

# Exploring AI, Human Experience, and Literary Expression in Saudi Fiction

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## Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI), humanity, and literary form in Najwa Alotaibi's *Raf Al Youm* (Today's Shelf, 2022), a contemporary Saudi novel set in a dystopian future. The study investigates how the text illuminates the profound dehumanization resulting from digitalization and the commodification of relationships, reflecting contemporary societal concerns. Through close readings of narrative techniques and thematic motifs, the analysis uncovers how AI serves as both a catalyst for redefining traditional narrative style and a critical lens on human nature. By portraying a hybrid protagonist navigating a society controlled by algorithms, Alotaibi challenges readers to reconsider notions of identity, agency, and consciousness in an increasingly automated world. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how *Raf Al Youm* engages with the ethical and philosophical implications of AI, offering insights into the cultural dynamics of contemporary Saudi literature.

**Keywords:** Science Fiction, AI, Creativity, Literary form, Saudi fiction.

Najwa Alotaibi's debut novel *Raf Al Youm* (Today's Shelf, 2022) is a contemporary Saudi science fiction work that explores humanity's future under the control of technology. It presents a compelling exploration of humanity's future under the pervasive influence of technology. Set in a dystopian Saudi Arabia, the narrative reflects on the profound dehumanization brought by digitalization and artificial intelligence. The phenomenon of AI integration is strikingly proved by the case of Sophia, who became the first robot to be granted citizenship in Saudi Arabia in 2017 (Kouravanas and Pavlopoulos, 2022), raising significant questions about identity and personhood in the age of advanced technology.

Scholarly discourse highlights how representations of AI in fictional universes encompass "droids/androids and robots (as entities with a physical form in the world)

and algorithms that exist and operate only within the digital realm" (Burgess, 2022, p.128). In *Raf Al Youm*, the protagonist is a hybrid of human and machine living in a city where AI and algorithms control every aspect of life. The protagonist grapples with the erosion of his humanity in a society where relationships are commodified. Alotaibi depicts a world in which friends, lovers, and even family members can be bought, replaced, or discarded when they fail to fulfil functional or emotional roles. Through this narrative lens, Alotaibi critiques the commodification of human connection in an increasingly automated society.

The novel invites a deeper examination of identity, consciousness, and the ethical implications of AI's role in shaping human experiences. This aligns with Karlheinz Steinmüller's assertion that science fiction "has become a unique medium for discussing science

and technology, their prospects and hazards, and more generally their social and cultural impacts” (2013, p.339). Furthermore, the societal operation of AI is frequently “tainted by fear” (Burgess, 2022, p. 124), a sentiment echoed in science fiction that often portrays AI as a harbinger of dystopia. This fear is further articulated through concerns that “AI expands beyond the realities of technology” (Burgess, 2022, p. 130), underscoring the ethical dilemmas embedded in technological advancements.

This study aims to investigate the complex interplay between AI, human experience, and literary expression in Alotaibi’s work. The analysis explores how AI shapes human experiences, relationships, and identities. The study uncovers how the novel uses AI to reflect, critique, and transform human existence, addressing ethical and philosophical implications. It offers insights into how contemporary Saudi literature engages with the challenges and opportunities posed by artificial intelligence, contributing to a deeper understanding of its impact on society and culture.

### AI and Human Experience

The story opens up with the protagonist, identified only by the code-like name 9-K, searching for his regular “friend product” on the shelf of daily products (Alotaibi, 2022, p. 5). However, he faces challenges due to the product shortages, prompting him to consider filing a complaint about the rapid depletion of his favourite product. He recalls a past experience with an “imported friend product” that hacked into his system, leading to its destruction by the “systematic check points unit” and its loss of privileges of “join[ing] the global friendship product lines” (Alotaibi, 2022, p. 7). Facing these shortages, K-9 is forced to interact with a human friend, which he finds particularly frustrating. He expresses his irritation, saying: “talking to people is really annoying because you cannot control their judgment or make them forget whenever you want” (Alotaibi, 2022,

p.10). K-9 returns home to find his “robotic plant” dead as a result of his neglect and he unkindness towards it. The unsettling juxtaposition of robotics with concepts like death and kindness is striking. However, the protagonist reveals that these plants are programmed to react this way and admits he forgot to read the manual, which specifies that the plant needs to be tapped, hugged, and smiled at every morning to stay alive and functional.

