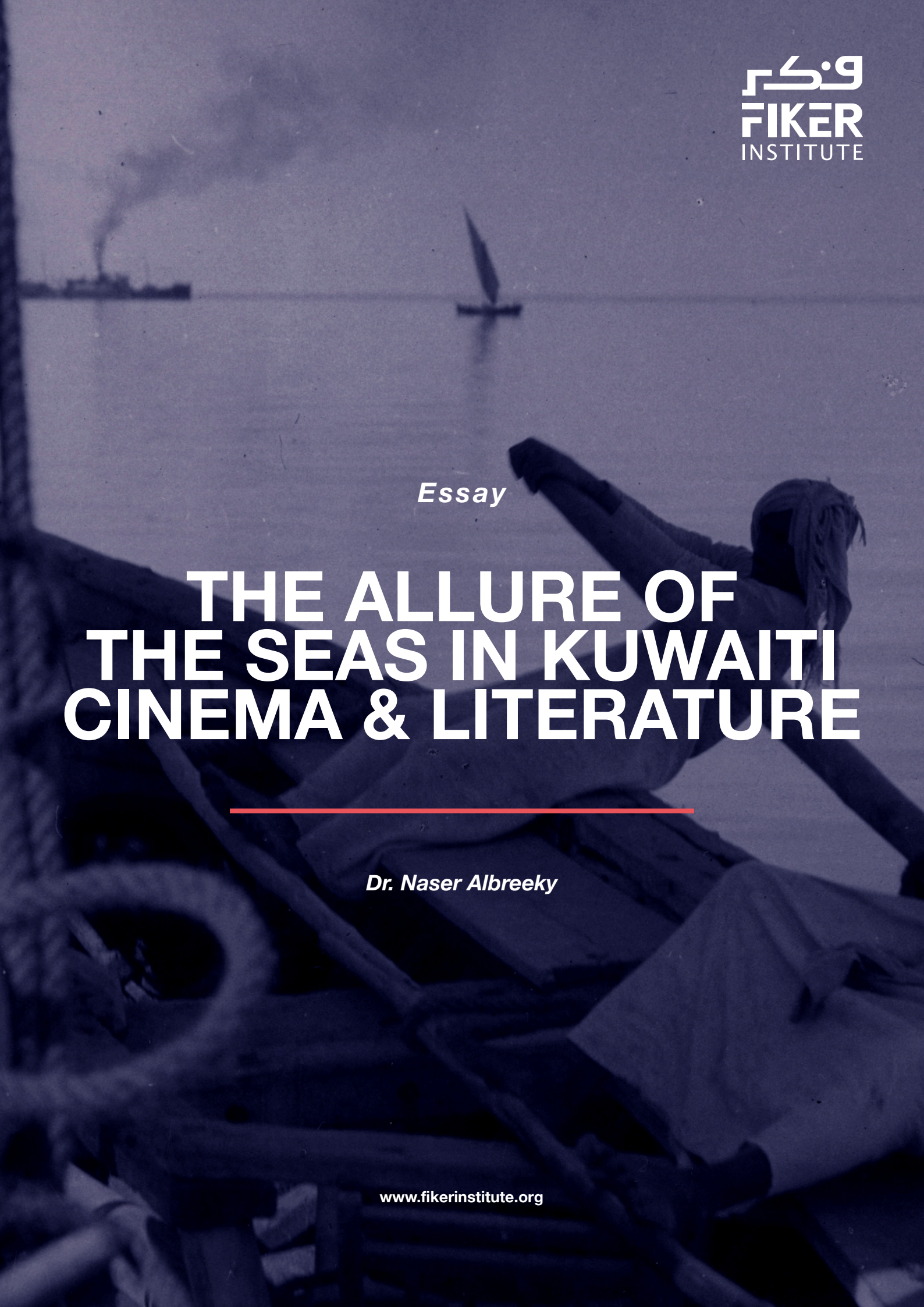

FIKER INSTITUTE

Essay

THE ALLURE OF THE SEAS IN KUWAITI CINEMA & LITERATURE

Dr. Naser Albreeky

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INTRODUCTION

Studying the history of Kuwaiti cinema illuminates a literary tradition, in writing and in film, that exists not only to narrate the story of a certain people but to emphasize a distinct cultural identity based on the sea. In 1982, the late Emir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah—then serving as Minister of Information—oversaw a national initiative to produce an updated translation of Alan Villiers' *Sons of Sinbad* (1938–1940), reflecting Kuwait's growing recognition of the book's historical value and the need to preserve the country's pre-oil maritime heritage. The Sheikh himself wrote the introduction to the book.[1] Villiers, an Australian maritime historian, sailor, and novelist, wrote about and photographed his travels in Kuwait in the late 1930s. The pictures he took "provide[d] an unforgettably vivid record of the life and skills of Kuwait's dhow sailors, of the ports along the route, of Kuwait itself, and of the pearl divers of the Arabian Gulf."[2] The film that Villiers produced during his travels, documenting the voyage and the ports along the way, is still celebrated as the first experiment in using a cinema camera in Kuwait's history.[3] However, the neglect of Villiers' account in academic research highlights how the Gulf's cultural isolation is related to a deeper Orientalist structure of thought that overlooks the sea in its portrayal of the Arabian Peninsula. On the contrary, since Villiers' seminal account, memories of the sea have been central to many Kuwaiti films and literary works and are ingrained in the filmmakers' and authors' forms of expression in symbols, metaphors, and allegory. The sea as a metaphor is often used by artists who navigate the waters of imagination but always find an anchor on the shores of generational memory, and the complex, dialectical relationship between the Gulf communities and the sea.

This Essay examines the legacies of Villiers' work in the early history of Kuwaiti cinema and its artistic and thematic preoccupation with the sea, pearl-diving, and pre-oil economic class distinctions. The analysis incorporates the 1965 film *Al-ʿAsifa (The Storm*, Mohammad Nasser Alsanousi); the 1971 *Bas Ya Bahar (The Cruel Sea*, Khalid Alsiddiq), and *Al-Samt (The Silence*, Hashim Alshakhs), the first Kuwaiti film in color, which premiered in 1979. Like Kuwaiti cinema, the country's literary canon features many works centered around the sea, including Mohamad Alfayez's poetry collection, *Mudhakkirat