Afshaha Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Arab
https://ejournal.uin-malang.ac.id/index.php/afshaha/index
e-ISSN: 2963-9913

AESTHETICS AND POLITICAL PERSUASION IN CONTEMPORARY SAUDI ARABIAN POETRY ON NEOM: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE

Muhammad Firmansyah[1*], Ade Kosasih[2], Ooh Hodijah[3], Abdul Barr Nashir[4]
[1,2,3]Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia
[4]Al-Azhar University, Egypt

Article History:
Received : 07/02/2026
Revised : 28/04/2026
Accepted : 28/04/2026
Published : 29/04/2026

Keywords:
Contemporary literature, Neom, Sociology of literature, Swingewood

***Corresponding Author:**
muhammad22492@mail.unpad.ac.id

Abstract: Literature has become an important tool for expressing and validating ideas about the future of the country as Saudi Arabia increases its cultural and symbolic commitment in the Neom megaproject. This article analyzes how award-winning poems from a Neom-themed poetry competition held by Nadi Tabuk Adabi function both as aesthetic representations of the Neom project and as instruments of ideological conditioning in contemporary Saudi Arabia. Employing a qualitative descriptive method, this study draws on Alan Swingewood's sociology of literature to examine poetry as a social product shaped by institutional and political contexts. Hermeneutic textual analysis is applied to three winning poems, focusing on diction, metaphor, symbolism, and narrative structure, while situating these elements within their socio-political environment. The findings show that Neom is consistently represented as a utopian, transformative, and inevitable future through futuristic imagery. Beyond textual representation, the poetry competition itself operates as a cultural institution that conditions meaning production through prestige, recognition, and symbolic legitimacy rather than coercion.This research contributes to Arabic literary studies by demonstrating the continued political function of poetry in contemporary state-sponsored cultural practices and by framing modern Arabic poetry as a site of ideological negotiation rather than purely aesthetic expression.

الملخص: أصبحت الأدبيات أداة مهمة للتعبير عن الأفكار المتعلقة بمستقبل البلاد والتحقق منها، حيث تزيد المملكة العربية السعودية من التزامها الثقافي والرمزي في مشروع نيوم الضخم .تحلل هذه المقالة كيف تعمل القصائد الفائزة بجوائز في مسابقة شعرية حول مشروع نيوم، نظمتها نادي تبوك الأدبية، كتمثيلات جمالية للمشروع، وكأدوات للتأثير الأيديولوجي في المملكة العربية السعودية المعاصرة. وباستخدام منهج وصفي نوعي، تستند هذه الدراسة إلى علم اجتماع الأدب لآلان سوينغوود

لدراسة الشعر كمنتج اجتماعي يتشكل بفعل السياقات المؤسسية والسياسية. ويُطبق التحليل النصي التأويلي على ثلاث قصائد فائزة، مع التركيز على اللغة، والاستعارة، والرمزية، والبنية السردية، ووضع هذه العناصر في سياقها الاجتماعي والسياسي. وتُظهر النتائج أن نيوم تُصوَّر باستمرار كمستقبل طوباوي، تحويلي، وحتمي، من خلال صور مستقبلية. إلى جانب التمثيل النصي، تعمل مسابقة الشعر نفسها كمؤسسة ثقافية تُحدد إنتاج المعنى من خلال المكانة والتقدير والشرعية الرمزية بدلاً من الإكراه. يُسهم هذا البحث في الدراسات الأدبية العربية من خلال إظهار الوظيفة السياسية المستمرة للشعر في الممارسات الثقافية المعاصرة التي ترعاها الدولة، ومن خلال تأطير الشعر العربي الحديث كموقع للتفاوض الأيديولوجي بدلاً من كون تعبيراً جمالياً بحتاً.

Introduction

Neom is a future megaproject under construction in northwest Saudi Arabia, powered entirely by renewable energy, designed to be a model for sustainable living, work, and well-being. It is part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, a plan to diversify the economy and reduce dependence on oil (Farag, 2019). Spanning approximately 26,500 square kilometers along the Red Sea coast, the project encompasses multiple zones, including smart cities, industrial hubs, tourism destinations, and renewable energy infrastructures, signaling an unprecedented scale of ambition in the region (Ilmi & Zawawi, 2024).

In official discourse and pro-government media narratives, Neom is consistently portrayed as a symbol of Saudi Arabia’s progressive, future-oriented, and globally integrated identity, emphasizing themes of innovation, sustainability, and human-centered development. This narrative constructs Neom not merely as an infrastructure project but as a civilizational leap and an inevitable future that aligns national aspirations with global technological trends. However, this optimistic framing coexists with critical counter-narratives that highlight ethical, social, and human rights concerns, including forced displacement of local communities and the suppression of dissent related to the project’s implementation (Ilmi & Zawawi, 2024).

Neom specifically addresses the social and cultural domains in addition to being an aspirational national emblem in the domains of technology, economics, and sustainability. The project claims to aim to create a multicultural space that enables cultural exchange and social integration on a global scale (Touri, 2024). Vast dimensions targeted by Neom have ultimately generated a significant wave of response. The rise of modern poetry that

represents Neom as a utopian space, full of hope, and transcending the limits of current reality is one example of this reaction.

Poetry plays a significant social role in the Arab tradition. An Arabic proverb states that "*Asy-Syi'r Asy'ar*" implies "poetry has a very wide reach" (Gatt, 2021). Early in its development during the Jahiliyah period, literature emerged as a space for aesthetic expression and a response to the Arab people's longing for peace amidst the chaos of war (Wati et al., 2023). As Arabic poetry evolved, its thematic orientation also underwent significant transformation. In the modern era, traditional poetic themes did not disappear, but rather expanded in scope and function. For instance, the theme of heroism, which once celebrated individual or tribal glory, increasingly shifted toward glorifying collective identity, national achievement, and the imagined greatness of a people or state (Asih & Anum, 2023). In this case, rather than purely aesthetic contemplation, Arabic poetry also functioned as a medium for social communication, a tool of legitimacy, and political propaganda. Poets utilized their rhetorical and aesthetic skills to garner support for particular figures, groups, or interests (Gatt, 2021).