In such unnatural world which the protagonist navigates, he maintains a connection with the natural human world through his elderly parents who live outside the city, evading digital control. The parents are a part of a “revolt cult” advocating digital minimalism, “technoskepticism” (Alotaibi, 2022, p. 16), and a reduced reliance on technology and AI in daily life. This group live on the periphery, where they homeschool their children, build their own houses and grow their own food (Alotaibi, 2022, p.18). Despite the protagonist’s initial rejection of his parents’ beliefs, he later discovers that he has been abducted and transformed into a semi-robot, a revelation he once denied, emphasizing the divide between those who embraced technology and those who rejected it.

This divide reflects poststructuralist concerns. Power structures emerge within the digitized city, where surveillance and control govern daily life. The city’s inhabitants are closely monitored, their lives shaped by digital control. In the novel, the city itself becomes a character—an entity fully digitized and governed by algorithms. People are no longer purely human; they undergo partial mechanization in which their bodies are implanted with tracking chips. Even their names reflect this transformation; characters are assigned identifiers like the M-35, A-7, B24 or lieutenant B4. These names signify their new identities as components of an organized, digitized system. Their once-human essence is now entwined with the efficiency of technology, transforming them into entities designed to function in specific ways and serve a larger agenda. Deviance is

completely intolerable, and highly trained agents will relentlessly pursue anyone engaging in any “technoskeptical move” (Alotaibi, 2022, 107). This serves to highlight how “fear exists in relation to AI’s exercise of constitutional power” (Burgess, 2022, p. 132), suggesting that such technological control can lead to a profound erosion of humanity, autonomy, agency and personal connection within a highly controlled system.

AI is frequently portrayed as dangerous, with one of the most common tropes in science fiction being the depiction of a dystopian future (Matthews, 2023). This notion aligns with the idea commonly presented in SF that technology can advance “to a point at which the growth of technology would become unstoppable, resulting in an irreversible change to civilization” (Burgess, 2022, p. 132). Alotaibi’s novel exemplifies this concept in its climax. The narrative illustrates how digitization can metamorphose human life into a posthumanist digital nightmare, in which the protagonist is compelled to question everything around him as he grapples with his own humanity and identity. On one hand, technology provides him with efficiency, connectivity, and progress; on the other, it hollows out the essence of what it means to be human. In the speculative world of the novel, AI algorithms quantify emotions, relationships, and experiences, reducing everything, even trees, grass, and water to mere data points. Friends become digital products, with their authenticity increasingly blurred.

Some narratives in science fiction, such as *Frankenstein*, “deal with an artificial life form rebelling against its creator, Victor Frankenstein, a scientist who doesn’t take responsibility for his creation” (Määttä et al., 2021, p. 55). In contrast, there are also narratives where “where AIs are in full control and create new and different civilisations” in which “humanity has often been reduced to the role of pets and children to the AI, bereft of any vital function in society” (Määttä et al., 2021, p. 55). In *Raf Al Youm*, the protagonist’s journey embodies these posthumanist themes.

Initially rejecting his parents’ beliefs, he confronts his own transformation into a semi-robotic human. Moreover, he is torn between two time periods: a dreamlike past recalled through vivid memories and a starkly numerical present that distorts his perception of the natural world, transforming every aspect of life into digital products. The past—rich with organic connections—feels increasingly like a distant dream, while the present renders reality unrecognizable.

The question of humanity and human agency becomes particularly clear in the novel’s compelling conclusion. The final chapter depicts a revolutionary resistance rising against digital tyranny, breaking its silence to engage in active, albeit violent, opposition. Its members, primarily undigitized humans, traverse the glass city, vandalizing and destroying everything in their path. The once beautiful, temperate sky dome surrounding the city transforms into a menacing red, from which weapons are launched, targeting both revolutionaries and innocent civilians alike. For the first time, the protagonist experiences anger and resistance, driven by a “desire to destroy all glass cities” (Alotaibi, 2022, p. 108), as he comes to terms with the extent of the authority’s oppression and the malevolence it conceals against its citizens.

This rage culminates in a pivotal moment where he sets fire to the city’s fuel depot, stepping into the flames and exclaiming: “Now I am entering the furnace, eager to see what my burning will look like; will it be human, mechanical, or would I simply disappear?” (Alotaibi, 2022, p. 108). This act represents a profound confrontation with his own identity and agency. However, he does not witness his own combustion; instead, he vanishes abruptly, as if he were merely a digital entity. The novel describes his end as entering into a “pure whiteness, a whiteness devoid of weight, mass, or sensation,” a state that he reflects does not resemble “the original world [he] knew” nor “anything [he] had or had not obtained from the shelves of daily products” (Alotaibi, 2022, p.

