

The Meccan Modernist: Hatem Alzahrani, Poetry, and a New Saudi Synthesis

For Saudi poet Hatem Alzahrani, overcoming dualities is essential when understanding his own work and that of other Arabs.

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Hatem Alzahrani (Courtesy of Sean Foley)

“Do you know,” the Saudi poet Hatem Alzahrani asked during a lunch in late December 2021, “how I learned about the world through the Quran?” Seating in the Riyadh cafe Acoustic was open, which would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier. Gone were the divisions separating a single male section and one for families. Classical music and large plants added to the ambiance, as did the colorful paintings adorning the gallery-like walls. Alongside paintings by Pablo Picasso were works by Saeed Gamhawi and other leading Saudi visual artists.

To answer his intriguing question, Alzahrani uniquely focused on the many stories in the Quran that define Islam but that are also found in the holy texts of Christianity and Judaism. And Alzahrani is well placed to discuss these holy stories, for, in addition to his comprehensive academic training in the fields of Arabic and Islamic studies at some of the world’s top universities, he is a *haifz*: a Muslim who has memorized the Quran

completely. Committing the Quran to memory had, remarkably, opened Alzahrani's eyes to deeper truths about his faith while educating him about the cultural, historical, and theological forces – what he calls continuities – linking himself, his faith, and his nation to the contemporary world.

Alzahrani has a unique vision as an academic and artist, blending classical and modern Arabic poetry with the ideas that he learned while studying in the United States between 2010 and 2019. During that time, he had to navigate different languages and contrasting cultures. But he also became fascinated with the ways in which individuals and communities utilized the arts: drawing continuities across cultures and history, and articulating “invented pasts” as a framework to define their identities and place in history. In analyzing this process, he has found that overcoming dualities is essential, especially when understanding his own work and that of other Arabs. Notably, the word “dual” is part of “Celebrating the Dual at Yale” his 2019 collection of poems about his experiences studying in the United States. Alzahrani explained, “I see my poetry as a site for negotiations between past and present, East and West, through cultural and literary references.”



Hatem Alzahrani headshot (Courtesy of Sean Foley)

A Southern Son of Mecca

Alzahrani's literary career began at a young age in Mecca, where he was born and raised. There, his father's unquenchable thirst for knowledge and his mother's determination that her son become an intellectual shaped his young mind. Another powerful influence on his worldview was his heritage. He is a Zahrani, one of the oldest tribes in Arabia, and frequently traveled to the tribe's ancestral lands in the southern Al-Bahah province to reconnect with his roots. Today, a frequent theme of his poetry is the Janoubi (or Southern) part of his identity, whose culture and traditions are part of the poetry and culture of the Hijaz.

As Alzahrani grew older, he memorized the Quran in Mecca's mosques, including the Haram. And he studied at the Mecca branch of Al-Falah. Jeddah's Al-Falah, the first modern school in the kingdom, opened in 1905. In Mecca, Al-Falah has educated generations of the city's most prominent families, producing leading modernist thinkers and accomplished technocrats, such as the former oil minister, Ahmed Zaki Yamani. In 2004, Alzahrani earned a Bachelor of Arts in Arabic literature and began to teach at Umm al-Qura University, another storied Meccan institution that, for decades, has educated many of the kingdom's leading Islamic and Arabic scholars. In 2009, Alzahrani earned a Master of Arts from the same university.

Alzahrani's education in Mecca has had a profound influence on his poetry, where the holy city and Quran are recurring themes. One of the earliest examples is "Nests for the Meccan Dove," which looks at development projects around Mecca through historical and spiritual lenses. A more recent example is his poem about the coronavirus pandemic, "I Need the Ordinary," which ends with the story of the first revelation of the Quran in Mecca. Yet, for Alzahrani, the most important aspect of Mecca is its spirit. The city is the place, he says, "of the last revelation that was meant to speak to all humanity – the motherland of the last word from the sky that connects earth to heaven and all humanity together." That spirit is perhaps what conditioned him to seek commonalities with others from different cultures and scriptural traditions.

أحتفل بالمشئى في ييل
حاتم الزهراني

أحتفل بالمشئى في ييل

تذكرت ذلك في ييل وهي تحرّز كلب أيها المحافظ. في ليلة شابة ارتدت شعرها الأبيض المتقصف حتى تفاعى وجه غريب الكناية. بالقرب من بيت هارولد بلومر الذي لم أوفق إليه لاني لم أتأثر بغيري من القليقين ولم أتبع خريطته لضلال القراءة. بين «المحاكاة» والفيلولوجيا، أو المتنبى وأقرانه، أو نيويورك/تفاحة الأرض والأرض، أو بين «قبر إلى أدونيس وقبر إلى أدونيس». عند صديقي اليهودي وهو يمد الخطوط الرهيفة بين محمد موسى وموسى محمد. أمام نوهيشن المستقرة قهوتها في الزجاج المبدد.

