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Representations of Maternal Trauma in Saeed Al-Suraihi's Al-Ruwais

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Saeed Al-Suraihi's Al-Ruwais (2013), focusing on how recurring stories of sons' drowning and loss shape representations of motherhood. It explores maternal trauma and its effects on mothers' psychological, physical, and sensory experiences, as well as the forms of resistance that emerge in response to loss. Drawing on Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric feminism, the study analyzes how mothers respond differently to the loss of their children and how that loss shapes their lives within the coastal community portrayed in the text. This perspective offers a lens for investigating how a similar experience of loss and trauma can provoke different responses. The study argues that while the mothers' tragic experiences of losing their sons to the sea are rooted in a shared trauma, their individual responses to grief vary. As the study reveals, these distinct experiences of maternal loss and suffering collectively contribute to the formation and preservation of Al-Ruwais's collective memory.

KEYWORDS

Al-Ruwais, Andrea O'Reilly, collective memory, maternal trauma, motherhood, matricentric feminism, Saeed Al-Suraihi, Saudi literature

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1. Introduction

"I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house—six fine men […] and some of them were found and some of them were not found […] They're all gone now, and there isn't anything more the sea can do to me" (Synge, 1961, pp.11, 13).

With this haunting lament, J. M. Synge's Maurya's grief still echoes through world literature. First published in 1905, Rider to the Sea stands as an iconic representation of maternal trauma, foregrounding the profound psychological and emotional aftermath of losing one's children and framing motherhood as an experience bound to grief, helplessness, and the unrelenting shadow of death. Beyond mere caregiving, representations of motherhood across world literature frequently intersect with pressing questions of gender, memory, identity, and social expectation. By exploring themes of love, sacrifice, attachment, trauma, and bereavement, literary works expose the profound fear of loss, anticipation of death, acute psychological stress, and the emotional endurance required of mothers in the wake of tragedy.

Saudi literature offers several representations of motherhood and mothers' experiences of loss and death. Some of the most relevant works include Layla Al-Juhani's Ghurfat al-Umm [The Mother's Room] (2024), Fatima Bin Rafaa's Bait Jaddi [My Grandfather's House] (2018), Malak Al-Ajili's Endama Yuthqab al-Wai [When Consciousness is Pierced] (2019), and Ameera al-Mudhai's Wa Ghabat Shams al-Hubb [And the Sun of Love Set] (2005) and Unthaa Mufakhakhah [An Explosive Woman] (2010). These works position the mother as central to suffering, memory, and the characters' transformations. They portray motherhood and how bereavement, absence, fear of loss, and anticipation of death shape mothers' lives. Saeed Al-Suraihi portrayed this maternal experience, though not the sole focus of his book Al-Ruwais (2013), as part of the collective trauma of the coastal community of old Al-Ruwais in Jeddah.

Saeed Al-Suraihi (1950–2026), born in Jeddah's Al-Ruwais district, remains one of the most influential figures in Saudi literature and criticism. Throughout his distinguished career as a critic, academic, and essayist, he profoundly shaped Saudi literary and

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cultural life. As former head of the Saudi Professional Literature Association, he became widely recognized for his provocative discussions of modernity, cultural discourse, and the intricate bonds among place, memory, and human experience. His diverse body of work spans incisive critical studies, essays, and insightful cultural biographies that chart social transformation, most notably Al-Hayah Kharij Al-Aqwas [Life Outside the Brackets] (2020) and Idiyulujiyat Al-Sahra [Ideology of the Desert] (2015). Among his most celebrated works is Al-Ruwais (2013), a poignant reflection on his birthplace that weaves together seafaring tales and collective memory to bring the historic neighborhood's heritage to life.

Although the text is multilayered, this study focuses on how Al-Ruwais portrays motherhood through recurring stories of drowning and loss in old Al-Ruwais. It examines Al-Ruwais to investigate the psychological and human aspects of motherhood, particularly how these recurring stories shape collective suffering within the community. This text was selected for its distinctive portrayal of maternal trauma in a coastal setting, allowing analysis to trace how this experience unfolds through different emotional, psychological, and social responses and to examine the varying effects these responses have on mothers. Therefore, this study argues that the recurring scenes of drowning and loss in Al-Ruwais transcend individual tragedies, revealing a prolonged experience of collective suffering that shapes the consciousness and lived experiences of mothers in the coastal community. In this context, motherhood becomes inextricably intertwined with persistent fear, vulnerability, and the ever-present threat of loss. Thus, the study employs Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric feminist theoretical framework as its main lens, which treats mothers' experiences as situations involving both suffering and responsibility, as well as their ability to cope with the circumstances around them. In this regard, this study is significant because few, if any, English-language studies have examined Al-Ruwais, especially from a feminist perspective.