109). All he knows is that this place existed prior to his own existence, underscoring the unsettling implications of a reality where identity and humanity are fundamentally altered by technology.

The protagonist's uncertainty about his own fate—whether he will burn, become mechanical, or simply disappear—reflects deep existential questions about identity and existence. His entry into the “whiteness” that lacks familiar qualities suggests a philosophical or spiritual resolution, where conventional understandings of reality had dissolved. The novels thought-provoking ending with its abstract nature invites readers to reflect on broader themes such as the consequences of technological and societal control, the limits of human understanding, and the search for meaning in a highly regulated or digitalized world. The shift from physical destruction to a more abstract or existential conclusion underscores the novel's thematic exploration of resistance and the nature of existence.

### Literary Expression

Paul Matthews (2023) in his discussion of the intersection between neuroscience and science fiction stories asserts:

The imaginative leap needed to enter alien ‘heads’ requires huge empathy and creativity on the part of both the reader and author in order to transcend most human constraints and experience. Still, this is a much harder task than writing in the first or third (human) person and requires very careful and innovative use of language, as referents and connotations may be very different than those shared by humans. (2023, p. 11)

Alotaibi's *Raf Al Yawm* exemplifies this complexity through its unique narrative style. By immersing readers in a dystopian world where technology mediates human experience, Alotaibi invites them to navigate the minds of characters whose identities are fragmented and redefined by mechanization.

She explores the boundaries of storytelling through her unconventional style, employing narrative techniques, stylistic choices, and thematic motifs that defy traditional conventions. The choice of title itself is significant “*Shelf of Daily Products*, alludes to commodification and the dominance of consumer values” (Al-Din, 2023). Her approach invites readers to engage with the text in novel ways, prompting questions about the nature of authorship and the role of AI in creative processes. As we explore Alotaibi's work, we will examine how her unique narrative style reflects these complexities and critiques the evolving relationship between humanity and artificial intelligence.

### Fragmented narration and shattered characters

In *Raf Al Yawm*, Alotaibi employs fragmented narration to mirror the fractured reality of her characters. Alotaibi's narrative lacks a proper beginning or coherent flow of time, as the narrator shifts back and forth in his accounts. The disintegration of language and narrative structure reflects the disempowerment of individuals in a digitized world. Just as AI algorithms break down complex tasks into discrete steps, the novel's narrative splinters into shards, illustrating how characters become mere fragments of their former selves, with their agency eroded.

The dystopian backdrop of *Raf Al Yawm* amplifies the protagonist's sense of helplessness. As noted, “popular representations of AI in science fiction frequently evoke dystopian visions of robots and intelligences that are a threat to humankind” (Burgess, 2022, p. 129). In this context, individuals are reduced to cogs in a digital machine; their feelings and intuitions into “internal knowledge processing” (Alotaibi, 2022, p. 50); and even their names into codes. Their autonomy wanes as algorithms dictates their choices. Despair permeates the novel—the despair of being trapped within a system that commodifies emotions, relationships, and even memories. The absence of agency drives

characters to desperate acts such as “self-erasure” (Alotaibi, 2022); the act of deleting oneself—whether from social media, databases, or memory archives—becomes a symbol of surrender. It’s a desperate attempt to reclaim agency, even if through negation.

The fragmented narrative structure and non-linear chronology disrupt conventional storytelling, creating a complex web that challenges readers to actively engage with the text. This technique not only alters the perception of time and sequence but also enhances the thematic depth by reflecting the novel’s exploration of fragmented identities and realities.

### *Innovative poetics*

Alotaibi’s artistic exploration of the hybrid narrator’s consciousness exemplifies the authors’ endeavor to “portray the nonhuman despite the human constraints and reference points they have to work with” (Matthews, 2023, p.13). Alotaibi masterfully navigates between the ordinary and the extraordinary, blurring the distinctions between organic and artificial life through linguistic choices, intentionally diverging from conventional literary language. Instead of relying solely on established vocabulary, she employs a lexicon that transcends norms with terms like “friend product,” “recycled lovers,” “parental production line,” “children production line” and “mental jamming” (Alotaibi, 2022). These phrases add an unfamiliar poetic resonance, evoking both the mundane and the extraordinary.

