

**COUNTERING PREVAILING DISCOURSES WITH LITERARY CREATIVITY –
CONTEMPORARY SAUDI WOMEN NOVELISTS' DRIVE FOR CHANGE**

Roswitha BADRY¹

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of a sample of novels by contemporary Saudi women authors published in the first decade of the 2000s in order to demonstrate to what extent this kind of fiction addresses taboo subjects and thereby not only challenges prevailing gender discourses maintained by the religious-political establishment with the aim of pushing for reform in the absence of independent civil society organizations, but also counters Western and Eastern distorted, stereotyped images of “the Arab woman”.

Keywords: Saudi women novelists; socio-political criticism; stereotyped images; discrimination; quest for autonomy; failures of modernity.

1. ‘Arab-Western’ Relations and the Resilience of Stereotyped Images

The history of ‘Arab-Western’ relations is a long and complicated story which goes back to the emergence of Islam in the 7th century and has always been characterized by a mixture of mutual attraction and repulsion.² On the one hand, it is a history filled with intercultural misunderstandings, harsh polemics, violent clashes and wars, often wrongly legitimized in religious, cultural, and civilizational terms. On the other hand, there were also periods of peaceful coexistence and fruitful cultural exchange. In this context, it may suffice to recall two examples for the positive effect of translations: First, it is well known that in medieval times Muslim culture reached a high standard; among other things, the ancient Greek legacy in the sciences and philosophy was not only preserved by translations from Greek into Arabic, but also corrected, and provided with commentaries. In the 11th/12th centuries, these works were translated into Latin and transmitted to Western Europe via Spain and thus contributed, inter alia, to the formation of the European Renaissance and finally the European Enlightenment. Second, the translation of European (above all French) works during the 19th and 20th centuries had a major impact on the emergence of reformist Islam and on the evolution of

¹ Roswitha Badry, University of Freiburg, Department for Oriental Studies, Institute for Islamic Studies; roswitha.badry@orient.uni-freiburg.de

² See (also for the following), e.g., Jabra, 1971: 76 and passim; Macfie (ed.), 2000; Al-Mahrooqi and Denman, 2016: (esp.) 6-7.

modern Arabic prose literature, for instance. At the same time, the colonial powers reproduced distorted images of “the Arab-Muslim Other” in order to legitimize their imperialist politics (“Orientalism”). This in turn generated “Occidentalism”, especially in the post-colonial era. Both discourses seem to have significant roots in a mutual fear of the threatening influence of “the other” in the political and religious, moral sphere.

The past two decades, particularly in the aftermath of ‘9/11’, have witnessed the resurfacing of age-old tropes of Arab, Muslim, Oriental otherness. As a result of the ‘global war on terror’ and the ‘refugee crisis’, these series of stereotypical images and imaginaries, described by Edward Said and others, have undergone a political and social intensification.³ One of these clichéd images concerns Muslim women who are often indiscriminately depicted as victims of patriarchal oppression, by or in the name of Islam, with no agency to challenge the status quo or to rebel against their confinement, and are thus seen as in need of being saved. In a similar vein, the conservative, traditional discourse in the Arab region itself regards women as being in need of (male) protection and as targets of Western influence and corruption. If evidence to the contrary were needed, the uprisings during the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, in which women from different walks of life and age groups participated in great numbers, not only illustrated the desire for fundamental social and political change but also the great diversity among the Arab countries. Apart from various civil society organizations (henceforth CSOs), contemporary Arabic literature has had a great impact by revealing the mechanisms of neo-patriarchal, authoritarian states, and by disseminating ideas of social justice, human dignity, freedom, and equality, which were to become the rallying cries during the 2011 peaceful protests.

This paper will focus on contemporary women novelists from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), which by all accounts is one of the most conservative and authoritarian countries in the Arab world. Madawi Al-Rasheed calls the absolute monarchy in her 2013 monograph “A Most Masculine State” because of the institutionalized gender discrimination. Despite socioeconomic changes over the past decades, and although reforms are often announced by the Saudi authorities, they are finally implemented too slowly and then merely with cosmetic effect. Outside of the royal family, the Al Saud, political participation is extremely limited. No parties or national elections are allowed. The Kingdom has a vibrant social media scene, but CSOs, including women’s organizations, are still restricted. Protests in the course of the ‘Arab Spring’ were suppressed as soon as they came up. In the absence of independent CSOs, Saudi intellectuals, women and men alike, have turned towards writing fiction in order to address taboo subjects and voice their criticism of the status quo. A recurrent theme of women’s novels is gender inequality in its various manifestations. However, the authors not only describe the

³ Cf. Said, 2004. – This phenomenon is termed as Neo-Orientalism, Islamophobia, or else; cf. Badry, 2016: (esp.) 511-512.

social, legal, and religious restrictions, the lack of personal freedom, the quest for individuality and autonomy, and the feeling of alienation from society. At times, they also demonstrate how women may use the means available to them in order to subvert the restrictions or to overcome oppression and marginalization. In addition, some authors deal with other urgent social and political issues (such as corruption, hypocrisy, exploitation of migrant workers, racism, and prostitution) and intertwine the personal stories of their heroines or main protagonists with political events and historical memories. Sometimes the gender issue is presented as part of a much larger structure of socio-political power relations that disempower both men and women. Thus, the writers provide a heterogeneous picture of Saudi society, and challenge prevailing gender discourses as well as the (political and religious) establishment. When portraying the ambiguities of modernity, they seek to go beyond the local and regional levels. In doing so, they are reminiscent of Edward Said's idea of the role of the intellectuals as that of 'speaking truth to power' (Said, 1994; cf. Laachir, 2013: 43).

