



Transforming Identities in Ahmed Asseri's *The Shadow and the Beloved*: A  
Critical Exploration Using Transformation Theory

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تحول الهويات في رواية "الظل والحبيب" لأحمد عسيري: استكشاف نقدي باستخدام نظرية

التحول

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**Abstract :** Ahmed Asseri's novel, *The Shadow and the Beloved* (Al-Zil wal A'ashiqah), examines love, betrayal, and identity through an intricate narrative. This paper critically analyzes the main characters using Al-Shamea's Transformation Theory to explore identity changes influenced by love, conflict, culture, and religion. The discussion situates the novel within Yemeni literature, referencing established critiques and philosophical views on identity.

**Keywords:**

Transformation Theory, Identity, Love, Betrayal, Cultural Conflict.

المستخلص

تنسج رواية أحمد عسيري "الظل والعاشقة" قصةً معقدةً عن الحب والخيانة والأزمات الوجودية، بينما تستكشف بعمق تحولات الهوية الشخصية. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى تقديم تحليل نقدي للشخصيات الرئيسية في الرواية، باستخدام نظرية التحول لدى الشامي كمنظور لفهم كيفية تطور الهوية في ظل قوى مختلفة. يتمحور هذا النقاش حول دراسة الحب كقوة تحويلية، والصراع كعامل مُعطّل للهوية، والعلاقات المتشابكة المعقدة بين الثقافة والدين والنمو الشخصي. يضع هذا التحليل الرواية في سياق أوسع للأدب اليمني، مستمدًا من النقد الأدبي الراسخ والتأملات الفلسفية حول تحول الهوية. **الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية التحول، الهوية، الحب، الخيانة، الصراع الثقافي**

**Introduction:**

Ahmed Asseri's novel, *The Shadow and the Beloved*, tells a powerful story. It explores the inner struggles of its characters. The book deals with love, betrayal, and personal growth.

The story is set in a land shaped by deep cultural and religious beliefs. There, the characters get caught in a web of emotions. This entanglement changes who they are over time.

The novel takes place in Yemeni society. In it, tradition clashes with modernity. This is a common feature in contemporary Arabic literature.

This article uses Transformation Theory. This theory helps explain how crises can spark change in a person's identity. These crises can be psychological, emotional, or existential.

The paper focuses on the main characters: Luqman, Shujun, and Suleiman. It looks at how Asseri creates their moments of transformation. He blends their personal stories with universal themes.

The article also uses the work of scholars like Edward Said. Said studied the complex link between personal identity and displacement. It also applies Gaston Bachelard's philosophy on poetic imagination. This connects to the shadowy spaces that Asseri uses as a metaphor.

### **Understanding the Transformation Theory:**

To revisit *The Shadow and the Beloved*, it is essential to grasp Al-Shamea's Transformation Theory, which argues that identities continually shift in response to various factors (Al-Shamea 3). While transformation drives growth, it can also be destructive. This concept is central in Asseri's novel, where characters face changing identities due to internal struggles and cultural pressures.

### **Luqman's Emotional Odyssey:**

Luqman is a central character in the novel. He represents the struggle between rationality and emotion. This is a common theme in Yemeni literature. At first, Luqman is a stoic and level-headed engineer. He transforms when his wife, Shujun, admits she loves another man, Suleiman. This causes him great emotional turmoil.

In many ways, Luqman's change represents a psychological conflict described by Al-Shamea's theory. In this conflict, rationality is slowly taken over by emotional chaos.

As the novel continues, Luqman's identity becomes more and more fragmented. He struggles with his love for Shujun and his need to maintain his dignity. Critic Homi Bhabha links this kind of fragmentation to the postcolonial idea of "unhomeliness." This is a state where people feel alienated from their own sense of self (Bhabha, 1994, p. 13).

Luqman is rooted in traditional Yemeni culture. Yet, he begins to feel deeply disconnected from his community and his marriage. This alienation drives him to seek comfort in the mythical healing power of the Tree of the Stranger. This tree is a powerful symbol in the story.

### **Shujun's Duality: Love, Betrayal, and Self-Realization:**

Shujun is the novel's enigmatic female protagonist. She is driven by a longing for passion and self-expression. This desire starkly contrasts with her life as Luqman's wife, which is one of suppression. Her relationship with Suleiman, a younger man, stirs her dormant passions. This relationship symbolizes the disruption of her identity.

Shujun's transformation is not just emotional. It is also deeply psychological. She must navigate feelings of guilt, betrayal, and personal freedom.

Transformation theory applies well to Shujun's character. Her journey embodies the stages of transformation. She moves from repression, to realization, and eventually to self-liberation.

