Arabistancı Nusayris: The Case of Migrant Labour, Masculinity, and Gender among Arab Alevis

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Published Date:
15 January 2026

Downloaded Date:
08.11.2026

Suggested Citation: Paşa, Dicle (2026). Arabistancı Nusayris: The Case of Migrant Labour, Masculinity, and Gender among Arab Alevis. Alevi Encyclopedia — ISIL: DE-4607. https://doi.org/10.68413/alevian siklopedisi.us54a (Access Date: 08.11.2026)

The Alevi Encyclopedia is registered under the code **ISIL: DE-4607** within the scope of the **International Standard Identifier for Libraries and Related Organizations**.

ISSN 3055-9928

ISIL URI /isil/DE-4607

LOBID
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Summary
This entry examines, through a reflexive methodological approach, the experiences, social processes, and consequences of labour migration among Arab Alevi (Nusayri) men who migrate from Antakya to Saudi Arabia, as well as the experiences of the families they leave behind, and argues that this migration produces marginalising effects for both groups. Inspired by the notion of "Almancı Turks," the study proposes the term "Arabistancı Nusayris / Arab Alevis" to conceptualise this population. Migrant men experience an erosion of their religious and identity boundaries under the pressure of the dominant Sunni Islamic culture, belief system, and identity regime in Saudi Arabia, while simultaneously confronting the patriarchal expectations of the male breadwinner role and related masculinity crises. Women and children defined as those "left behind" assume responsibility for care work, emotional labour, subsistence labour, and domestic labour—forms of work that are insecure, unending, and unpaid—while women are additionally exposed to gender-based, religious, and identity-based discrimination, both when remaining behind and when migrating with men. At the intersection of migration, masculinities, and femininities, these dynamics reshape gender roles and generate distinct forms of discrimination, religious and identity erosion, and social isolation for both men and women.

Keywords: Arabistancı Nusayriler-arap Aleviler, Arap Alevi Kadın, Arap Alevilik, Erkeklik, Nusayrilik, Toplumsal Cinsiyet

Introduction

I first coined the term "Arabistancı Nusayris / Arab Alevis" (Paşa 2023), taking into account the socio-economic structure of the region where I live. The primary motivation for formulating this concept was, in fact, reflexive: when I looked at my own life, and at the lives of my relatives and childhood friends, I observed that at least one man from almost every household had gone to Saudi Arabia for work.

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Accordingly, starting from my immediate surroundings, I began to observe the experiences of people living on the street where our home is located in Samandağ; this observation gradually extended to other streets as well, and these experiences increasingly converged and became shared. I also undertook a journey back into my childhood memories-more precisely, a journey through the narratives and processes I witnessed as a result of my father having spent nearly thirty years in Saudi Arabia, beginning from the period when he was engaged to my mother. [1] For my mother and siblings, my uncle's children and my aunt, my other uncle's children and my classmates, and many others I have known, what we had in common was that we were all "left behind." From this starting point, I came to see Arab Alevis' labour migration to Saudi Arabia as resembling the stories of those who once migrated to Germany and came to be known as "Almancı Turks" (Korkmaz 2021; Suavi 2019). Drawing on this analogy, I developed the term "Arabistancı Nusayris / Arab Alevis" (Saudi Nusayris-Arab Alevis) (Paşa 2023, 278).

The stories of Arabistancı Nusayris / Arab Alevis are not limited to the experiences of people who go to Saudi Arabia as migrant workers to earn money. They also encompass a wide range of situations and processes, including sociological and faith-based forms of "othering," experiencing pressure due to an "Alevi" identity, and the re-construction of social masculinities and femininities. My core motivation has been shaped between, on the one hand, being "familiar" with this story since infancy and, on the other, being able to make others aware of these experiences. When my father began living in Saudi Arabia as a "gurbetçi" (a labour migrant in exile), and as I started to make sense of what this meant, I gained an opportunity to reflect on the experiences of others like him there. I do not know whether this should be regarded as something "positive" for my own process of thinking, because my childhood-spent "almost without a father"-in effect meant that my father, and many others who shared a similar experience, spent part of their

lives in gurbet.

