines between human and machine.

4. 3. Erosion of Memory and Identity

Memory and personal history are critical in Al-Otaibi's dystopia. Characters find it difficult to trust their own recollections, as past experiences are stored, altered, or even replaced by digital systems. The protagonist laments, "I no longer trusted my own mind; every memory had its digital twin, and the twin was always more accurate, or at least more convincing" (Al-Otaibi, 2022, p. 113). This manipulation of memory illustrates a posthuman concern: the human subject is no longer the primary bearer of personal experience, raising questions about authenticity, selfhood, and moral responsibility (Braidotti, 2013).

4. 4. Commodification of Human Relation

Al-Otaibi's dystopia also highlights the commercialization of emotion and intimacy. Relationships are mediated by AI platforms that control compatibility, desire, and social interactions. One character notes, "Love had become a service, rated and ranked, delivered according to the algorithms' schedule" (Al-Otaibi, 2022, p. 79). Here, human emotion is transformed into a marketable, programmable commodity, echoing broader posthumanist critiques of neoliberalism's appropriation of life and affective labor (Braidotti, 2013; Almeahaidly, 2024).

4. 5. Aesthetic and Narrative Strategies

Al-Otaibi's narrative style adds to the feel of posthuman dystopia. Fragmented, aphoristic prose reflects the instability of memory and the alienation caused by technological oversight. Critics point out that the novel's structure and language evoke both distance and closeness. This allows readers to feel the psychological and emotional effects of living in a heavily mediated environment (Al-Quds al-Arabi, 2022; Riyadh Review Board, 2024). The disjointed narrative sequences and sudden shifts emphasize the confusion typical in posthuman dystopian settings, reinforcing the themes with style.

4. 6. Ethical and Existential Implications

The posthuman dystopia in *Raf al-Yawm* goes beyond just speculative technology; it serves as a platform for deep ethical and existential questions. In this world, human accountability falls apart, personal freedom diminishes, and true authenticity is challenged as machines invade and shape our desires, actions, and memories. The protagonist's haunting statement, "I lived twice: once for myself, once for the system that watched me" (Al-Otaibi, 2022, p. 78), exposes the essence of the posthuman issue: people are no longer whole or independent. Instead, they are scattered within a network of technological surveillance and control, leading to a fragmented existence. This feeling of shared subjectivity reflects theoretical discussions within posthuman studies. Braidotti (2019) redefines subjectivity as a mixed group that includes humans, non-human agents, and the earth. This idea shifts away from traditional human superiority and shows that agency is shared and dispersed. Similarly, philosophical posthumanism questions human-centered models of agency, arguing for a variety of actants that operate within semiotic and material networks (Ferrando, 2019). From an ethical standpoint, this dispersed agency forces us to rethink responsibility in a complex technological environment, where accountability is intertwined and boundaries fade (Coeckelbergh, 2020). This connects to the idea of "posthuman convergence," where technological immersion blurs the lines between self and machine, bringing both liberating potential and authoritarian risk in late-capitalist systems (Diéguez, 2023). Moreover, Hayles' (2017) notion of the "cognitive assemblage" indicates that cognition now spreads across human and non-human actors, such as algorithms, drones, and sensor networks. This creates a complex ethical landscape where questions of authenticity and freedom become much more intricate. Together, these ideas highlight how *Raf al-Yawm* explores ethical and existential conflicts at the core of posthuman conditions, placing characters in uncertain states of dual existence that resonate with global discussions about the future of human identity.

4. 7. Position within Saudi and Global Posthuman Literature

Al-Otaibi's *Raf al-Yawm* has a notable role in both Saudi and global posthuman literature. It skillfully incorporates local culture into a wider international discussion. Unlike many Western dystopias, which often view technology as a unifying threat, *Raf al-Yawm* offers a perspective shaped by Saudi customs, language, and moral traditions. The novel explores technological control in a way that connects deeply with local social values. It raises issues of community, memory, and moral responsibility while also contributing to global conversations about AI, identity, and agency (Guth & Pepe, 2019). This dual approach shows how cultural influence plays a role: *Raf al-Yawm* reflects global posthuman anxieties and showcases Saudi literary creativity.