حاتم الزهراني

"قصائد حاتم الزهراني مذكرات على شكل مجازات،

تخاطب الآتي بينما تشكل نوافذ على امتداد الزمن."

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The cover of "Celebrating the Dual at Yale" (Courtesy of Sean Foley)

From Al-Mutanabbi to Modern

In 2010, Beirut's Arab Institute for Research and Publishing published "Al-ya'u ya'i" (The Letter Ya' is Mine), Alzahrani's first collection of poetry, and "Shaja'at al-'aql: dirasa fi-al-fikr al-shi'ri wa-al-nasij al-lughawi 'inda al-Mutanabbi" (The Courage of Mind: A Study in the Poetic Thought and the Linguistic Texture of al-Mutanabbi). The latter was hailed by one critic as the most "comprehensive study" of Al-Mutanabbi, a 10th-century poet widely seen as one of the most influential Arab writers of all time. Alzahrani has noted that Al-Mutanabbi is his favorite poet, and he has honored him in his own poetry. One example is his 2014 poem "Celebrating the Dual at Yale":

May your journey be filled with hope and glee

With a ticket that omits those who bade you farewell,
Because their traits in the mirrors of the clouds
And their voices ring hoarse in spaces that are empty.

With a poem rhymed in L that betrayed al-Mutanabbī
A sonnet that didn't kiss Neruda,
Some colloquial poetry
And words kissed by melody!

Both “The Courage of Mind” and the references to Al-Mutanabbī in “Celebrating the Dual at Yale” reveal the importance of classical Arab poetic tradition for Alzahrani and why he believes that it is relevant to the contemporary world. He especially values the Arab tradition’s tripartite structure for composing poems, which invites poets to imagine traveling metaphorically to new communities. This provides an opportunity to create new commonalities while still remaining true to their societies’ poetic structures and cultural traditions. For centuries, he has noted, Arab poets have creatively employed this traditional literary structure as a mechanism to address the contemporary problems of their societies. That includes those plaguing 21st-century societies: dualities and the presence of opposing worldviews in a single space.

In 2020, Alzahrani highlighted this point by editing and writing the introduction to a new bilingual (Arabic-English) version of the “Mu‘allaqat,” a collection of poems widely hailed as the finest examples from the pre-Islamic era. The book, which has a catchy name and an alliterative title, “Mu‘allaqat for Millennials,” is aimed at the world’s rising generation of young men and women.

At the same time, Alzahrani views modern Arab poets, whose art does not adhere to the structures that define Al-Mutanabbī and the “Mu‘allaqat,” as no less significant to both poetry and contemporary society. Among the most important of these poets was Saudi Muhammad al-Thubaiti (1952-2011), whose “new cultural self-image” for the kingdom sparked, in the 1980s and 1990s, one of the most intense cultural crises in the country’s history. During this period, conservative Islamists accused Thubaiti and other modernist Saudi writers of “corrupting” the Arabic language, importing literary methods hostile to religion, and even committing treason. These were serious charges, and the attacks proved effective, driving Thubaiti and others out of the kingdom’s public life for years.

Still, Alzahrani has frequently utilized Thubaiti’s work in his scholarship. In particular, he celebrates the modernist Saudi poet’s creative use of cultural and linguistic references to pre-Islamic Arabic poems to frame his avant-garde art. Modernist Saudi poetry invokes images from the worlds of the pre-oil Arabian Peninsula, while at the same time making innovations in the poetic form. Notably, Alzahrani has seen similar themes in the work of Bahraini poet Qassim Haddad, especially what the Bahraini calls “healing the distance.” Within this framework, Haddad seeks to bridge the gaps between the classical and modern Arabic poetic traditions, while synthesizing ideas drawn across different artistic genres and forms of knowledge.

For Alzahrani, what ultimately sets the poetry of Thubaiti, Haddad, and others apart is their strong connection to the pre-Islamic tradition of Arabia. By contrast, modernists of Iraq, Syria, and Egypt have focused on the myths of the ancient civilizations that existed in their lands before being Arabized and Islamized. Saad Albazei, one of the kingdom’s foremost authorities on poetry, has called this “The Desert Culture.”

A Saudi Poet Abroad

In a January 2021 tweet, Albazei praised Alzahrani for “his unique diligence and perseverance” as a scholar and for sharing the culture of the kingdom with American students during his time at the University of Pennsylvania, Yale University, and Georgetown University between 2010 and 2019. Throughout this decade, Alzahrani faced the challenges that have bedeviled tens of thousands of Saudis and other foreigners who have studied in U.S. colleges and universities: how to successfully navigate between different languages and cultures and how to respond to the songs, texts, and other cultural products produced by the country embracing him with immense welcome.

Further complicating matters for Alzahrani was the existential question he faced within his chosen field of study: whether he could study his nation’s cultural, religious, and social traditions in English while utilizing a set of analytical terms that were foreign to his culture. Some have responded to these challenges and the paradoxes that accompany them by rejecting their native cultures in favor of American culture. Others have rejected American society, sometimes with disastrous consequences.