Building on all these observations, it can be stated that the dominance of Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia, the *kafala* (sponsorship) system through which migrant workers are, so to speak, compelled to entrust every aspect of their lives to a sponsor they do not know, the compulsory closure of workplaces on Fridays, being detained in public spaces by the "morality police" and forcibly taken to prayer or Friday □□□□, and the obligation for women accompanying their husbands to wear the *abaya* or full veil, all entail experiences that are deeply alienating to these individuals' own beliefs and identities. The experiences of my mother's cousins and my own cousins-people from two generations-attest widely to these conditions. This social observation has been reinforced by listening to people in every social setting I have taken part in. Accordingly, rather than presenting a strictly "academic" narrative, this text foregrounds these lived experiences; nevertheless, since several "academic" concepts are employed, it is appropriate to briefly outline them.

To begin with social gender roles, the figure of the man as the "breadwinner," "income earner," and "head of the household" constitutes a social cliché. Likewise, expectations directed at women-such as fulfilling the role of the "female bird" within the family and sustaining domestic and care work-are equally gendered clichés. For Arab Alevi men, going to Saudi Arabia to "earn bread," and for women, remaining behind to carry out care work and maintain the core tasks of the household, draw directly on these normative assumptions. For men who perceive migration to Saudi Arabia as a "masculine duty," as well as for women who remain behind and spend years alone while performing unpaid, unending care labour, these processes are highly complex and fraught. Such complexities will be discussed through Robert William Connell's category of "marginality," applied to both masculinities and femininities (Connell 2017, 13-16, 251-275, 353). In this context, the concept is used to analyse masculinities that experience being "othered" at the

intersection of migrant labour and Arab Alevi identity, and Arab Alevi femininities that experience being “left behind.” The majority of those who migrate to Saudi Arabia as workers are men.

Those Who Migrate to Saudi Arabia, Gurbetçiler: The Construction of Arab Alevi Social Masculinity in the Context of Migrant Labour

Men who migrate to Saudi Arabia typically do so in order to earn money, return to establish a family, and provide for the family they have formed, thereby fulfilling socially expected norms of masculinity. Within Arab Alevi society, men who occupy the core of inheritance and property relations, who act as carriers of religious knowledge, and who serve as “representatives” of ritual practices may be regarded as embodiments of hegemonic masculinity. Arab Alevi forms of masculinity performed in cooperation with the patriarchal system correspond, in normative social terms, to what can be described as “hegemonic-complicit” masculinity. However, men who migrate to Saudi Arabia encounter various difficulties shaped by their positions as “foreigners,” as “others,” and as “Arab Alevis.” Within this context, it can be argued that hegemonic masculinity becomes destabilised. Exposed to pressures structured by class, religion and sect, and age hierarchies in Saudi Arabia, these masculinities come to experience conditions of “marginal masculinity.”

Processes of adaptation to the host context, encounters with “different” forms of masculinity, and rigid patriarchal social norms can produce oppressive and fragile effects on men. Mehmet Bozok conceptualises such situations as a “masculinity crisis” that emerges when men confront what he terms “destabilising contexts,” leading to losses of power, respectability, and status (Bozok 2019, 178-180). Masculinity crises thus refer to forms of frustration that arise when men’s relationships with patriarchy are disrupted or undermined.

Men who migrate to Saudi Arabia may come to feel, as a

result of the hegemony exercised by men in the host society, as if they occupy a position “similar to that of women,” a perception that can sharpen gendered forms of questioning, discrimination, and normative relations. Tasks conventionally defined in gendered terms as women’s roles-such as moral, emotional, and care labour-also carry broader conceptual meanings. In a similar vein, among men who migrate to certain European countries, activities such as gardening, cleaning staircases, or sweeping are likewise understood as forms of “reproductive labour” (Gallo and Scrinzi 2019, 2-3). When men perform roles and tasks defined as reproductive labour within the context of migrant work, they may experience a sense of “feminisation” and perceive this as a form of humiliation. Such internal conflicts can lead men to experience losses of status, respectability, and self-confidence, affecting them in ways that diverge from patriarchal norms and, at the same time, reinforcing discriminatory and sexist attitudes and sentiments toward women.

Nusayri/Arab Alevi men generally migrate to Saudi Arabia with the aim of acquiring professional skills or, if already trained, finding employment and working. Within Arab Alevi society, these men are regarded as the “founders” of the family and migrate under the social expectation of being the “provider” and income earner. Unmarried men, in particular, often work in Saudi Arabia through the kafala (sponsorship) system in order to save money before marriage, acquire a profession, and marry upon their return. [2] Sponsorship, maintained by Saudi nationals, functions as a form of occupation in its own right: sponsors enable migrant workers to remain in Saudi Arabia in exchange for payment. These individuals possess the authority to confiscate migrant workers’ passports and thereby exercise significant coercive power over them. Through this power, sponsors may transform their position into an instrument of exploitation, continuing such practices by withholding passports, demanding large sums of money as “illicit gain,” delaying entry and exit procedures, or making re-entry into the

country increasingly difficult.