This transformation is not superficial but represents a deep-seated evolution in the character's identity. The character has confronted their internal conflicts, navigated their journey of discovery, and now emerges with a new understanding of themselves and the world around them. (Al-Shamea 5)

Such a transformation is further contextualized by the works of Julia Kristeva, who argues that abjection and desire are intertwined, particularly in the lives of women who have been socially marginalized (Kristeva, 1982). Shujun's struggle is not merely with her love for Suleiman but with her identity as a woman caught between societal expectations and personal desires.

As Shujun's story unfolds, Asseri masterfully portrays the tension between the shadow of her past self and the beloved—the person she yearns to become. This internal duality mirrors the transformative process described by Al-Shamea, where characters evolve by shedding old selves in favor of new, more authentic versions of their identity. “This synthesis represents the character's new identity, which incorporates elements of both the old and the new, allowing for a more complex and nuanced understanding of themselves” (Al-Shamea 5).

### **The Catalyst of Change:**

In the novel, Suleiman functions as a catalyst for the transformations experienced by both Luqman and Shujun. Suleiman, the younger and seemingly more carefree character, represents a new wave of thinking—a break from the past. His youth and vitality are appealing to Shujun, while his presence threatens Luqman's established role as the patriarch.

Luqman implored Shujun to avoid Suleiman during their preparations for the journey to Mount Shadow, but her reply was evasive. The look in her eyes betrayed her intentions. Clearly, she planned to see him again, to resume their discussions about her divorce and their future together. (Asseri 16)

Suleiman is portrayed as a multifaceted character who actively engages with the socio-political context of Yemen, rather than being solely defined by Shujun's feelings. His relationship with Shujun is influenced by broader societal factors, including the limitations imposed by Yemeni society. Based on Al-Shamea's theory, Suleiman represents elements of youth and change, influencing both Shujun's self-reflection and Luqman's understanding of his role as a husband.

### **Symbolism of the Tree of the Stranger:**

A recurring element in *The Shadow and the Beloved* is the Tree of the Stranger, which is described as having mystical properties associated with healing and transformation. The tree functions as a metaphor for the personal development of the characters, presenting opportunities for change and redemption. Within Al-Shamea's framework, the tree is interpreted as an external factor that initiates internal transformation, providing a setting in which the characters confront significant fears and desires.

According to Bachelard (1994), the tree represents “verticality,” linking individual experience with the universal and providing space for reflection and transformation. For Luqman, the tree symbolizes hope and the possibility of restoring his fractured marriage,

while for Shujun, it represents the potential for emotional and spiritual rebirth. However, the novel's conclusion suggests that transformation is not always redemptive, and sometimes, the path to self-discovery can lead to further disintegration rather than integration.

### **Sufi Influence on Transformation**

In Asseri's novel, *The Shadow and the Lover*, Sufism plays a transformative role in the lives of its characters, particularly Shujun, the protagonist. Sufism, in its essence, is the spiritual path to understanding divine love and truth through self-purification and enlightenment, and it influences the journeys of the characters in the novel as they grapple with personal crises, identity, and love.

Under the tutelage of her Sufi uncle, Abdul Latif al-Haddar, her young mind was kindled. Her father, the seafaring Hassan, also contributed to her intellectual growth, as did her other uncle. However, it was her prolonged companionship with the Sufi that truly shaped her understanding of Sufism and the central role of love within it. She came to reject the superficial teachings of novice dervishes and the superstitious beliefs of the ignorant. (Asseri 14)

Shujun's transformation is deeply intertwined with Sufi concepts of divine love and self-realization. In the novel, she faces internal turmoil, torn between her affection for her husband, Luqman, and her passionate love for another man, Suleiman. This emotional and psychological conflict pushes her into a state of spiritual crisis, making her question the very foundations of her life. Her journey reflects Sufism's view that spiritual love and suffering lead to growth and enlightenment.

In Sufism, love is viewed as a divine energy leading seekers to spiritual fulfillment. Shujun's emotional journey mirrors the Sufi path toward divine love, with her feelings for Suleiman representing a deeper spiritual longing. Suleiman, like the Beloved in Sufi poetry, embodies unattainable divine beauty and connection.

The novel portrays Luqman, Shujun's husband, with Sufi values. These are patience, wisdom, and perseverance. He knows about his wife's emotional distance and her affair with Suleiman. Yet, he stays calm and composed. This embodies the Sufi principle of "sabr," or patience.

He believes in the healing power of a mystical tree and its shadow. This shows his faith in spiritual solutions for worldly problems. Luqman's journey to this sacred tree is a symbol of spiritual healing and divine intervention. This trip mirrors the Sufi quest for inner peace. It is about finding a divine connection through contemplation and prayer.