As part of the wider Arab world, Saudi Arabia also participated in the broader evolution of modern Arabic literature. Poetry, as the most central and enduring genre in Arabic literary history, remained the dominant form through which social values, political authority, and cultural aspirations were articulated. Consequently, Modern Saudi literary development is closely tied to the Kingdom's historical, religious, and institutional formation. From the reformist movement initiated by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, literature and rhetoric in Saudi Arabia evolved as tools of moral guidance, social order, and collective identity. As an integral part of the broader Arabic literary tradition, Saudi literature inherited poetry as its central genre, which historically functioned not only as aesthetic expression but also as a medium for praise, legitimacy, and social commentary. Genres such as praise (*madh*), heroism, lamentation (*ritha'*), religious poetry, satire, and social criticism became prominent vehicles for expressing both continuity with classical forms and engagement with modern realities (Dahami, 2020).

The development of modern Saudi poetry also accelerated through the emergence of literary modernism in the 1970s and 1980s, when poets such as Muḥammad al-Thubayti, Muḥammad Al-ʿAli, and Fawziyya Abu Khalid began experimenting with free verse and new thematic concerns. Rather than focusing solely on traditional praise or elegy, these poets explored questions of identity, modernity, national transformation, and the relationship between tradition and rapid social change. According to Fakhreddine and Stetkevych (2023), Saudi modernist poets treated contemporary reality itself as a new source of poetic

invention, while reimagining classical symbols such as the desert, the palm tree, and the homeland within a modern sociopolitical framework. This shift demonstrates that Saudi poetry had become not only a vehicle of preservation but also a medium for negotiating national consciousness and future aspirations.

Scholars have also noted that the development of Saudi literature passed through several overlapping stages beginning from the recapture of Riyadh in 1902, which marked the foundation of modern Saudi Arabia. Rather than following rigid Western literary categories such as Romanticism or Modernism, Saudi literary development reflected local historical and cultural conditions shaped by state formation, educational reform, and institutional patronage (Almeflh, 2004). This gradual evolution strengthened the close relationship between literary production and national development.

Following the unification of the Kingdom under King Abdulaziz, the Saudi state actively promoted education, cultural production, and literary institutions as foundations of national development. Early platforms such as Umm Al-Qura newspaper played a crucial role in fostering intellectual life, enabling poets and writers to engage in social criticism, reformist thought, and poetic experimentation within a state-supported cultural environment. This historical trajectory established poetry as a genre operating in close alignment with institutional authority (Dahami, 2020).

Within this continuum, to mark Saudi Arabia's 90th anniversary in 2020, Nadi Tabuk Adabi, a literary club directly affiliated with the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Information, held a national poetry competition entitled “Neom, the Place of Dreamers.” The competition required that the works produced reflect the project's utopian vision, as expressed by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman: "Neom is the place of dreamers.". Through this competition mechanism, instead of directly dictating the content of the works through this competitive process, the state fosters cultural conditions that encourage poets to replicate the official narrative about Neom through artistic manifestations that seem voluntary and imaginative.

From a corpus of more than seventy poems submitted to the competition, three poems were selected as the primary objects of analysis, corresponding to the first, second, and third prize winners as determined by the official jury. The first prize poem is entitled الزمكان by Yassir Ali Gharib, presents Neom through a grand synthesis of temporality and futurity, foregrounding themes of inevitability and civilizational transformation. The second-place poem was entitled مُزمل بالرؤى by Yusuf Madkhali, emphasizes visionary anticipation and collective aspiration, framing Neom as a moral and imaginative project

rather than a purely material one. The third-place poem was أحلام تلوذ بالبقاء by Husain Ali Ammar that articulates Neom through the language of endurance and hope, reinforcing the project's portrayal as a necessary response to historical and existential challenges.

The relationship between literature and politics has been widely studied. Buana's (2020) research outlines the relationship between literature and politics that was clearly visible during the reign of the Umayyad Dynasty. During the Umayyad Dynasty, poetry played an active role in the political conflict after the Battle of Siffin and in the patronage relationship between Yazid bin Mu'awiyah as a ruler and Al-Akhṭal as a poets who legitimized power by rewarding poets who composed poetry nuanced with praise or flattery. Similar findings were also presented by Alebdha (2021) in the context of the Abbasid Dynasty, where praise poetry (*madh*) was used by poets such as Ali ibn Jabala to the Caliph al-Ma'mun for political purposes. Meanwhile, Al-Azzam et al. (2014) revealed research related to literature and politics in a more modern era entitled Socio-Cultural, Historical, and Political Allusions in the Translation of the Saudi National Day Poem: "Salvation, O Gracious King." This research shows that Saudi Arabia indirectly directs national singers to express public loyalty to the king through various national songs that are nuanced with flattery and praise.

Although these studies have revealed the intimate relationship between literature and power, there are still very few studies that particularly look at poetry won in literary competitions as a means of ideological indoctrination in the modern Saudi Arabian setting. This research uses a sociological approach to literature, drawing on the ideas of Alan Swingewood, who views literary works as social products and cultural documentation arising from the relationships between writers, institutions, and power structures (Muamaroh et al., 2022). From this perspective, literature is not reduced to mere sociological facts but rather is understood as an aesthetic product that both reflects and shapes social reality. In order to understand the metaphors, symbolism, and utopian stories included in the poetry, text analysis is carried out through a hermeneutic reading.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how the winning poems of the Neom competition represent the Neom project through metaphor and symbolism, and how these poems function as a means of ideological conditioning and cultural persuasion in the contemporary Saudi Arabian socio-political context. Thus, this study is expected to provide academic contributions in understanding the role of literature as an aesthetic medium intertwined with power, while enriching studies on the sociology of Arabic literature in the modern era.