These sponsors, who generate pressure and violence over migrant workers, can be conceptualised through Connell's categories of "authoritarian masculinities" and "complicit masculinities" (Connell 2017, 169). Acting as complicit actors, such sponsors marginalise Arab Alevi migrant masculinities. In Saudi Arabia, conditions for marginalised men may operate through systems that are more rigid than those in Turkey and may become further intensified. The functioning of institutions in Saudi Arabia, the justice system, working and everyday life conditions, the powers of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 2017, 267-275) and complicit masculinity, as well as class-based, social, and economic forms of discrimination and pressure, can all be seen as factors that sharpen the experience of marginal masculinity. For example, for Arab Alevis, "praying in a mosque" does not constitute a form of worship. In Saudi Arabia, however, prayer times involve compulsory mosque attendance and, particularly for workers who are shopkeepers, the mandatory closure of workplaces. Social spaces, preferences such as alcohol consumption, or situations such as meeting with a woman may be monitored by morality police, and practices such as alcohol consumption are subject to severe penal sanctions. Such conditions may lead migrant men to experience increasing isolation and contribute to the erosion of Arab Alevi religious identity. At the same time, these men are often pushed to socialise in fragmented groups or only with people from their country of origin, a dynamic that further produces alienation.

Social masculinities are generally constructed in ways that are compatible with the suppression and concealment of emotions. This also applies to men who move away from what is "familiar" and experience life as gurbetçi, leaving behind their families and loved ones and being forced to live alone. Within a patriarchal system in which men's expressions of sadness are socially prohibited-encapsulated in norms such as "men do not cry"-such gendered

perceptions and judgments exert pressure on men. These attitudes not only denigrate women but also alienate men from their own emotions and contribute to masculinity crises. Migrant men may therefore suppress or conceal their feelings, including longing for relatives and families left behind, intense affection for children and spouses, loneliness, distress, and the need for social interaction. The expression of such emotions may be perceived as a "loss of power." In particular, because men's socially assigned roles as the "pillar" or "head" of the family can be disrupted from the perspective of families left behind when men migrate abroad, masculinity crises may emerge, with men experiencing this disruption as a loss of authority.

Men who migrate to Saudi Arabia usually do so alone. As a result, they are compelled to assume responsibilities that, within the family, are conventionally and genderedly attributed to women and girls. Tasks such as washing dishes, cooking, and cleaning-although not inherently tied to any gender-may, due to social constructions, constitute additional sources of masculinity crises. In such contexts, examples of marginalised masculinities commonly emerge. By contrast, in some cases associated with hegemonic masculinity, men who avoid these responsibilities, who regard them as women's "obligatory duties," and who are unwilling to relinquish performances such as sexuality, often establish a "second family" in Saudi Arabia. Despite this, women who remain behind are expected to remain under male hegemony economically and sociologically. "Left-behind" family members are compelled by social perceptions-such as the notion that "a man will do what men do"-in matters related to remittances or inheritance. It is widely expected that women should accept infidelity by their husbands abroad, refrain from seeking divorce, and "protect their honour." Conversely, although less common, cases in which women are perceived to have been unfaithful to their husbands abroad may result in the imposition of "social sanctions," including public exposure and social isolation. The "burden of honour" thus functions as a social

mechanism for controlling women's bodies: while hegemonic masculinity may operate through consent-building sanctions imposed on women in cases of male infidelity, comparable consequences do not apply to men.

For men who migrate to Saudi Arabia while also taking their wives and/or children with them, numerous additional difficulties arise. Only a limited number of "Turkish schools" compatible with the Turkish education system exist in Saudi Arabia, and these are located in specific regions, thereby restricting the areas in which men can work if their children are to continue their education. For wives, there is also a public obligation to wear the *abaya*. Furthermore, relationships with sponsors, visa procedures, demands such as securing a "large" home for the family, and the resulting increase in financial burdens constitute further sources of difficulty.