2. Review of literature

This section reviews previous studies on Saeed Al-Suraihi and his literary output from diverse critical perspectives. Most of these studies examined his critical and cultural project, while others explored self-representation and autobiographical writing. They highlighted recurring themes, including cultural discourse analyses, self-representation, and the interplay among memory, space, and lived experience within broader intellectual, cultural, and social contexts that frame Al-Suraihi's writings.

Significant studies focused on Al-Suraihi's critical cultural discourse project and his analytical methodology. For instance, Almarhabi (2026a) examined how Al-Suraihi uses linguistic roots as a core mechanism to criticize cultural discourse, deconstruct implicit patterns, expose foundational cultural biases, and articulate a nuanced philosophical critique of contemporary Arab discourse. Extending this inquiry, Al-Marhabi (2026b) explored the ontology of poetic language through Al-Suraihi's engagement with poetry, narrative, and cultural critique, demonstrating how this ontologically grounded vision of language provides a unified theoretical framework spanning four decades of scholarship. Similarly, Atta (2024) examined Al-Suraihi's critical discourse, highlighting how his framework extends beyond traditional literary analysis to critique foundational cultural patterns in Arab thought. Complementing these perspectives, Al-Razhi (2024) studied Al-Suraihi's critical methodologies, exploring how Al-Suraihi employs textual thresholds as a central mechanism for cultural discourse analysis to decode underlying ideological messages, evaluate textual organization, and illuminate the interplay between textual design and reader reception.

Recent scholarship has turned to Al-Suraihi's non-traditional autobiography, Life Outside the Brackets (2020), to examine how memory, experience, and intellectual evolution shape his construction of selfhood. Scholars have highlighted how Al-Suraihi employs experimental narrative techniques to bridge intimate self-transformation and the broader complex intellectual and cultural struggles of contemporary Saudi society. Specifically, Al-Hussami (2023) investigated Al-Suraihi's biographical shifts in Life Outside Brackets, examining how the text disrupts traditional constraints of autobiographical writing by shattering linear time, dismantling the authority of reality, and subverting conventional life writing through 'autobiographical displacement.' Al-Suraihi uses this mechanism to shift his autobiography from literal life narration to a critical reinterpretation of lived reality, a reflective space to continually reframe the self. Albaqami (2021) applied a descriptive-analytical framework alongside psychological theories to reveal how Al-Suraihi weaves history, memory, poetry, and imagination to depict the struggles of the Saudi modernity generation across three stages of self-transformation: self-alienation, self-division, and collective sense, through complex autobiographical storytelling. Furthermore, Al-Qahtani (2024) examined how Al-Suraihi's narrating "I" navigates dynamics of connection, separation, and temporal dimensions within non-traditional Arabic autobiography. He demonstrated that while the narrator maintains internal cohesion and harmony with family, ancestors, and societal roots, a sharp ideological rupture occurs between the self and dogmatic factions that question his religious and national allegiance.

While existing studies have thoroughly examined Al-Suraihi's critical project, cultural discourse, and autobiographical writing, focusing on his representations of the self, identity, and the relationship between the self and place, Al-Ruwais remains underexplored, particularly its psychological dimensions and the lived experiences of women and mothers in the text. Existing studies have yet to evaluate the work through a feminist lens that focuses on maternal trauma, unresolved grief, and loss bound to the sea. To address this gap, the present study analyzes representations of loss and drowning in Al-Ruwais, examining how maternal grief and shared suffering forge a distinct collective trauma across the coastal community.

3. Methodology

This study analyzes Al-Ruwais through Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric feminist perspectives, presented in her book Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice, first published in 2016. O'Reilly is a Canadian feminist scholar known for developing a matricentric feminist perspective that places mothers' lived experiences at the center of feminist analysis. This feminist perspective focuses on mothers' experiences and their psychological and emotional struggles as distinct from the general feminist experience of women. O'Reilly argues that mainstream feminist discourse has minimized the experience of motherhood and categorized women as a single group, neglecting to explore the unique aspects of motherhood and its related care, fear, and responsibility toward children. Therefore, she notes "the category of mother is distinct from the category of woman," highlighting that motherhood is a distinct experience that imposes exceptional suffering and challenges for mothers (O'Reilly, 2021, p. 577). O'Reilly frames motherhood as a lived experience defined by deep emotional ties and a constant anxiety over children's safety, causing suffering and significant psychological strain and grief. Through this framework, Al-Ruwais is analyzed to explore how the sea and the threat of drowning shape coastal women's internal lives and grief.