Method

This research is a descriptive qualitative research using the sociology of literature approach as formulated by Alan Swingewood. Qualitative research was chosen because the object of study is a literary text that is full of symbolic, ideological, and aesthetic meaning, so that it is able to describe social, cultural, and humanitarian phenomena in depth based on descriptive data that is narrative in nature. The descriptive approach is used to describe systematically, factually, and analytically the social phenomena represented in the Neom-themed poems.

Within Swingewood's framework, literary works are understood as social products and cultural documents born from the relationship between authors, institutions, and specific socio-political structures (Wahyudi, 2013). Therefore, this study views poetry not only as an autonomous text but also as an aesthetic expression intertwined with social and ideological contexts beyond the text. Poetry in this study is analyzed as a medium for representing Neom's utopian narrative and as part of the cultural mechanisms functioning within the contemporary Saudi Arabian power system.

Primary and secondary data sources are the two categories of data sources used in this study. Three winning poems from Nadi Tabuk Adabi's 2020 national poetry competition with a Neom topic serve as the main sources of information , namely: الزمكان by Yassir Ali Gharib, مُزمل بالرؤى by Yusuf Madkhali, and أحلام تلوذ بالبقاء by Husain Ali Ammar. The three poems were obtained from the official website of Sahah Arabiyyah https://sanews.sa/13851087/, where the publication listing of the winning works is dated 28 September 2020, which contains publications of the winning works.

Secondary data sources include books, journal articles, and previous research relevant to literary and political studies, cultural propaganda, contemporary Arabic poetry, and sociological theories of literature, particularly Alan Swingewood's thinking and hermeneutic approaches to literary text analysis.

Data collection techniques in this study were carried out through reading and note-taking techniques. The reading technique was carried out by reading the poetic text repeatedly and in depth to understand the language structure, choice of diction, imagery, metaphors, and symbolism used in representing Neom. The reading was carried out not only at the literal level, but also at the connotative and symbolic levels. The note-taking technique was used to record parts of the text that were considered relevant to the research focus, such as metaphorical expressions, symbols of space and time, representations of the

future, and utopian narratives related to the Neom project. This note-taking aimed to organize the textual data to facilitate the analysis process.

The data analysis in this study was conducted using the hermeneutic method. Hermeneutics was chosen because it allows for in-depth interpretation of the text's meaning by considering the relationship between the text, the social context, and the reader's horizon of meaning. The analysis process was carried out in several stages, namely: The analytical process began with an intensive and repeated reading of each poem to gain familiarity with its linguistic structure and thematic orientation. During this stage, key aesthetic and symbolic elements such as diction, metaphor, imagery, and narrative movement were identified and systematically grouped based on their thematic relevance to representations of Neom. These textual findings were then interpreted by relating them to the broader socio-political context of the Neom project.

In the interpretation stage, the results of the hermeneutic reading of the text are connected to Swingewood's sociological framework of literature to examine how the poems function as both a reflection and a construction of social reality. Thus, the analysis goes beyond the intrinsic meaning of the text but also explores how the poems represent, normalize, and popularize Neom's utopian narrative as part of the state's cultural strategy.

Result and Discussion

According to this study, the winning poems in the 2020 Neom poetry competition organized by Nadi Tabuk Adabi not only serve as individual aesthetic expressions but also serve as part of the social and institutional mechanisms in building the legitimacy of state projects. Furthermore, the research results indicate that the dominant poetic genre in the winning works is a combination of *madh* (praise) and *fakhr* (collective pride). *Madh* is directed at the figure of the leader and the state project, while *fakhr* is used to emphasize the greatness of the Arab nation and Saudi Arabia's strategic position in the global future. The discussion that follows presents the whole results.

Aesthetic Reading

To understand how Neom-themed poems function as a persuasive medium, analysis must begin with the realm of aesthetics. In the literary tradition, particularly within the framework of the sociology of literature, intrinsic elements such as diction, metaphor, and symbolism cannot be viewed solely as aesthetic devices, but rather as means of constructing meaning intertwined with specific socio-political contexts. This perspective is also consistent with the classical Arabic critical tradition, where aesthetic evaluation was closely

connected to meaning and intellectual effect. As shown by Noy (2023), the development of Arabic literary criticism from the eleventh century onward, particularly through figures such as Ibn Sina and ʿAbd Al-Qahir Al-Jurjani, introduced an aesthetic framework in which poetic beauty was understood through structures of wonder, rhetorical effect, and semantic depth rather than surface ornamentation alone. In this tradition, figurative language was valued for its capacity to produce cognitive and emotional impact, making aesthetics inseparable from interpretation and persuasion.

As argued in sociological literary studies influenced by Alan Swingewood, literary texts function simultaneously as aesthetic objects and as social documents that reflect, mediate, and shape the conditions of their production (Muamaroh et al., 2022). Therefore, the discussion at this stage focuses on the aesthetic analysis of the three winning poems of the 2020 Nadi Tabuk Adabi competition, examining how language choices and poetic structures are used to construct the image of Neom as a utopian, progressive, and hopeful space. This analysis provides a starting point for examining how poetic aesthetics function as a cultural medium that allows political narratives to be conveyed in a subtle, persuasive, and seemingly natural manner.