To conclude this section, it can be argued that the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011, as well as the significant shifts in the course of the conflict during 2024-2025 and the increase in crimes directed against Arab Alevis/Nusayris-such as hate attacks, massacres, rape, and abduction-have contributed to a decline in migration. Other factors that have reduced migration include Arab Alevi youths' preference for pursuing university education in order to acquire professional qualifications, the effects of modernisation, the assimilation of Arabic through Turkey's modernisation process, and the fact that younger generations no longer speak Arabic as fluently as before. The classification of Arab Alevism in Saudi Arabia as an "ethno-religious minority," together with the pressures produced by a hegemonic and dominant social structure, has also meant that migrant men may be confronted with various forms of violence. "Arabistancı Arab Alevis/Nusayris," who can be situated under the rubric of marginal masculinity, may feel pressure arising both from the society in which they live in Saudi Arabia and from the expectations of their own communities. Hetero-patriarchal norms and roles, along with cultural differences, may exert pressure on men, while men may at times collaborate with

these roles to exert pressure on women. The man who sustains his life as a migrant worker in Saudi Arabia thus inhabits an emotional and social condition shaped by being a *gurbetçi*. For "left-behind women," similarly, social, economic, and emotional pressures and hardships are also present. These dynamics will be interpreted through the lens of "social femininities in the context of migration."

Those Left Behind, Emotional Labourers-Unpaid, Unregulated, and Precarious Care and Domestic Workers: The Construction of Arab Alevi Social Femininities

The labour migration of Nusayri/Arab Alevi men from Antakya to Saudi Arabia affects categories of femininity in distinct ways. As Arab Alevis constitute a social group characterised, in religious terms, by a form of "closed communal organisation," marriages outside the group or faith are generally not accepted. This condition socially constructs a perceived "necessity" for Arab Alevis to marry Arab Alevi partners. In addition, social expectations such as consanguineous marriages, arranged marriages, and child marriages-although less prevalent among younger generations-may still persist (Paşa 2019). The fact that Arab Alevi men become migrant workers further reinforces the expectation that the women they marry as Arab Alevis should be drawn from familiar circles, relatives, or close social environments. Patriarchal traditions, anxieties about assimilation, and prevailing social perceptions may define women who are "selected" through arranged marriages, at an early age, or from among relatives as more "controllable." In this way, "left-behind" women and girls-married from among relatives or at a young age-may be rendered subject to surveillance and control by mothers-in-law, patriarchal social norms, and masculinities, entering what Deniz Kandiyoti has broadly conceptualised as a "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti 2012), aimed at "raising" or "shaping" them according to prescribed norms.

Through such mechanisms of control and the

instrumentalisation of the family institution, the “honour” and bodies of women who remain behind are likewise subjected to regulation. These women may be defined as unpaid and insecure care labourers with no fixed working hours, occupying a subordinate position within the household: caring for parents-in-law and children, and, where applicable, carrying out agricultural labour. Consanguineous marriages may also be regarded as a means of preventing Arab Alevi belief and identity from “opening outward,” as well as a strategy to keep inheritance within the family and avoid its division. All of these processes contribute to the marginalisation of “left-behind femininities.” While women sustain domestic and emotional labour, care for the sick, children, and the elderly, and forms of subsistence labour such as agricultural work, they may be rendered dependent on the household and, by extension, on the economic income of the migrant man. As a consequence, mechanisms may emerge that prevent divorce, restrict women’s ability to care independently for their children following separation, and regulate women’s sexuality.

Women who are most often defined as “left behind” may also develop their own processes of *self-surveillance* as a result of pervasive patriarchal pressures. Alongside social control and scrutiny, such mechanisms of self-control manifest in the regulation of women’s clothing in public spaces, normative restrictions at social events such as weddings and festivals, and limitations placed on women’s spheres of socialisation. Through the gendered ideal of the “self-sacrificing woman,” women may also be subjected to emotional pressure. For instance, women whose husbands have migrated to Saudi Arabia may be disciplined through normative control mechanisms such as avoiding “excessive adornment” when attending weddings, “paying attention to skirt length,” limiting their visibility on the dance floor to what is deemed “appropriate,” and behaving in a manner considered “proper,” in order not to become targets of gossip.

Femininities that do not conform to the socially prescribed image of the “self-sacrificing woman,” and that transgress

these rules, are often exposed to social isolation, labelling, and various forms of violence. Moreover, controlling mechanisms such as arranged marriages or consanguineous marriages reinforce the assumption that women's bodies within marriage are more legitimately subject to surveillance and regulation. Even when men are unfaithful to their spouses, women are expected to suppress their sexuality and desires. In cases-less frequent but highly sanctioned-where women are perceived to be unfaithful "like men," they may face social media exposure through videos, public shaming, enforced isolation, and separation from their children. Heteronormative marriage and sexuality thus remain firmly in place. The role of being the "bearer of honour" is socially assigned to women as a normative expectation, while comparable meanings and roles do not emerge for men. When women are deceived by their migrant-worker husbands, patriarchal gender roles may frame this experience in terms of "acceptance," "resignation to fate," or "submission." While marginalised femininities are constructed as "silenceable," it should also be noted that femininities-and masculinities-that resist such patriarchal norms do exist within society.