This study draws on O'Reilly's three key concepts: motherhood as lived experience, maternal trauma, and maternal agency, to analyze how Al-Ruwais depicts the relationship between motherhood and recurring experiences of loss and suffering in the coastal Al-Ruwais community. Through the concept of motherhood as lived experience, O'Reilly suggests that motherhood is not limited to a social role but is also a daily experience characterized by emotional attachment and constant fear. She also links this attachment to psychological stress, grief, and fear of loss or the possibility of experiencing it, as illustrated by the concept of maternal trauma and suffering. O'Reilly further states that "many of the problems mothers face—social, economic, political, cultural, psychological, and so forth—are specific to women's role and identity as mothers," to show that motherhood involves not only responsibility and care but also the psychological tension and constant fear it creates, reflecting the risk of loss or harm (O'Reilly, 2021, p. 577). O'Reilly does not reduce motherhood to mere suffering; she also highlights how mothers attempt to respond, resist, and cope with these challenges.

Hence, O'Reilly does not portray mothers as completely submissive to psychological pressure. Instead, she shows that mothers can exercise a degree of choice and take a stand through their experience of motherhood. She examines this idea through the concept of maternal agency, which focuses on mothers' ability to maintain their voice and make their own decisions within motherhood, even in circumstances that demand sacrifice and impose fixed roles. In this context, she explains that the concept of maternal agency "draws on the idea of agency, the ability to influence one's life, to have a power to control one's life, and explores how women have agency via mothering," revealing that the mother can exert a form of power and hold onto her positions through her relationship with her children and her perspective on her circumstances as a mother (O'Reilly, 2021, p. 698). Consequently, O'Reilly associates this concept with mothers' efforts to sustain their personal positions despite the traditional roles that restrict motherhood to a conventional image and demand sacrifice. This perspective positions motherhood as encompassing both intentional action and individual choice, as well as endurance of suffering.

Grounded in O'Reilly's matricentric feminist framework, this study draws on the concepts of maternal trauma and suffering, motherhood as lived experience, and maternal agency to capture the complex psychological and emotional dimensions of motherhood. Rather than treating motherhood as an idealized image or a rigid social role, this framework focuses on the lived realities, struggles, and diverse personal experiences of mothers. By viewing motherhood as a dynamic experience shaped by emotional, relational, and contextual factors, the study offers a nuanced analysis of how maternal representation in Al-Ruwais reflects a broader pattern of collective trauma within Al-Ruwais community.

4. Analysis and discussion

Al-Suraihi's Al-Ruwais revives childhood memories of his neighborhood and the lives of its early inhabitants. As mentioned in an interview, he narrated the stories of those people who were storytellers by nature. Their stories stemmed from their experiences, most of which arose from the hardships at sea and the horrors they endured there, or from their ancestors' experiences in the desert; stories woven of land and sea (Al-Deriny, 2021, 13-14). As Tolba notes, Al-Suraihi's Al-Ruwais narrates stories of people, palm trees, houses, graves, sea and land, a city encroaching on a neighborhood, and a neighborhood timidly slipping into a city, only to return. These tales create history, and history is flavored with narrative; events that shape a civilization while erasing another (Tolba, 2013, p. 48). Set in the early twentieth century, before Saudi Arabia's unification, the narrative portrays old Al-Ruwais as an impoverished, disease-stricken coastal community dependent on fishing and seafaring. Because the sea shapes daily survival, accounts of sailors and tragic drownings recur throughout the text. Within these narratives, this study focuses on the experiences of mothers who lost sons at sea and analyzes how their trauma and suffering are represented.