Bahhar (Memoirs of a Sailor*, 1962), which was later adapted into a national and fondly remembered operetta; Laila Al-Othman's novel, *Wasmiya Takhruj min al-Bahr (Wasmiya Leaves the Sea*, 1986); and, more recently, Taleb Alrefai's novella, *Al-Najdi* (2017), which draws on Villiers' work, fictionalizing the final hours of one of the heroes from *Sons of Sinbad*. By drawing a line from Villiers to Alrefai, this Essay argues that the prominence of the sea in Kuwaiti literature and cinema is shaped by two key influences: firstly, the interests of stakeholders and beneficiaries involved in the early development of Kuwait's artistic and media institutions; and, secondly, a desire to offer an alternative portrayal of a region often imagined through dust and sand.

VILLIERS AND THE SAILORS OF ARABIA

In 1938, Villiers traveled to the Gulf to photograph, film, and write about what he believed to be the last days of Arab sailing traditions. During his expedition, which lasted from December 1938 to June 1939, Villiers joined the crew of *al-nukhethah* (captain) Ali Bin Naser al-Najdi (1915-1979), a Kuwaiti man, in Aden. He served as a crewman and as an equal among the men on al-Najdi's *dhow*—something almost unheard of among the foreigners associated with European empires who traveled through Arabia in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Villiers sought to discover the "ancient vessels of eastern waters in which men probably first sailed" and "the Arabs who still sailed them," in an effort to explore a dying tradition firsthand.[4]

Villiers' work is a significant contribution to a scarcely documented period in Kuwaiti history, yet it remains largely overlooked in the record of travel writing about the Arabian Peninsula. Villiers traveled on a deep-sea *dhow* called *Bayan*.[5] The Arabic name translates to 'clarification', specifically with the connotation of 'making clear' through language; or, in the modern sense of the word, a 'declaration' or 'statement'. Villiers freely translates the name of the ship to *The Triumph of Righteousness*. While it is easy to assume a mistranslation, it is more likely that Villiers wanted to express his own perspective on seafaring through the naming of the ship. His stance becomes clear in Villiers' later book, *The Set of Sails* (1949), where he contends that the sailing tradition, as it was still being practiced at the time, was a "triumph of man's seasurfing genius."[6] Following his voyage on the *Bayan*, Villiers produced a short film, a series of black and white photographs, and a book in 1940, first published in the United Kingdom and then in the United States, all titled *Sons of Sinbad*.