By contrast, Alzahrani dealt with these challenges by focusing on how to overcome the dualities and paradoxes they revealed. His approach, which was built on “healing the distance,” opened Alzahrani’s eyes to scores of connections within and across traditions while giving him license to draw freely on his own tradition and the new ideas and concepts that he encountered in the United States. He found that his teachers, who employed some of the literary theories that had once produced the backlash against the Saudi modernists, offered invaluable insights into Arabic literature. Alzahrani drew on postcolonial studies, one of the theories that he learned from these professors, as part of the PhD dissertation that he wrote at Georgetown University. His dissertation focused on how classical and modern Arab poets forge self-identities in response to both time-honored traditions and the demands of contemporary sociopolitical and cultural authorities. In his dissertation, Alzahrani included Al-Mutanabbi, Thubaiti, the Syrian poet Adonis, and the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, among others.

Alzahrani also explored dualistic forces in the poems that he wrote during and after his decade in the United States. Among the most important is “Metaphor for a Passing Train,” a 2016 poem included in “Celebrating the Dual at Yale.” In the lengthy poem, Alzahrani aims “to heal distance” between the paradoxes in his life by exploring a variety of subjects, including obscenity. He also imagines Al-Mutanabbi sharing coffee with the late professor and literary critic Harold Bloom, who was Jewish, at Yale University. There Alzahrani imagines the two intellectuals discussing one of Alzahrani’s Jewish friends along with the qualities that Moses and the Prophet Muhammad shared.

Four years later, during the height of the coronavirus lockdowns in 2020, Alzahrani wrote “I Need the Ordinary,” which begins with the haunting line: “O Ordinary, how strange you look when pellucid mirrors crack and time expands!” Throughout the rest of the poem, he references Asian, European, and Middle Eastern cultural traditions: using words in Latin along with references to the Mahabharata, Buddhism, pre-Islamic Arab culture, Islam, the Arab classical poet Abu Nuwas, and the Arab literary classic “One Thousand and One Nights.” Collectively, his references to these works display his wide-ranging erudition while evoking the work of American modernist writers, such as Robert Duncan, who famously said of himself that he is “not an experimentalist or an inventor ... but a derivative poet.”

A “New Liberty” and a New Chapter

In April, during a Zoom lecture delivered to students at Middle Tennessee State University, Alzahrani spoke at length about his work and career, especially his time studying in the United States. Throughout that decade, he aimed to “create continuity and connection” between Saudi Arabia and the United States – two countries representing two cultures that he did not wish to become “the victims of the historical clash between their partisans.” His work during that time and afterward, he added, represents “his meditations” on the intellectual journeys he believes all of us must take to survive in a world defined by a modernity “that always forgets.”



Alzahrani speaking. (Courtesy of Sean Foley)

For Alzahrani, a modern poet from Mecca, a historic city steeped in tradition, the act of remembering, or “journeying” into the past, is as much about the present and future as it is about the past. Here history is not “bunk” nor the embodiment of “tradition,” as Henry Ford once said, imprisoning society in the past. Instead, the past, when invoked in poetry or prose, can serve as a liberating force that can inspire individuals to look at themselves, their societies, and their most intractable challenges in new ways. Overall, this approach to writing echoes one voiced by the American poet Michael McClure, a prominent figure in the Beats literary movement. “Writing,” McClure observed in his 1962 essay “Phi Upsilon Kappa,” “is a kind of pain as well as a joy at the chance to make a new liberty.”

Six decades after McClure wrote those words, the “new liberty” in Alzahrani’s poetry is more important than ever. His poems echo and reflect upon the tectonic forces reshaping Saudi society, especially since the launch of Saudi Vision 2030, which places a great emphasis on culture in the kingdom’s national development agenda. But they also seek to overcome some of the dualities – between East and West, past and present – that have challenged U.S.-Saudi ties for decades. Engaging with his poetry can provide new perspectives on a contentious debate that many see in dichotomies: Can President Joseph R. Biden Jr.’s administration balance the United States’ strategic interests in Saudi Arabia with its commitment to its moral principles?

While some have argued that this is impossible, others, including Jon Alterman of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, have stressed that it is time for Washington to seriously engage Riyadh, stressing the benefits of a frank dialogue with a culturally vibrant country “that is no longer so black and white.” As Alterman and others aim to play “constructive roles” in redefining U.S.-Saudi ties, they would be wise to engage Saudi creative figures like Alzahrani. Although he is neither a diplomat nor a politician, Alzahrani and his work exemplify the kingdom’s cultural flourishing and provide new, more nuanced ways for engaging with its society. Indeed, this type of engagement could, in the long run, help to start a new chapter in relations and “heal the distance” separating the two countries.

Sean Foley is a professor of history at Middle Tennessee State University and specializes in the history of the Middle East and the cultural, political, and religious trends in the wider Islamic world.