The analysis traces representations of maternal suffering and the varied maternal responses to the recurring stories of losing sons to the sea in Al-Ruwais. It examines how grief unfolds differently for each character, shaped by the unique emotional and psychological weight of her tragedy. Accordingly, the analysis is structured around three distinct maternal responses identified in the text. The first response is psychological collapse and madness, in which repeated trauma precipitates a complete mental breakdown. The second response is physical suffering, in which grief manifests as exhaustion, loss of sight, and sorrow-induced bodily deterioration. The third response is resistance, which shows how motherhood endures through persistent emotional attachment and resilience, even in the depths of loss and grief. By organizing the analysis around these three paradigms, this study

demonstrates how Al-Ruwais portrays motherhood not as a monolithic experience but as a complex, multifaceted human condition forged by loss within a coastal community.

In Al-Ruwais, the sea is not merely a lifeline; it is a symbol of lingering fear, absence, and inescapable loss, binding the community in a perpetual state of waiting for sailors who may never return. Amid this collective anxiety and recurring loss, Um Awad (Awad's mother) emerges as a central figure, embodying the deep psychological toll of losing a son in Al-Ruwais. After Awad's drowning, she unravels into delusion, wandering from house to house to ask neighbors whether they know when her son will come home (Al-Suraihi, 2013, p. 13). Her refusal to accept his death triggers a psychological collapse, trapping her in an endless cycle of anticipation, waiting for his return at any moment. This denial gives way to an obsessive attachment to his memory: she presses her face against the footprints he left by the door and traces them with her fingers whenever grief overwhelms her (p. 14). After the sea claims her son, these fading marks on the earth become her only way to cling to his remaining presence.

The trauma affects Um Awad's mind, as evidenced when she begins imagining unrealistic scenarios, such as seeing Hamedah, who cannot walk, circumambulating the Kaaba in Mecca. This moment illustrates how grief distorts her perception of reality (Al-Suraihi, 2013, p. 14). Through these subtle details, Al-Ruwais captures how profound loss can trigger a mother's psychological collapse and her gradual detachment from the world around her. This representation parallels Synge's Maurya, whose life is defined by the relentless loss of her sons to the sea. This psychological impact is evident when Maurya experiences the same mental anguish, which manifests in a vision at her son's departure, in which she sees her deceased son Michael wearing fine clothes and new shoes (Synge, 1961, p. 11). Much like Um Awad, Maurya's hallucination highlights the lingering psychological burden of maternal loss and the struggle to endure perpetual absence. This is further illustrated when O'Reilly justifies, "to suffer with and for and against a child because that child is a piece of oneself," showing that the mother's bond with her son is central to her identity (O'Reilly, 2021, p. 625). Such a rupture in the bond explains how Um Awad's unhealed trauma ultimately turns into madness.

Additionally, the physical and sensory dimensions of loss are deeply embodied in the characters of Hamedah and Solouh. Al-Ruwais portrays grief not merely as an emotional burden but as a suffering that visibly harms the body and senses. Hamedah is described as sitting with a stooped posture, as if rising from prostration in prayer. When she heard the news of her only son's drowning, she collapsed into prostration, steadying her heart through prayer. But when she raised her head, she froze midway, spending the rest of her life suspended between sitting and prostrating; death had broken her back (Al-Suraihi, 2013, p. 14). This shows how grief has permanently left its mark on Hamedah's physical posture, trapping her in a state of physical brokenness. Described as caught between sitting and prostrating, her posture conveys a profound helplessness: while sitting reflects a desperate attempt to steady her heart after her son's death, she remains frozen in the trauma of that moment.

Similarly, Solouh exemplifies the sensory toll of maternal grief. Her eyesight faded after her tears dried. Epidemics of smallpox, measles, Spanish flu, and childbed fever took twelve of her sons and daughters, leaving her with only one daughter. As for her son Awad, he was struck by the evil eye; he went to the sea with his father and didn't make it to evening before he was in his grave. When he died, they brought her the good tidings that he was close to completing his memorization of the Qur'an. When that son died, she wrapped him in a silk shroud (Al-Suraihi, 2013, pp. 32-33). Al-Ruwais presents this blindness not as a medical condition but as the direct outcome of the prolonged anguish Solouh endured; the depletion of her senses illustrates grief's power to physically exhaust her body. Through Hamedah and Solouh, Al-Ruwais demonstrates how maternal suffering leaves indelible marks on both body and perception. This portrayal resonates with O'Reilly's observation that maternal experiences are inherently bound to "anxiety, physical weariness, anger, and guilt" (O'Reilly, 2021, p. 698).