Villiers' account is unique in two respects: firstly, it represented a shift away from the Arabian travel writing tradition that fixated on the desert and its "purifying powers,"[7] particularly the individual quests of Western travelers seeking "'personal redemption'"[8] in empty quarters and dry areas while overshadowing local communities. Secondly, it was composed by an author unaffiliated with the British empire. These elements may have contributed to Villiers' relative obscurity in the Orientalist travel writing tradition about the Gulf in the 19th and 20th centuries, in comparison to his contemporaries, notably Gertrude Bell, T.E. Lawrence, and Wilfred Thiseger. As Yacoub Al-Hijji, William Facey, and Grace Pundyk argue in their introduction to the 2006 re-publication of *Sons of Sinbad*: "A sea voyage is by its very nature subversive of the stereotypical Western account of Arabian travel, the pioneering desert journey."[9] In other words, Villiers' unusual travel account disrupted the perception of what was considered authentically 'Arabian,' which was structured by an Orientalist machine that influenced how Arabia was imagined in the West, and sometimes also in the East. Villiers' travels showed an alternative to the Western concept of Arabia, and he was inevitably dismissed: "To

go by sea was automatically to disqualify oneself as an authentic Arabian traveller."[10]

Nonetheless, *Sons of Sindbad* provides a compelling reading of the pre-oil economy of the Gulf. In the second half of the 20th century, Villiers' economic analysis gained notable recognition in Kuwait for addressing a crucial void in the historical records.[11] Moreover, Villiers' travel writing has found an afterlife in contemporary Kuwaiti literature and cinema, with the metaphor of Sinbad becoming a Khaleeji literary trope found in poems, songs, and children's literature.

THE SEA IN KUWAITI CINEMA AND LITERATURE

Villiers' documentation of Kuwait's pre-oil economy is a theme that was picked up in early Kuwaiti cinema productions of the 1960s and 1970s. Kuwaiti films, from Mohammad Nasser Alsanousi's short narrative film *Al-ʿAsifa*, to Khalid Alsiddiq's *Bas Ya Bahar* and Hashim Alshaks' *Al-Samt*, are not only notable cinematic depictions that capture life in the pre-oil period, they also reveal a turning point in the collective imagination of the Gulf and its visual memory.

Al-ʿAsifa, a film written by Abdulamir Alturki, begins with a Kuwaiti proverb that laments the pace by which a village has surrendered to modernity. Offering a glimpse into the past life of the story's father figure, the film devotes considerable time to presenting the traditional scenographic dance of the sea—the sailors' movements, which performatively evoke a sense of place. These rituals are carried out by an unnamed and unidentified collective of sailors. The film then depicts a shift from the spiritual to the material, with a scene of men entering a *masjid* cutting to the gas flares of petroleum refineries and the new city. The story of *Al-ʿAsifa* is centered around a father, a Kuwaiti sailor, and his son. The two characters debate the value of education and labor, reflecting the influence of the socialist-inspired policies prevalent during the era, and, more significantly, exposing concerns around the new and privileged generation which was radically different from its predecessors. "My days are better than yours!" the son tells his father, "why would I voluntarily choose to suffer?" The father reminds his son that money and oil are impermanent; that if he is not equipped with knowledge and the mastery of an honorable profession, he is equipped with nothing. Despite his father's warnings, stubborn and egoistical, the son steps into a literal and metaphorical storm which represents the strong winds of change and the consequences of arrogance and abundance, demonstrated by the son's heavy drinking and gambling. In a Shakespearean Hamlet-like soliloquy, the father utters a warning for those entering the "cursed storm that changed everything" against the modern generation's blind rush toward novelty and speed, erasing what truly matters. Fearing a future where all ties to the past are severed, the former sailor reflects on the storms of his past and the battles he entered and emerged from victorious:

"A white, dust-covered beard,
I am the one who broke the stones,
And wrestled with the demons of the sea and won,
Always returning with many rewards in hand."