Dominant Diction Patterns: Vision, Movement, and Transcendence

The dominance of diction related to vision, movement, and transcendence in the three winning Neom-themed poems reveals a coherent ideological pattern rather than an incidental stylistic choice. This finding resonates with earlier studies on Arabic praise poetry, which demonstrate that elevated and future-oriented diction has historically functioned as a linguistic strategy for legitimizing political authority and projecting power beyond present realities (Buana, 2020). As shown in Buana's (2020) study of Al-Akhṭal's panegyrics to Yazid ibn Muʿawiyah, praise poetry frequently employs metaphorical language of elevation, motion, and grandeur to construct rulers and political projects as transcendent forces rather than historically contingent entities. All things considered, the three winning poems in the Neom competition show comparatively uniform and mutually reinforcing diction patterns, especially in the vocabulary domains of transcendence, movement, and vision. This diction constructs the image of Neom as a future space that transcends the historical and geographical realities of Saudi Arabia. Words such as رؤية (vision), الأحلام (dream), المجد البعيد (distant glory), and other vocabulary signifying mobility and acceleration are dominant elements that recur throughout the texts.

This can be seen, for example, in the expression in the first poem by Yassir Ali Gharib بجناحي رؤية طار بنا الوقت وأسرى (with two wings of vision, time flies carrying us and delivering

the journey), which combines the diction of vision with the metaphor of movement to emphasize acceleration towards the future. Comparable mechanisms have been identified in studies of Abbasid and Umayyad panegyric poetry, where metaphors of movement and ascent function to naturalize political ambition and portray authority as dynamic, inevitable, and forward-moving rather than coercive (Alebdha, 2021).

However, while classical panegyric poetry often centered on individual rulers or patrons, the Neom poems mark a shift toward the abstraction of authority. For instace , in the phrase وتسلق المجد البعيد (climbing to distant glory) in the third poem. This diction presupposes the future as something that does not come naturally, but must be conquered through will, vision, and political courage and no longer signifies as personal aspiration but is transformed into a collective, state-directed imagination. Another example, the use of the word الأحلام in various contexts no longer functions as an individual dream, but as a collective dream directed and legitimized by the state project, as implied in the line حينها تنتثر الأحلام من جفن الليالي (when dreams scatter from long nights). In this sense, the Neom poems reproduce a long-standing poetic logic in which political projects are framed as historical necessities propelled by vision and courage.

This finding extends previous scholarship by showing how contemporary state-sponsored poetry reconfigures traditional praise conventions to serve large-scale development narratives rather than personal patronage. As Alebdha (2021) argues, panegyric poetry functions performatively by reordering power relations and guiding public perception through subtle rhetorical means rather than overt political statements. The Neom poems operate in a similar fashion, but with the object of praise shifted from a ruler to a national future.

The dominance of these diction indicates that the three poems do not attempt to present Neom's reality in a concrete and factual manner, but rather symbolically and oriented toward the future. The future is represented as a near and achievable space, while the language in the poems is used to bridge the gap between political vision and public imagination. Within the framework of Swingewood's sociology of literature, this pattern of diction demonstrates how literary texts function as a medium of social documentation that is not neutral, but actively conditions how society imagines the future and its position within the state's ideological project.

Repeated Metaphors and Futuristic Imagery

Beyond shared diction patterns, the three winning poems consistently employ repeated metaphors grounded in futuristic and cosmic imagery. Neom is not represented as a concrete geographical or infrastructural space, but rather as a symbolic landscape that exceeds everyday human imagination. Metaphors of the sky, galaxies, and horizons appear consistently, forming a shared imaginative horizon: grand scale and global ambition. One of the most striking examples is the phrase وينشق مداها عن مجرات وأسراب نجوم (the horizon splits, revealing galaxies and swarms of stars), which moves Neom from the realm of physical development to the realm of the transcendent.

This metaphorical strategy corresponds with findings in earlier studies of Arabic political poetry, which show that cosmic and hyperbolic imagery has long been used to elevate political authority beyond historical contingency. Alebdha's analysis of Abbasid panegyric poetry demonstrates that exaggerated metaphors function performatively by transforming political figures and projects into symbols of inevitability and cosmic order rather than objects of rational evaluation (Alebdha, 2021). The Neom poems replicate this mechanism, but redirect it from individual rulers to a future-oriented state project, thereby updating classical panegyric conventions for contemporary ideological needs.

In addition, one of the three winning poems also exhibit a recurring pattern of meta-poetic metaphors, which are metaphors that specifically reflect the nature of poetry, language, and figures of speech themselves. The clear example appears in the verse صارت به هذي البلاد قصيدة (This country has become a poem). In this expression, Rather than describing Neom through poetry, the poet redefines Neom *as* poetry. This metaphor blurs the line between text and reality, so that Neom's project is not merely represented aesthetically, but is transformed into a symbolic entity inherent in the beauty, order, and perfection of poetry. By making "country" a "poem," the poet elevates the political project to the realm of aesthetics, implicitly placing it outside the realm of rational criticism. Previous studies from Ridwan et al. (2023) on metaphor in Arabic literature emphasize that such metaphors do not merely embellish meaning but actively shape conceptual understanding by relocating abstract or contested realities into culturally revered symbolic domains.

This meta-poetic metaphor framing is reinforced through the use of technical terms from the science of *ʿarudh*, لا تستسيغ اللحن والإقواء (He dislikes grammatical errors and rhyming defects). In the science of al-arudh, the phrases "*lahn*" and "*iqwa'*" literally allude to defects in poetry's language and structure. However, in a socio-political context, these

expressions function symbolically as a rejection of imperfection, deviation, and dissonance. Thus, Neom is framed as a project that "does not accept flaws," both aesthetically and ideologically. Criticism, opposition, or alternative views are implicitly positioned as "linguistic errors" that are unworthy of being present in the great poem Neom. As Buana's (2020) studies of classical praise poetry suggest, aesthetic norms are often mobilized as moral and ideological standards, where deviation from form implies deviation from legitimacy.

The culmination of this metaphorical pattern is seen in the verse حينها يمسي المجاز حقيقياً على أرض نيوم (At that time, metaphors became real in the land of Neom). This phrase marks the process by which figurative language is no longer understood as a product of imagination, but as a reality that is seemingly being realized. Similar processes have been identified in sociological readings of literature, where metaphor operates as a bridge that transforms speculative futures into perceived inevitabilities (Ridwan et al., 2023).