Unlike other mothers, Abedah's experience shows maternal sorrow intertwined with resistance. While at sea, Abedah held her dead child close to her chest, refusing her fellow passengers' urging to cast his body into the water because there was no nearby land for burial. She steadfastly refused a fate that would abandon him to the sea and its whales, even in death. Three days had passed since his death; his limbs had turned blue, and the stench of death had begun to emanate from him. She kept him in her arms as she slept, wrapping him in the folds of her cloak, holding him tight to her chest, and carrying him when she awoke. She watched the eyes of those who tried to convince her to throw the child's corpse into the sea, including her husband. On the fourth day, an island appeared in the distance, and they steered toward it. Abedah jumped from the boat's deck, carrying her child in her arms. She dug a grave for him and kissed his forehead three times. She tried to stretch his arms at his sides; they had stiffened, but she clasped them against his chest. She laid him to rest beside a sand dune and stood to perform the funeral prayer over him. She placed a stone on his grave, bent down, kissed it three times, then returned to the boat. (Al-Suraihi, 2013, pp. 18-19). Her response reveals a deep emotional and psychological bond with her child, driven by a resolve to prevent him from being reduced to a mere corpse swallowed by the sea.

Moreover, the depiction of whales taps into the Al-Ruwais community's collective dread of the sea; thus, Abedah's defiance transcends a simple, grief-driven reaction. It becomes a deliberate act to shield her child's body from the sea's customary claim on her people. Her plight shifts when she reaches an unfamiliar island, where she digs a grave with her bare hands and performs the funeral prayer herself (Al-Suraihi, 2013, p. 19). Rather than surrendering to despair, Abedah insists on bestowing dignity and a proper burial upon her child, despite her isolation and limited knowledge of funeral rites. As Al-Suraihi described in an interview, Abedah is his grandmother, whose plight exemplifies what the people of Al-Ruwais narrated (Al-Deriny, 2021, 15). Abedah's act epitomizes Andrea O'Reilly's concept of maternal agency, which describes how mothers challenge and resist external constraints

imposed upon them (O'Reilly, 2021, p. 698). By defying the instructions of those on board, Abedah fiercely reclaims her authority as a mother to honor and protect her child on her own terms.

The analysis reveals that maternal trauma in Al-Ruwais manifests as diverse individual responses, each shaped by the mother's unique lived experience. Although the selected characters share the profound trauma of losing a child to drowning, they diverge significantly in how they respond to this loss and navigate its aftermath. In Al-Ruwais, maternal trauma is intrinsically linked to an ongoing process of grief and suffering that begins with the tragic loss of a child and continually reshapes mothers' lives. This enduring trauma extends beyond emotional distress, directly affecting their mental stability, physical health, and behavior. Consequently, this traumatic trajectory yields varied outcomes, ranging from acute psychological collapse and embodied physical suffering to forms of resistance through which mothers seek to preserve an enduring connection with their children beyond death.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals that Al-Ruwais portrays maternal trauma and grief not as an isolated experience, but as a shared phenomenon of loss that evokes varied psychological, physical, and resistant responses among mothers, thereby reflecting collective trauma. Furthermore, the narrative depicts motherhood not merely through acute bereavement but through the enduring ways mothers navigate its aftermath. As this ordeal unfolds, the characters' responses evolve from psychological distress and somatic suffering to active endurance and resistance. Thus, motherhood emerges as a dynamic condition in which loss is continually negotiated and confronted through recurring motifs such as waiting, absence, and burial. Consequently, Al-Ruwais portrays a recurring trajectory of trauma that, while following similar stages, yields distinct individual coping mechanisms. Although united by the loss of their sons, each mother develops a unique praxis for living with its consequences. Yet, this trauma does not sever maternal attachment; rather, these enduring bonds continue to shape the mothers' thoughts, actions, and identities. This underscores the significance of the text's representation: motherhood does not terminate with loss but persists as a defining framework through which these women understand their reality and respond to their lives. Ultimately, Al-Ruwais transforms individual narratives of bereavement into a collective repository of memory that mirrors the broader community's lived history.

Because the study focuses on the distinctive portrayal of maternal trauma in Al-Suraihi's Al-Ruwais, this narrowing of scope invites alternative interpretations that may vary across historical periods and literary styles. Future research could broaden this scope by comparing this text with Al-Suraihi's subsequent book, Life Outside the Brackets: A Non-autobiography of the so-called Saeed (2020), or by examining other Saudi or global fictional or autofictional works inspired by local history and collective memory, and by exploring diverse representations of maternal trauma.

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