The dust in the first line symbolizes the departure from the sea, starkly contrasting with the familiar drops of water clinging to a wet beard. The father goes on to honor the heroism of the older generations and their struggle for survival at sea, but soon shifts to reflect on his awareness of his own inevitable end: "But now I walk to my inevitable death." His resistance to answering the call of death stems from a deep fear that his son and future generations of Kuwaitis may not withstand the coming storm. "Spare me," he pleads to the angel of death, "I do not want to leave them to the storm." The story thus serves both as a cautionary tale and a guide for the lost. The harmony between the sea and its past inhabitants, contrasted with the desert where death confronts the characters, reflects a desire to craft a distinct identity related to the sea.

A few years later, the film that would be remembered as the first feature film in Kuwaiti cinema history, *Bas Ya Bahar*, was produced and nominated as Kuwait's entry for Best Foreign Film in the Academy Awards. The film follows a young Kuwaiti man who defies his parents and goes to sea, hoping to amass enough wealth to marry a woman of higher social and economic standing—a narrative that reflects the class divisions and economic inequality defining Kuwait at the time. Though the film was not accepted as a nominee, it still holds a significant place in the region as an ambitious and mature directorial debut. Almost a decade later, Hashim Alshaks directed *Al-Samt*, which follows a similar storyline but veers in a different direction: its protagonist remains trapped on land, setting the narrative on a markedly distinct trajectory. Both films feature lovers striving to transcend class barriers, hoping to marry above their status, but each ending in tragedy as the protagonists, Musaad (Mohammad Almansour) in *Bas Ya Bahar* and Khalifa (Ali Albreeky) in *Al-Samt* meet their demise, painfully close to realizing their dreams but ultimately falling short. The themes of the fallen patriarch, father-son dynamics, and the question of inheritance recur in both of these early Kuwaiti films. Both feature a father figure who endures an injury and near amputation, one that is dually physical and psychological, as it prevents him from continuing to work at sea, pushing the family into poverty. When the sons choose to inherit their fathers' craft of pearl diving, their aim is to seek the legendary *danah*, the renowned pearl in the Gulf said to have almost mythically changed the lives of the fortunate few who have found it. The fathers' disapproval is unequivocal, driven by the memory of the sea that nearly claimed their own lives and the fear that it might, this time, take their only sons. In the harsh traditional society, the fathers' physical injuries thus symbolize the metaphorical amputated patriarch. Though he still walks

and breathes on land, his traditional role and authority has become a casualty of the sea. The fathers of Khalifa and Musaad endure the humiliation of pleading on their sons' behalf for a marriage above their status which is unthinkable in a society where wealth and lineage determine social boundaries. Despite the profound, lifelong friendships they share with the fathers of their sons' loved ones, these bonds dissolve when the subject of marriage arises. In such matters, boundaries are often drawn around two forms of wealth: on the one hand, familial and tribal affiliations, which bring the value of a respectable ancestry, and financial status on the other. The key difference between the plots of *Bas Ya Bahar* and *Al-Samt* is that the former portrays the son's death at sea, while the latter, avoiding the sea entirely, depicts his death on land. The sea is not merely the background of these tales, it is also the source and force driving divisions and tragedies, with the power to elevate individuals' status or trap them within it. What was silent and unspoken in Villiers' film and photography now becomes vivid and alive in these cinematic experiments.

Literature was similarly drawn to the collective memory of the sea. An example is Kuwaiti novelist Taleb Alrefai's novella *Al-Najdi*, which is directly inspired by Alan Villiers' travels. By some accounts, including those close to al-Najdi's family, Captain Ali al-Najdi, whose ship Villiers traveled on, disappeared when he went missing after a fishing trip with friends in the late 1970s, years after the decline of the sailing industry.[12] Based on these historical events, the author attempts to recreate al-Najdi's memories in fiction. The pull between tradition and modernity is also present in Alrefai's novella where al-Najdi reflects with sorrow on the collapse of the sailing industry, which began after the Second World War with the first oil shipment in 1946 and the advent of artificial pearl manufacturing.[13] He laments that the ships "were being deconstructed and turned into the woods of the buildings, and to fire,"[14] emphasizing the same duality depicted in *Al-ʿAsifa*, particularly in the scene where the fire of the petroleum refineries dissolve into the image of the new Kuwait city. Similarly, like *Bas Ya Bahar* and *Al-Samt*, Alrefai's fictionalized account of al-Najdi's life features complex characters that undergo a generational conflict associated with the dangerous craft of seafaring. The refusal of al-Najdi's mother to let him join his father's crew at a young age is a notable example. The novella builds a narrative where the climax is when the adult al-Najdi and two friends face a storm, and it ends with the ambiguous fate of the protagonist who could have drowned at sea or died after reaching land. This ambiguity echoes the different fates of Musaad and Khalifa in *Bas Ya Bahar* and *Al-Samt*, respectively.