The mystical tree, which Luqman thinks will cure Shujun, symbolizes Sufi divine mercy and ultimate truth. Trees, in many Sufi teachings, represent knowledge, growth, and a connection between heaven and earth. By seeking refuge under the shadow of this tree, Luqman is engaging in a symbolic act of surrender to divine will, trusting that spiritual forces can resolve the conflicts between him and his wife. This also ties into Sufi ideas of "tawakkul," or reliance on God's will, where the believer places complete trust in the divine plan. Maria de Cillis summarizes Ibn Arabi in this regard, "According to the classification of the spiritual stations, the *maqam* of the *tawakkul*, that is, the 'abandonment to God,' and

'trust in God', is followed by the *maqamat* of *taslim* (submission), *tafwid* (acceptance) and *rida* (contentment)" (225).

Shujun's personal evolution also parallels the Sufi idea of self-annihilation, or "fana," where the individual ego is dissolved in the love and knowledge of the divine. Her love for Suleiman, while destructive on the surface, becomes a catalyst for her self-discovery and transformation. She begins to see beyond the superficial desires of the self, realizing that her true path is not in possessing another person but in attaining a deeper understanding of herself and her place in the world. This is evident when she contemplates her father's life as a Sufi and the trials he faced in his spiritual journey, including moments of divine ecstasy and confusion that led him to silence and introspection.

Shujun's relationship with her father's Sufi practices also shapes her transformation. Her father walked a Sufi path. This involved withdrawing from society and having intense spiritual experiences. His journey resonates with Shujun's own struggles.

He is shown as a man who sought divine union through spiritual exercises and contemplation. But he was ultimately overwhelmed by the mystical experiences he encountered. His silence followed a profound mystical event. This silence becomes a metaphor for the indescribable nature of divine love and truth. These are the same concepts Shujun grapples with as she navigates her own emotions and desires.

As Shujun reflects on her father's Sufi teachings, she sees her own journey is similar to his. Both she and her father are seekers of truth. Both of their paths are full of challenges and misunderstandings.

This realization deepens her spiritual understanding. It helps her reconcile her internal conflict. She begins to see her love for Suleiman as part of her own spiritual path. This journey ultimately leads her toward self-awareness and inner peace.

Using Hatem Al-Shamea's Transformation Theory, we can see Shujun's character arc as a process of breakdown and rebuilding. This theory emphasizes how identity falls apart and is put back together. At the start, her identity is fractured by her conflicting emotions and desires. She cannot reconcile her love for Suleiman with her duties as a wife and mother.

But as she starts her spiritual journey, she begins to rebuild. This journey is influenced by Sufi teachings and the symbolic mystical tree. Her transformation is not immediate or easy. It reflects the slow process of spiritual awakening central to Sufi philosophy.

Sufism teaches that the heart is the seat of spiritual knowledge. We see this in Shujun's journey. Her painful emotions become a pathway to deeper self-knowledge. In Sufi thought, divine truth is revealed in the heart. The heart is purified through suffering and love.

Shujun's suffering acts as this purification process. This includes her unfulfilled love for Suleiman and the distance from her husband. This pain ultimately leads her to a higher understanding of herself and the world.

In short, Sufism plays a transformative role in *The Shadow and the Beloved*. It shapes the characters' journeys, especially Shujun's, as they navigate complex emotional and spiritual landscapes. Through Sufi teachings on love, suffering, and self-realization, the novel explores its characters' inner transformations. It offers a profound meditation on identity, desire, and spiritual awakening.

Shujun's journey is one of disintegration and reintegration. Her experiences of love and suffering lead her to a deeper understanding of herself. They also help her understand the divine forces that shape her life. This transformation is mirrored in the novel's rich symbolism. The mystical tree, in particular, represents the potential for healing and spiritual renewal.

### **Conclusion:**

Ahmed Asseri's *Al-Zil wal A'ashiqah* provides a profound examination of the intertwined themes of love, identity, and transformation. Drawing upon Hatem Al-Shamea's Transformation Theory, the novel demonstrates how personal crises—whether they stem from love, faith, or cultural conflict—serve as catalysts for reshaping the characters' identities. Asseri skilfully explores the tension between tradition and modernity, revealing how confronting one's past is essential for understanding the present.

The transformative journeys experienced by Luqman, Shujun, and Suleiman exemplify broader motifs within Yemeni literature, especially the persistent conflict between individual desires and the expectations imposed by society. Through these characters, the novel presents identity as a fluid and evolving concept, one that is continually shaped by both internal struggles and external pressures.

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