The term “friend product” particularly is an example of such linguistic unfamiliar choices. While “friend” traditionally implies a relationship based on emotional connection and companionship, in the context of the novel, it is redefined as a transactional and commodified entity. On the other hand, “product” is a stark contrast to the emotional weight associated with “friend.” The cold, market-driven connotation clashes with our expectations. The protagonist voices his dissatisfaction with a previous “friend

product” he once owned, stating: “This is not what friends are bought for!” (Alotaibi, 2022, p. 6). This commodification challenges the natural human perception of friendship as a meaningful and reciprocal relationship. Traditionally, friends are valued for their emotional support and mutual care, not as commodities to be purchased. In the novel, however, friends are reduced to mere products, designed to function in specific ways, respond predictably, and demand nothing in return. This novel concept disrupts our assumptions about friendship, revealing the narrative’s underlying critique of consumer culture and technology.

Similarly, Alotaibi introduces the concept of “recycled lovers.” This phrase blends the familiar “lovers” with the unexpected “recycled”. The poetic resonance lies in the paradox: love, typically associated with uniqueness and passion, becomes a commodity—a recycled emotion. It challenges conventional romantic notions. As readers encounter this phrase, they grapple with its implications. According to Matthews, (2023), “in developing original angles to alien and artificial minds, authors have found it useful to diverge from prevalent trends and overused plot devices” (2023, p. 17). Both “friend product” and “recycled lovers” operate within the narrative language, not merely as concepts or labels; they work as blot devices that shape the events, relationships and the novel’s world.

The novel’s differentiation lies not only in its idea but also in its linguistic audacity, brevity and resonance—a deliberate departure from the ordinary. It skillfully finds a “balance between the known and unknown” (Matthews, 2023, p.22). It encapsulates an entire novel socio-technological landscape, inviting reflection. By introducing such linguistic choices, Alotaibi sets her novel apart. It refuses to conform to Saudi literary conventions. In doing so, *Raf Al Yawm* challenges readers to navigate this linguistic terrain. It demands active engagement, pushing us beyond familiar language boundaries.

### *Futuristic description*

The narrative is filled with futuristic descriptions, with the author inventing new terminology and imagery to express a strange digital world, such as “digital water,” “metal rain,” “glass city” “robotic plant” and “dispossessed human bodies” on which surgeries leave no marks (Alotaibi, 2022). The settings are equally unfamiliar, featuring abstract spaces such as “methodological confiscation point,” “unit of recycling old friends,” “new configuration zone,” and “brains-resetting organization” (Alotaibi, 2022). These settings, which are characteristics of the novel’s dystopian world, contribute to the overall disorientation and sense of alienation that readers experience. All of which are unconventional and “serve as means of highlighting the contrast between the old world and the world of machines” (Ahmed, 2023). Moreover, the aim of this mechanical language, besides endowing the narrative with dynamism and vitality, is to communicate the theme of commodification and digitalization that takes control of humanity in this speculative future.

This stylistic variation demonstrates how “the range of narrative style in the [SF] genre [...] varies from more realist to more impressionist and abstract, allowing different locations of meaning-making” (Matthews, 2023, p. 25). In the context of the given narrative, the futuristic descriptions and unconventional settings can be seen as examples of a more impressionist or abstract style. This stylistic choice allows for a more subjective and experimental exploration of the themes, such as the commodification and digitalization of humanity.

The stylistic choices, including the integration of futuristic digital and physical elements, function as a formal experiment that questions the boundaries between the tangible and the virtual. This blending serves as a critical commentary on the influence of technology on human perception and experience. By employing these techniques, Alotaibi foregrounds the interaction between form and content,

emphasizing the thematic exploration of control, resistance, and the impact of technological mediation on narrative structure.

### *Question of Authenticity*

The rapid emergence and unconventional narrative styles of *Raf Al Yawm* have ignited debates surrounding its authorship (Al-Qahtani, 2022). Critics have questioned whether the text could be a product of artificial intelligence due to its mechanical language and futuristic perspective (Al-Qahtani, 2022). Moreover, the novel’s departure from established Saudi literary norms have further fuelled speculation about its origins. However, no concrete evidence supports these claims.

One common critique of *Raf Al Yawm* is its perceived minimalism in description and world-building. However, this aspect aligns with a broader convention within science fiction, where “minimalism in style can apply to plot and to world-building—the detail of fictional societies and places” (Matthews, 2023, p. 23). This stands in contrast to the more intricate and detailed narratives often found in contemporary Saudi literature, which typically emphasizes rich world-building and nuanced language choices.