Taken together, the repetition of metaphors in the winning poems creates a normalizing effect of utopia, where a speculative future is presented as imminent and inevitable. Metaphor, in this context, is no longer decorative, but rather functions as an ideological device that bridges political vision with social reality.

Personification of Nature

Another prominent aesthetic strategy observed in the winning poems is the personification of nature, which frames the Neom project as part of a harmonious and consensual natural order. Nature is not positioned as a space conquered by the development project shown as a subject that willingly takes part in the transformation. One of the verse in the second poem, dawn is described as having a dialogue with water in a date palm tree صُبحٌ يحاور في النخيل الماء while in the next verse, the desert seems to receive a whisper to "become paradise" أوحى إلى الصحراء كوني جنة. This personification creates the impression that the ecological changes promised by Neom are taking place without resistance, even with the blessing of nature itself.

The personification of nature conveys a softness and emotional closeness, so that massive futuristic projects don't feel foreign or threatening. However, ideologically, this approach eliminates the conflict between power and local communities, between humans and nature, and between progress and the environment. Nature that "speaks," "receives orders," or "dialogues" is a symbolic domain that has been subdued through speech rather than empirical nature.

This strategy resonates with findings in previous studies on Arabic literary aesthetics, which note that personification often functions to domesticate abstract or potentially disruptive processes. Mautini's discussion of literary symbolism in modern Arabic texts emphasizes that when nature is personified, it is frequently used to soften ideological messages by translating structural power into emotionally intelligible narratives (Muamaroh et al., 2022). In the context of the Neom poems, this technique reconfigures large-scale technological and environmental intervention as a gentle, almost intimate dialogue rather than an act of domination.

At the same time, this personification operates ideologically by erasing conflict. As studies of sociological criticism in literature have shown, aesthetic harmony often masks underlying tensions between power, society, and environment (Buana, 2020). By portraying nature as a speaking and consenting subject, the poems eliminate the possibility of resistance, whether from the environment itself or from local human communities affected by the project. The desert does not resist transformation; it receives revelation. Nature does not suffer disruption; it participates in renewal. This narrative suppresses questions about displacement, ecological risk, or uneven power relations, replacing them with an image of inevitable harmony.

Furthermore, the use of speech-oriented personification is significant. Nature in these poems does not resist materially but responds verbally, through whispers, dialogue, and commands. As noted in previous analyses of metaphor and personification in Arabic poetry, speech functions as a symbolic marker of order and submission, where to "speak" is already to enter a human-defined semantic system . In this sense, nature's voice is not autonomous but already aligned with the ideological language of progress. What appears as dialogue is, in fact, a one-directional affirmation of the political vision.

The personification of nature also reinforces the effect of depoliticization. When nature is portrayed as welcoming, speaking, and transforming voluntarily, the space for criticism is narrowed. Development no longer appears as the result of questionable political decisions, but rather as a natural process in harmony with nature's will. At this point, aesthetics plays a direct role in building emotional consensus, a crucial prerequisite for subtle political persuasion.

The Absence of Problematic Diction

One of the mosr significantt findings in the analysis of the three winning poems of the Neom poetry competition is the consistent absence of diction representing social problems, conflicts, or structural tensions. When read as a whole corpus, the poems present a semantic field completely filled with diction nuanced by vision, hope, progressive movement, and future transcendence, without providing space for vocabulary containing the meaning of crisis, resistance, or ambivalence. There is no diction such as أَزْمَة (crisis), صِرَاع (conflict), رَفْض (rejection), or expressions that indicate doubt and failure.

This finding strongly resonates with earlier sociological approaches to literature which argue that literary texts do not function as neutral mirrors of social reality, but as selective constructions shaped by power relations. In Muamaroh et al. (2022) discussion of sociological literary criticism, the emphasis on what is omitted in a literary text can be as ideologically meaningful as what is explicitly articulated, particularly in texts produced within institutional or state-related contexts . From this perspective, the absence of problematic diction in the Neom poems should be understood not as a gap, but as a deliberate representational strategy that limits the range of permissible meanings.

A similar pattern has been identified in previous analyses of state-oriented or celebratory poetry in the Arab world. The study *O Gracious King* by Al-Azzam et al. (2014) demonstrates how laudatory poetic discourse often achieves ideological cohesion through silence, especially by excluding social tensions that might disrupt the image of harmony and legitimacy . In such texts, the absence of conflictual language functions to naturalize power and present political authority as uncontested. The Neom poems follow a comparable logic, where development is framed as unanimously beneficial and devoid of social cost.

In fact, in global discourse and public policy studies, the Neom project is often debated through sensitive issues such as the relocation of local residents, ecological impacts, social inequality, and economic risks. The absence of representation of these issues in the analyzed poems indicates that literary language does not function as a comprehensive reflection of social reality, but rather as a selective construction of reality that has been ideologically filtered. Thus, the absence of problematic diction cannot be understood as a lack of meaning, but as an active representational strategy.

The absence of problematic diction is also intertwined with the use of futuristic metaphors and transcendental symbolism discussed in the previous subchapter. When Neom is represented as a galaxy, light, heaven, or a metaphor that becomes reality, language containing conflict and suffering becomes aesthetically and ideologically incompatible. The presence of problematic diction would disrupt the unity of the clean, harmonious, and

visionary imagery that is intended to be constructed. Therefore, the elimination of such vocabulary actually strengthens the poem's symbolic cohesion and the effectiveness of its persuasive message.

From the perspective of literature's social function, this linguistic silence acts as a subtle mechanism of persuasion. Rather than explicitly convincing readers that the Neom project is without problems, these poems operate by removing problematic possibilities from the reader's imagination. In this way, readers are led to accept a simplified, orderly, and naturalized narrative of the future as something natural and undeniable. Persuasion does not come in the form of rational argument, but rather through imaginative framing that limits what is and is not permissible to imagine.