Recent studies highlight this interplay. Manal M. Almeahaidly (2024) looks at *Raf al-Yawm*'s narrative methods. She illustrates how AI changes human identity within a dystopian Saudi setting. The protagonist is portrayed as a "hybrid" navigating algorithm-driven governance, placing the novel at a crossroads of local and global posthuman perspectives (esiculture.com). This reveals how Saudi fiction engages with worldwide theories while preserving a distinct regional voice.

In the Global South, posthumanism is being reexamined through decolonial, ecological, and feminist views. These perspectives challenge Western-centric ideas of humanity. Works like *Re-thinking Posthumanism across the Global South* advocate for a posthuman understanding that locates humans within larger material and ecological networks. They emphasize nonhuman agency and the connections between identity, environment, and technology (peterlang.com). From this angle, *Raf al-Yawm* shows how Saudi literature can add to a broader, more inclusive global posthuman discussion.

In summary, Al-Otaibi's novel presents a complex posthuman dystopia where technology reshapes thought, memory, and feelings. It challenges conventional ideas about identity and agency. Through its fragmented storytelling, emotional distance, and ethical exploration, *Raf al-Yawm* showcases an advanced posthuman storytelling style. This enriches Saudi literary innovation and deepens global conversations about the changing interactions between humans and machines in the twenty-first century.

4. 8. Digital Magic and Memory Loss in *Raf al-Yawm*

In *Raf al-Yawm (Shelf of Today, 2022)* by Najwa Al-Otaibi, we see a near-future Saudi Arabia where technology is ever-present in life: in social interaction, emotions, and even thought processes. The novel examines the clash between technological ease and the erosion of human autonomy, focusing on themes of digital manipulation and the vulnerability of memory. Al-Otaibi's narrative shows the self as increasingly shaped by data systems, algorithmic influences, and even AI-monitored interactions. This echoes broader posthuman literature dealing with identity reconfigurations in the digital age (Hayles, 1999; Braidotti, 2013).

A key theme in the novel is algorithmic surveillance and behavior manipulation. Characters exist in spaces where their actions, preferences, and thoughts are closely tracked and recorded by widespread AI devices. Al-Otaibi (2022) illustrates this by stating: Even my sighs were listed, every passing thought noted, ordered and untangled before I knew it (Al-Otaibi, 2022, p. 45). This passage reveals a type of digital governance that penetrates both outer and inner awareness, blurring the line between personal memory and external, organized archives. Such a depiction connects to Hayles' (1999) idea that information systems structure human thought and identity, as lived experience becomes more mediated by technology.

The novel also depicts how technology replaces and disrupts memory. Memories are no longer purely personal; they become fragmented, curated, and sometimes rewritten through digital platforms designed to optimize behavior and emotional responses. This idea is highlighted when a main character thinks: "This was not the laughter of my childhood, I'd drawn a blank; the system had archived it, compressed it, and all that remained was the image that the network found relevant" (Al-Otaibi, 2022, p. 112). Memory turns into a flexible, externally controlled commodity, revealing posthumanist concerns about the diminishing of human experience in favor of machine logic (Braidotti, 2013).

Al-Otaibi further examines the ethical and emotional fallout of digital control. Characters' dependence on AI-managed memory systems creates disorientation and deep emotional distance. As the protagonist states, "I lived my life twice: once for me, once for the system watching me" (Al-Otaibi, 2022, p. 78). This dual existence highlights the alienation inherent in technology-saturated settings and echoes Haraway's (1985/2016) warning that cyborg systems can both enable and limit human agency. The novel thus frames the loss of memory as not just a cognitive concern but also an ethical challenge, questioning the cost of convenience and algorithmic governance on human identity.