Alongside these social roles, the range of expectations imposed on marginalised femininities continues to expand. As the "wives" of married migrant workers, women who are "left behind" may be compelled to assume the role of the "pillar" or de facto "head" of the nuclear family. Children are raised within single-parent households, and women who effectively "replace the father" take on responsibilities such as providing care for children, meeting their needs and expenses, managing household and external finances, and sustaining similar roles. Through these processes, women may at times acquire a form of authority. However, although this authority is produced through intensive emotional and physical labour, the notion of "womanly femininities" tends to recede into the background, while strong, resilient femininities capable of managing the family are discursively constructed as "women like men." Although women's

participation in paid work outside the home is not widespread, when it does occur it is often framed as a "necessity." Socially, this labour is not recognised as independent work, employment, or income generation, but rather as a "contribution" to the family and to the male migrant worker.

Women who migrate to Saudi Arabia together with men experience many difficulties similar to those faced by men. Patriarchal roles persist across many regions of Saudi Arabia; however, at the intersection with Sunni Islam, these roles may be experienced by Arab Alevi women through even stricter regulations. While the pressures and challenges encountered within a society structured by rigid patriarchal patterns may be broadly similar, it can be argued that femininities are exposed to more intense forms of social pressure. In Saudi Arabia, enforced veiling or compulsory wearing of the *abaya* may generate inequality and alienation for "Arabistancı Nusayri-Arab Alevi" women, narrowing their opportunities for socialisation and restricting their ability to move in public spaces without being accompanied by a man. In matters such as "protecting honour," alcohol consumption, or-until recently-driving a car, the penalties associated with "offences" are far more severe for women than for men. Women in Saudi Arabia are also held more directly responsible for domestic labour, care work, and emotional burdens. Issues related to children's schooling, care, and needs, as well as difficulties encountered with local sponsors in Saudi Arabia, likewise remain relevant and pressing concerns for women.

Conclusion

This text has employed a reflexive methodological approach to examine masculinities that migrate from Antakya to Saudi Arabia and the social consequences of this migration. In addition, the experiences of migrant workers' families-mothers and children-have been interpreted through the concept of those "left behind." On the basis of these interpretations, Arab Alevis have been analysed within the

context of migrant labour. The migration of Arab Alevis (Nusayris) from Antakya to Saudi Arabia and their experiences have given rise to the concept of “Arabistancı Nusayris-Arab Alevis,” inspired by the depiction of “Almancı Turks” (Korkmaz 2021; Suavi 2019).

Within this conceptual framework and at the intersection of migration, the gender roles of masculinities and femininities have been examined. When “Arabistancı Nusayris-Arab Alevis” migrate to Saudi Arabia as migrant workers, both social masculinities and femininities experience marginalising conditions, processes of labelling, and forms of social isolation. Under the dominance of Sunni Islam in Saudi Arabia, dynamics emerge that may erode Arab Alevi belief and identity. Drawing on the concepts of marginal masculinities and femininities, the reasons, processes, and consequences through which these social dynamics are experienced have been discussed. Both marginal masculinities and marginal femininities may be exposed to various forms of discrimination and pressure. Men confront gendered expectations such as being the “breadwinner” and “income provider,” alongside the cultural and religious pressures associated with Sunni Islam. Similarly, under comparable gendered norms, women who remain “left behind” sustain insecure and unending forms of care work, emotional labour, and domestic labour, while also experiencing forms of religious, cultural, and identity-based discrimination-processes that can be identified as emblematic instances of marginalisation.

Endnotes

[1] "The condition of being both the observer and the observed renders ethnographic research complex and compels the researcher to engage in a continuous negotiation between empathy and critical distance, and between belonging and analytical inquiry. At this point, reflexivity becomes not merely a methodological requirement but also an ethical and emotional compass guiding the research process." (Coşan Eke 2025).

[2] "The kafala (sponsorship) system is the name of a legal framework developed by the Saudi Arabian government to keep migrant workers under control. Although it is not formally incompatible with international migration policies, it operates through many distinctive practices in its implementation and has been widely criticised by authorities." (Doğandor 2019, 79).

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