Political Persuasion

Poetry and the Mechanism of Cultural Persuasion

From the Jahili period to the modern era, Arabic poetry has played a role beyond mere aesthetic expression. Poets of the Jahili and early Islamic periods used poetry with various themes to achieve political, intellectual, and socio-cultural goals (Alebdha, 2021). This made poetry a propaganda vehicle used to shape public opinion, control historical narratives, and legitimize power (Gatt, 2021). The persuasive power of literature is not limited to poetic production itself, but also depends on how literary texts circulate within society. As noted by Alshhre (2023), literary transmission through institutions such as translation, publication, and cultural mediation allows literary works to shape broader social, political, and ideological discourse. Although translation may function as a tool of cultural hegemony and power structures, it also demonstrates how literature operates beyond aesthetic boundaries and becomes part of larger systems of influence and representation. This broader perspective strengthens the understanding of poetry as a cultural instrument capable of participating in both symbolic persuasion and ideological reproduction.

Within the framework of Alan Swingewood's sociology of literature, literary works can be understood as social documents that reflect the relationship between writers, institutions, and society. Swingewood emphasizes that literary texts do not emerge in a vacuum but are produced, circulated, and interpreted within specific social contexts that determine their direction and function. From this perspective, praise poetry (*al-madh*) cannot be read simply as the poet's personal expression, but rather as part of a social mechanism that connects aesthetic production to structures of patronage and the legitimacy of power (Stetkevych, 2016).

Previous research has shown that *madh* poetry functioned as a negotiating tool in the relationship between poets and patrons. Poets invested their skills in building a positive image of their patrons through praise, glorification, and symbolic framing, while patrons provided rewards in the form of material goods, protection, and social prestige. This reciprocal relationship gave rise to a relatively stable and long-term patronage system, as long as both parties felt they benefited (Alebdha, 2021). In this system, poetry production was not entirely free, but rather guided by the surrounding social and political needs.

However, in historical records, this mechanism underwent a transformation when rulers took the initiative to utilize poets. This phenomenon occurred because rulers recognized poetry's great potential as a tool for social control and propaganda. The rulers no longer just passively accepted poetry, but actively recruited, invited, or even controlled poets to write poetry that suited their interests, as happened with Al-Akhtal in the Umayyad era and Al-Mutanabbi in the Abbasid era (Buana, 2020).

A classic example of this mechanism is the relationship between Al-Mutanabbi and Saif Al-Daulah. Al-Mutanabbi's poems not only praised the ruler but also systematically constructed an image of heroic, visionary, and unwavering leadership. Through powerful poetic language, Saif al-Daulah was presented as the personification of glory and majesty, even though his leadership was historically fraught with political and moral problems (Albounaeeam, 2023). From Swingewood's perspective, such poetry functioned as social documents that helped construct an ideal political reality in the eyes of the public. Thus, a transformation occurred from mere economic patronage to ideological control, where rulers began to regulate poetry as part of their hegemonic project.

This phenomenon continues in modern contexts, such as during Saddam Hussein's reign in Iraq. Abdul Razzaq Abdul Wahid, one of Iraq's most renowned poets, produced poems depicting Saddam as a heroic leader who revived the nation's glory. These poems circulated not only in literary circles but were also integrated into state speeches, educational curricula, and official state media. Here, poetry became part of the state's symbolic apparatus, working systematically to establish political legitimacy.

A comparable mechanism can be observed in contemporary Saudi Arabia, particularly through poetry competitions organized by cultural institutions such as Nadi Tabuk Adabi. While these competitions appear to celebrate creativity and literary excellence, the analyzed Neom-themed poems reveal how poetic aesthetics are mobilized to construct and normalize a state-led futurist narrative. For example, the line بجناحي رؤية طار بنا الوقت وأسرى (with two wings of vision, time flies carrying us and delivering the journey), frames the

Neom project as an inevitable and accelerated journey toward the future, guided by vision rather than political decision-making. Similarly, expressions such as حينها يمسي المجاز حقيقياً على أرض نيوم (At that time, metaphors became real in the land of Neom.). collapse the boundary between imagination and reality, presenting the political project as a fulfilled destiny rather than a contested plan.

These poetic strategies mirror classical *madḥ* conventions while adapting them to contemporary ideological needs. Praise is no longer directed solely at individual rulers, but at abstract entities such as "vision," "future," and "nation," which function as depersonalized symbols of state authority. Elements of *fakhr* (collective pride) also emerge, portraying Neom as evidence of Arab and national success on a global stage. Through such representations, poetry participates in shaping emotional consensus around development and progress.

In the context of contemporary Saudi Arabia, Poetry is still used as a sociopolitical tool, but through more nuanced and formalized methods. Poetry competitions organized by official institutions such as Nadi Tabuk Adabi exemplify how the state constructs a space for cultural production that appears neutral and creative, but actually functions as a mechanism for conditioning meaning. Through competitions, poets from many backgrounds willingly contribute to the creation of nationalistic, progressive, and future-focused narratives, such as the Neom project. Ultimately, these competitions serve not only as a creative platform but also as a tool to reinforce government hegemony over public discourse.

In this way, Neom-themed poetry competitions exemplify how contemporary Arabic poetry continues to function as a mechanism of cultural persuasion. Through aesthetic elevation, symbolic abstraction, and institutional mediation, poetry contributes to the normalization of political narratives, transforming ideological projects into emotionally compelling and seemingly natural visions of the future.

Figuration of Leadership

Continuing the mechanisms of cultural persuasion discussed previously, one important strategy emerging in the data on the winning poems on the theme of Neom is the figuration of leadership. This strategy is most explicit in the third-place poem, but is functionally intertwined with the overall ideological narrative constructed by the competition. In the third verse, leadership is depicted through a series of dictions that emphasize active agency, courage, and future orientation, as in the verse ألقى بمختلف النهى أحلامه (He conveys his dreams with various prohibitions).