Critics have noted that Al-Otaibi's handling of memory is both speculative and socially reflective. Almeahaidly (2024) points out that the novel dramatizes the tension between lived experience and networked data representation, highlighting the emotional and ethical stakes of living under constant technological oversight. Al-Quds al-Arabi (2022) remarks that the narrative's fragmented style mirrors memory's own instability, with disjointed sequences reflecting characters' reliance on digital tools to reconstruct or suppress their histories.

Together, these aspects show that Al-Otaibi's novel deeply engages with posthumanist debates about the connection between human thought and technology. By depicting memory as both a part of personal identity and a resource under digital management, the novel illustrates the fragility of human experience amid algorithmic control. It also positions Saudi speculative fiction within a worldwide discussion on technology, identity, and ethics, demonstrating how local narratives address universal fears about digital surveillance, memory loss, and autonomy.

5. Conclusion

This study has looked at Najwa Al-Otaibi's *Raf al-Yawm (Shelf of Today, 2022)* as a prime example of posthumanist themes in modern Saudi fiction. The analysis shows that the novel creates a layered posthuman dystopia where human identity, memory, and social connections are heavily influenced by AI and digital systems. Al-Otaibi's narrative explores memory loss, the commodification of human emotion, and the ethical issues that arise from technological control, illustrating how posthuman realities redefine cognition and emotional experience.

The research highlights several main conclusions. First, *Raf al-Yawm* shows how Saudi fiction engages with global posthumanist discussions while maintaining specific cultural concerns, such as ethical duties, social norms, and linguistic nuances. Second, the novel's fragmented narrative and lyrical language reflect the destabilizing effects of technological mediation on memory and identity, emphasizing the experiential aspect of posthumanism. Third, Al-Otaibi's work presents technology as both enabling and limiting human potential, supporting posthumanist critiques of agency, freedom, and moral responsibility in highly mediated societies.

This research matters because it contributes to both literary studies and posthuman studies. By applying posthumanist ideas to a contemporary Saudi novel, the study fills a gap in existing research, which has often focused on postmodernism or sociopolitical critiques rather than on technological mediation and AI-influenced identities. It shows that Saudi speculative fiction is a rich area for exploring the connection between culture, technology, and identity, providing insights into how local narratives handle global anxieties about humanity's future.

In closing, Al-Otaibi's *Raf al-Yawm* not only exemplifies a posthuman dystopia but also deepens Saudi literature's engagement with the technological and ethical challenges of the twenty-first century. The novel's complex exploration of memory, identity, and relationships under digital control highlights the importance of posthumanism for understanding contemporary literature and the broader impacts of AI and algorithmic governance on human experience.

This study highlights the need to examine modern Saudi fiction through a posthuman lens. It reveals how narratives like Najwa Al-Otaibi's *Raf al-Yawm* (Shelf of Today, 2022) critically engage with the social, ethical, and psychological impacts of technological mediation. By focusing on memory loss, the commodification of emotion, and the redefinition of human agency, this research shows that Saudi literature not only reflects global posthuman issues but also offers culturally unique viewpoints on integrating technology into everyday life.

Future research could explore several paths. Comparative studies might analyze other Saudi or Arabic speculative works to trace the rise of posthuman themes in the region. Additionally, interdisciplinary approaches that combine literary analysis with digital humanities or AI ethics could provide deeper insights into how literature anticipates and critiques the societal effects of algorithmic governance. Investigating how readers receive and interpret posthuman narratives could also reveal how these texts shape public understanding of technology, identity, and morality in contemporary culture.

By situating Saudi fiction within both regional and global posthuman discussions, future studies can illuminate the changing relationship between literature, technology, and human experience, emphasizing the relevance of literary scholarship in understanding the social and technological transformations of the twenty-first century.

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ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2824-9441>

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