In *Raf Al Yawm*, recurring simple linguistic structures appear throughout the text, presented in slightly varying forms which critics believe to be a common aspect of AI writing (Al-Qahtani, 2022). This stylistic choice may reflect the author’s intent to capture the essence of a digitized world, where “machines do not converse with themselves nor seek to evolve linguistically, and the language of machines is not hindered by repetition” (Al-Din, 2023). This observation is echoed by the protagonist, who, embodying a hybrid identity, remarks on his mother’s eloquence: “My mother’s words always sound wonderful in their formulation; they’re just unlike mine” (Alotaibi, 2022, p. 65). Thus, the novel’s seemingly cold and technical language is a device to reflect the digitized worlds it depicts. This deliberate choice “appears to favor all things human while rejecting

anything artificial” (Ahmed, 2023). It prompts critical reflections on technology’s impact on human life. Through this lens, Alotaibi’s narrative strategy can be seen as a deliberate commentary on the limitations of language in an automated society.

The influence of AI on narrative structure and its ability to evoke genuine emotional resonance is a subject of ongoing inquiry (Hitsuwari et al., 2023). By generating content, recognizing patterns, and tailoring narratives to individuals, AI is reshaping how stories are created and experienced. However, concerns remain about the originality, ethical implications, and emotional depth of AI-generated narratives (Swathi and Dhayalakrishnan, 2024). As AI technology advances, it is crucial to carefully consider its potential benefits and drawbacks in the realm of storytelling.

*Raf Al Yawm* by Alotaibi serves as a poignant exploration of these concerns. While addressing themes like the commodification of humanity in a digital age, Alotaibi uses her novel to critically examine the impact of AI on storytelling itself. Her complex yet concise language and innovative vocabulary contrast sharply with the perceived limitations of AI-generated text, demonstrating a distinctly human approach to narrative. This combination of human sensibility and technological critique not only enriches the narrative but also invites readers to reflect on the evolving role of AI in literature. By juxtaposing human creativity with the mechanization of storytelling, *Raf Al Yawm* becomes a nuanced commentary on the potential and limitations of AI, challenging our understanding of authenticity and emotional depth in modern narratives.

Alotaibi’s work transcends the mere portrayal of AI as a technological phenomenon. Instead, it utilizes AI as a tool to reimagine storytelling itself. By using it as a narrative device to explore complex themes of identity, humanity, and societal transformation to challenge traditional storytelling, critique societal norms, explore human-AI interactions,

and foster emotional resonance, ultimately inviting readers to reflect on the complexities of creativity and authenticity in a digital age. While the novel’s narrative style and speculative exploration of technology and the future have raised concerns about its authenticity, it remains a significant contribution to the Saudi literary landscape.

## Conclusions

Najwa Alotaibi’s *Raf Al-Youm* offers a provocative exploration of humanity’s future under technological dominance. Through its dystopian narrative, the novel vividly depicts a world where AI and digitization commodify human relationships and identities. The protagonist, through his rejection of his family’s ideology, dull emotions toward friends and lovers, and insatiable desire for instant gratification, embodies the complexities of contemporary existence. His struggle illustrates the ways in which technology can alienate us from authentic human connections and genuine emotional experiences. In a world increasingly dominated by digital interactions, the protagonist’s journey resonates deeply with our own challenges, making him a figure with whom we can relate, even if we do not fully identify. As one reviewer notes, “this hybrid-human-machine figure, with whom we may not fully identify, is a reflection of us” (Saleem, 2022).

The broader theme of disconnection in the age of technology, highlighting how our aspirations, frustrations, and emotional numbness often mirror his own, inviting us to confront the uncomfortable truths about our lives in a hyper-connected yet profoundly isolating world. In this context, it becomes clear that “science-fictional AI is not necessarily about the technology but can be a metaphor for other social issues” (Hermann1, 2021, p.320). Alotaibi skilfully navigates this terrain, using AI as a dramatic means to reflect on the human condition, thereby enriching her exploration of identity and agency in an increasingly mechanized world.

Moreover, Alotaibi's use of fragmented storytelling and innovative language challenges traditional narrative forms, reflecting the novel's themes of dehumanization and existential crisis. The novel's linguistic lexicon, drawn from outside the usual literary language, introduces a

new poetic dimension, capturing the current moment with its uniqueness and artistry. Ultimately, *Raf Al-Youm* is a significant contribution to contemporary Saudi literature, offering a critical perspective on the integration of technology into human life and storytelling.

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