The next lines also emphasize leadership qualities, as in the phrases ولم يزل يختار من إعجازه إلهامهُ (He continues to choose inspiration from his wonders) dan ولا يُريح زمامه (never loosens his reins). Leadership in this poem is ultimately presented as a combination of courage to surpass limits and absolute control over direction. Risk, uncertainty, and the possibility of failure are eliminated from this representation.

When compared to classical madḥ poetry of the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, clear continuities emerge. Previous studies on praise poetry emphasize that rulers were frequently portrayed as decisive, heroic, and divinely favored figures whose authority was naturalized through poetic exaggeration and symbolic elevation (Alebdha, 2021). In this respect, the Neom poems reproduce a familiar poetic logic: leadership is legitimized through aesthetic glorification rather than rational justification. As in classical madḥ, poetry functions as a tool to stabilize authority by presenting leadership as both exceptional and necessary.

Furthermore, the elimination of risk and failure in these representations mirrors patterns identified in earlier research on ideological poetry. Studies of praise poetry in authoritarian and developmentalist contexts demonstrate that leadership is often portrayed as infallible to maintain emotional consensus and suppress critical imagination. By excluding hesitation, doubt, or unintended consequences, poetic language transforms leadership into a moral and aesthetic certainty rather than a political practice subject to contestation. In this sense, the figuration of leadership in the Neom poems functions less as description and more as persuasion.

From Swingewood's sociological perspective, such representations underscore literature's role in constructing social reality rather than merely reflecting it. The poems operate as social documents that align leadership with progress, destiny, and national fulfillment, thereby reinforcing hegemonic narratives without overt coercion. Leadership is aestheticized, depoliticized, and embedded within a future-oriented vision that discourages alternative interpretations.

Thus, the figuration of leadership in Neom-themed poetry should be understood as a continuation of classical *madḥ* traditions adapted to contemporary ideological needs. While the poetic techniques remain familiar, their function has evolved to support a state-led futurist project in which leadership is symbolically inseparable from progress itself. This finding not only corroborates previous studies on praise poetry and political legitimacy, but also extends them by demonstrating how modern Arabic poetry reconfigures leadership imagery to suit institutionalized forms of cultural persuasion.

Persuasive Language in Three Poems

When the three winning poems from the Neom competition are read collectively as a corpus, it becomes clear that the language used is neither neutral nor merely aesthetic, but rather forms a consistent and recurring pattern of persuasion. Instead of using overt political speech or direct appeals, this persuasion uses symbolic framing, selected language, and repeated imagery to guide the reader toward a specific ideological acceptance.

The persuasive language in this corpus is characterized by the dominance of affirmative and teleological diction, namely vocabulary that assumes direction, purpose, and certainty of the future. Neom is not positioned as an ongoing or experimental project, but rather as an entity that has "become," "manifested," and "real." Expressions such as حينها يمسي المجاز حقيقياً على أرض نيوم demonstrate how poetic language is used to erase the distance between vision and reality, as if the promised future is already fully present in the present. This strategy is important in persuasion, as it reduces the reader's room for skepticism towards the project.

This strategy also aligns with earlier findings on metaphor in Arabic literature. Studies on metaphorical language emphasize that metaphor functions not only as a stylistic ornament but as a cognitive and ideological device that reorganizes perception. By repeatedly transforming vision into reality and promise into fulfillment, the poems guide readers toward accepting the narrative of inevitability. In this sense, the persuasive function of metaphor observed in the Neom poems confirms Najib al-Kilani's argument that metaphor in Arabic poetry often operates as a means of conceptual control, shaping how abstract political ideas are emotionally and imaginatively processed.

Furthermore, persuasion also works through the aestheticization of language itself. The metaphor that makes the country a qasidah صارت به هذي البلاد قصيدة or development as musical harmony لا تستسيغ اللحن والإقواء shifts the reading from the political and economic realm to the aesthetic realm. Within this framework, Neom is no longer understood as a state policy project, but rather as a collective work of art that demands appreciation, not criticism. The persuasive language here doesn't persuade readers to rationally agree, but rather encourages them to "feel" the truth of the narrative being offered.

When read as a whole, these three poems also demonstrate a consistent elimination of semantic opposition. There is no diction that opens up space for conflict, ambiguity, or resistance. The language of persuasion works by closing off the possibility of alternative meanings, so that the narrative about Neom appears singular, coherent, and harmonious.

Within the framework of Swingewood's sociology of literature, the persuasive language identified in these poems reflects the structural relationship between poets, cultural institutions, and the state. The poems function as social documents that demonstrate how aesthetic production is guided toward fulfilling specific ideological functions. Rather than expressing individual poetic freedom, the language of persuasion reveals how literary creativity operates within institutional frameworks that reward affirmation, coherence, and alignment with national projects.

Taken together, these findings not only support previous scholarship on persuasive language and ideological aesthetics, but also extend it by showing how contemporary Arabic poetry continues to serve as a subtle yet effective medium of political persuasion. The Neom poems exemplify how language, when carefully structured and aesthetically elevated, can transform political vision into perceived reality, thereby reinforcing symbolic support for state-led futurist narratives without the need for explicit propaganda.

Conclusion

Based on an aesthetic and sociological analysis of the three winning poems, this study shows that Neom is consistently represented as a utopian, visionary, and inevitable project through the use of futuristic metaphors, natural symbolism, and the figuration of leadership. This study asserts that these poems cannot be understood solely as individual aesthetic expressions, but as social products born of the relationship between poets, cultural institutions, and state power. The poetry competition organized by Nadi Tabuk Adabi functions as a cultural institution that conditions the production of meaning through mechanisms of theme, selection, prestige, and symbolic rewards. In this context, poetry acts as a medium of soft power that builds ideological consensus without direct coercion, allowing poets and readers to voluntarily participate in the reproduction of official state narratives. These findings broaden the understanding of literary propaganda in the Arab tradition, demonstrating a shift from personal patronage to cultural institutionalization in the modern era.