In Alrefai's novella, sea heritage, Villiers' travel writing, and cinema intertwine, converging in the flashbacks and memories of the sea captain al-Najdi. As the final heir to the lineage of Sinbad, al-Najdi's story ends in the merciless, indifferent sea, where silence lingers in the aftermath of a sudden storm. Alrefai's cinematic prose and the

striking visual details he incorporates into his text further highlight the connection to Villiers' documentary work. *Al-Najdi* was received positively and was longlisted for the 2018 International Prize for Arabic Fiction.[15] It has been translated into English (*The Mariner*, 2020) and French (*Al-Najdi le marin*, 2020). Mariam Al-Doseri contends that Alrefai's novella is "a story that recounts a great infatuation and an attempt, despite all warnings against its treacherous nature, at befriending the sea," highlighting that what is being scrutinized is not Al-Najdi's alienation from the sea, but Kuwait's own.[16] Alrefai's work is particularly significant in forging a previously nonexistent connection between Villiers and contemporary Kuwaiti literature and cinema.

In these examples of Kuwaiti arts, the sea eclipses the desert as the central element in Kuwait's tradition. However, it is important to note that not all Kuwaitis were associated with the sea. While these films showed what was true to certain groups, the social environments of Kuwaitis vary widely, and the films fail to represent other, more complex societal structures. Those who shaped Kuwait's early media institutions—television, film, and related visual platforms—remembered their own communities, but in doing so, unintentionally left others—especially agrarian and desert tribal societies—outside the frame. The centrality of the sea and the spread of its spoken dialect as the official, and dominant, tongue, overshadowing other idioms, is influenced, as Khalid Alrasheed argues, by the cultural *milieu* of a certain class in Kuwaiti society, which first controlled the maritime and pearling trade.[17] With the emergence of the modern nation-state, national education and media, the inquiry of why the sea, not the desert, is central to Kuwaiti's self-image, is found in these local circumstances. The development of broadcast media—television and radio—was shaped by a specific group with both economic privilege and geographic proximity to the emerging urban center. While they had the resources and access to participate in this cultural project, the majority remained excluded—either by distance or by the more pressing demands of labor and subsistence.[18] Thus, what began as a deliberate project of 'remembrance' of Kuwait's maritime traditions was transformed into a process of forgetting, a distortion driven by the over-representation of a single facet of Kuwait's past. At the same time, it successfully countered the Orientalist portrayal of Arabia as synonymous with the desert, attempting to correct centuries of misrepresentation.

THE POST-VILLIERSIAN ERA IN KUWAITI ARTS

Alrefai's novella successfully captures many of the themes and tropes found in the first three films in Kuwaiti cinema history, which in turn pick up themes from Alan Villiers' travel writing. The analysis of the afterlives of Villiers' account helps us draw a line between what comes before and after his original and necessary visual and textual contributions to Kuwaiti history. This represents a pivotal reconfiguration of Kuwaiti artistic identity, a cultural phase that can be conceptualized as the "post-Villiersian"

era in literature and cinema. The sea is a constant presence in all the films and literary works discussed, whether as a personified entity, a backdrop for compelling tales of love, struggle, and sacrifice, or an overarching symbol shaping the narrative and influencing the characters' lives. Yet, like any powerful force, its impact is shaped by societal factors that either amplify or diminish its significance. In the Kuwaiti context, the sea was embraced as a central element, offering a visual history of the region and providing a rare glimpse into a scarcely documented past.

About the Author

Dr. Naser Albreeky is a Senior Fellow at Fiker Institute. He is an Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Kuwait University. His research focuses on the cultural memory of Kuwait and the Arab Gulf (GCC), British imperial history, political poetry, theory of parody, and the reception of the Greco-Roman classics.

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Author: Dr. Naser Albreeky
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Email: info@fikerinstitute.org