This study contributes to sociological approaches in contemporary Arabic literature by introducing poetry from official state competitions as underexplored cultural propaganda and demonstrating that, despite the dominance of modern media, poetry retains a strategic role in constructing political legitimacy. It thus extends earlier scholarship beyond classical and early modern contexts by highlighting the continuity of literature's political function in the contemporary state. However, the study is limited to a small dataset and a single competition; future research should broaden the corpus, compare

with digital literary production, and apply approaches such as reception studies or critical discourse analysis to better understand public response and ideological impact.

References

Al-Azzam, B., Al-Ahaydib, M., & Shalaby, M. (2014). The Socio-Cultural, Historical, and Political Allusions in the Translation of the Saudi National Day Poetry: "Peace, O Gracious King" as a Case Study. *Studies in Literature and Language, 9*(3), 30-39. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.3968/n

Albounaeeam, Z. M. J. (2023). Words of Praise in Al-Mutanabbi's Sayfyyat Poems (A Study in the Light of Semantic Field Theory). *Journal of College of Education*, *49*(2), 17-70. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31185/eduj.Vol49.Iss2.3304

Alebdha, F. (2021). Abbasid Politics and Performative Panegyric: The Poetry of ʿAli ibn Jabala. *International Journal Middle East Studies*, *53*(1), 19–37. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020743820000999

Almeflh, A. (2004). Saudi Poetry in the Last Quarter of the 20th Century : a Creative Analysis. *Doctoral Thesis.* University of Leeds. Retrieved from http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/182/1/uk_bl_ethos_406262.pdf

Alshhre, A. M. (2023). Probing Saudi Arabia's Literary Complexity: Combining Global and Local Narratives for a Hybrid National Literature. *Asiatic IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature,* *17*(1), 9-25. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31436/asiatic.v17i1.2791

Asih, K. D., & Anum, R. A. (2023). Strategi Modal 'Ala Al-Aswany dalam Arena Sastra Arab: Kajian Sosiologi Sastra Pierre Bourdieu. *Afshaha: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Arab*, *2*(2), 147–164. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18860/afshaha.v2i2.23020

Buana, C. (2020). Al-Akhṭal's Praise for Yazid bin Mu'wiyah, the Second Caliph of the Umayyad Dynasty (680-683 AD). *Buletin Al-Turas*, *26*(2), 221–238. DOI: https://doi.org/10.15408/bat.v26i2.14998

Dahami, Y. S. H. (2020). Modern Saudi Poetry: Mohammad Hasan Awwad's Night and Me, In Balance. *International Journal of Applied Research in Social Sciences*, *2*(5), 130–143. DOI: https://doi.org/10.51594/ijarss.v2i5.177

Fakhreddine, H., & Stetkevych, S. P. (2023). *The Routledge Handbook of Arabic Poetry*. Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003096955

Farag, A.A. (2019). The Story of NEOM City: Opportunities and Challenges. In *New Cities and Community Extensions in Egypt and the Middle East*. Springer. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77875-4_3

Gatt, K. (2021). Poetry as a Communicative Vehicle in the Jihadi Milieu: The Case for Modern Extremist Poetry. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, 49*(5), 993–1013. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1891521

Ilmi, D., & Zawawi, M. (2024). Media Framing of Technological Advancement and Human Rights to Saudi Arabia's Neom Project. *Leksema: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra, 9*(2), 107-122. DOI: https://doi.org/10.22515/ljbs.v9i2.9706

Luhuringbudi, T., Liza, F., Kuliyatun, K., & Utami, D. N. (2024). Arabic as a Window in Perceiving the World: A Contextualizing the Sociology of Literature. *Tatho*, 39–55. DOI: https://doi.org/10.70512/tatho.v1i1.8

Muamaroh, D. N. N., Maliyanah, A. A., & Fitriani, L. (2022). Analisis Sosiologi Sastra dalam Cerpen "Mauthini" karya Amani Ismail Berdasarkan Perspektif Alan Swingewood. *Afshaha: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Arab*, *1*(1), 46–58. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18860/afshaha.v1i1.15921

Noy, A. (2023). Review of Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic literature. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, *143*(3), 735-738. DOI: https://doi.org/10.7817/jaos.143.3.2023.r0056

Ridwan, R. A., Nurhuda, Z., Hifni, A., Suparno, D., & Nisa, M. (2023). Pemakaian Gaya Bahasa Metafora dalam Cerita Fabel "Al- Diku Al-Zarifu" Karya Kamil Kailani. *A Jamiy Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Arab, 12*(1), 170-184. DOI: https://doi.org/10.31314/ajamiy.12.1.170-184.2023

Stetkevych, S. P. (2016). Al-Akhtal at the Court of ʿAbd al-Malik: The Qaṣhida and the Construction of Umayyad Authority. In *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State*. The University of Chicago

Touri, M. (2024). Crafting the Future: Pioneering Urban Branding and Development in Neom's Visionary Line City Project, Saudi Arabia. *Doctoral dissertation*. Politecnico Torino.

Wahyudi, T. (2013). Sosiologi Sastra Alan Swingewood Sebuah Teori. *Jurnal Poetika*, *1*(1), 55-61. DOI: https://doi.org/10.22146/poetika.v1i1.10384.

Wati, E. S., Imawan, Y., & Tiara, H. (2023). Arabic Literature in the Islamic Period: Syi'ir and Natsar. *Afshaha: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra Arab*, *2*(2), 90–104. DOI: https://doi.org/10.18860/afshaha.v2i2.20772