2. Emergence and Development of Saudi Women Novel Writing – Trends and Themes

Compared with Egypt, Lebanon, or Syria, Saudi novel writing began relatively late, to be precise in 1930, when the first novel by a male author was published. Initially, the development of novelistic writing was slow and its output modest. It is only in the new millennium that the novel seems to have become the main genre of writing and has begun to overshadow poetry and short stories, the more popular mediums of creative writing in previous decades. As in other Arabian Gulf countries, women's education (the first girls' school in KSA opened in 1959) and their entry into the workforce as well as the establishment of literary clubs, intellectual women's salons, magazines and awards had a major impact on the mushrooming of literary production (Al-Ghadeer, 2017: 400 Al-Sudairy, 2017: 66f).

According to Al-Ghadeer (2017: 401), Al-Sudairy (2017: 61-66) and other observers (e.g. Algahtani, 2016: 27-29), the development of Saudi female writing can be divided into three major stages.

(1) The initial phase started in 1958 with the appearance of the first novel ("Farewell to My Dreams") by a Saudi (and Arabian Gulf) woman, Samira Khashuqji (1935-86), who wrote under the pseudonym "Samira Daughter of the [Arabian] Peninsula". It is noteworthy, that some Saudi female authors still continue writing under pen-names in order to avoid criticism from the general public and to escape censure. Khashuqji published eight further novels and remained the only Saudi female novelist until 1972. She also founded the first women's magazine. In the beginning, women authors addressed topics similar to the earlier novels by men, such as socio-cultural change and reform; but they also

saw writing as a creative and liberating space. As literature these early novels are considered weak by literary critics because they show a tendency to romance and a didactic tone. The heroines are portrayed as passive. Moreover, the events in the novels either take place overseas or the setting remains unidentifiable; this may be seen as a strategy to prevent official criticism, but it makes the events and characters unrealistic.

(2) Since 1980 the novels have become more mature: the women novelists have improved their artistic techniques and experimented with the genre. The setting of the novels becomes marked and emphasized as Saudi, and the focus continues to be on social topics. The literature of this phase has to be contextualized within a fierce debate between the conservatives and modernists triggered by the seizure of the Grand Mosque of Mecca by ultra-conservative insurgents in 1979. Some novels of the 1990s also addressed 'shocking' taboo topics such as sexual betrayal and abortion.

(3) As from 2000, we witness a remarkable increase in the publication of novels. This boom in fiction writing, especially by young novelists in the Gulf region, cannot be separated from the new globalization, inter alia the rapid changes in communication technology and the Internet, which offered new spaces for novelists away from censorship. The novels of this third phase vary in their artistic value as well as in their vision. A large number of the narratives reveal double standards and the contradictions between reality and what society claims to be, and thereby challenge the myth of a pious Saudi society. Experimenting with narrative is attempted in many novels, as also the infusion of different genres, and multiple intertextual references to Arabic-Islamic and Western literary sources are a common trend. Several literary outputs of this third period have been awarded with national, regional, and international prizes.

Many recent women writers' novels seem to focus too much on the issue of sex, as some critiques complain.⁴ This in turn has created a lively debate on the literary merits of such novels and whether their focus is just intended to attract attention, and many reviewers have labelled such books indiscriminately and disparagingly as "chick lit". Other observers, however, argue that it is legitimate to center on sexuality as this reflects the obsession with sex in Saudi society and attests to the predominance of the 'economies of desire' (Al-Rasheed, 2011, as quoted in Laachir, 2013: 34, 35). The 'chick lit – trend' is often said to have been initiated by Raja Alsanea's⁵ "Girls of Riyadh" although this novel is much less explicit on sexual issues than a number of literary works that followed Alsanea's book. As this

⁴ On the diverse opinions concerning this trend, see, e.g., Al-Rasheed 2013: 221-227; Al-Rasheed 2015: 136-140; Laachir 2013: 34-35.

⁵ Throughout the text, I will use a simplified transliteration for Arabic proper names, places, terms, and titles.

bestseller is perhaps the best-known novel from KSA, I will cast a glance at this book, without going into details, but concentrating on its unique success story.

2.1 A Bestseller from Saudi Arabia: Raja Alsanea's "Girls of Riyadh" (2005)

"Girls of Riyadh" was originally published in Arabic in Beirut and London in 2005. The debut novel of the then 23-year-old Alsanea (b. 1981) soon occupied the top of the bestseller list, and reached an unprecedented level of sales for an unknown writer. In 2011, it already saw its 7th edition in Arabic. The novel was translated into more than 26 languages (Behzadi 2014: 97); both the English and the German translation appeared in 2007.

The fiction is a kind of epistolary novel in electronic form.⁶ In it, an unnamed female narrator sends emails every Friday to the Yahoo group server. The e-narrator mischievously promises to disclose the stories of her four girlfriends – albeit with a few alterations. Lamis, Michelle (the "Halfie"), Qamra, and Sadim, all of them well-educated and in their early 20s, belong to upper class families, and hence only represent a small segment of Riyadh girls. The narrative depicts their everyday concerns and sorrows, their longings, disappointments, the social restrictions and obstacles they face. Their romantic dreams of finding their great love and happiness inevitably leads to disillusionment. But, as every one of the four young women pursues different paths and perspectives and adopts different opinions, the novel offers a fairly wide spectrum of possible constellations in this privileged societal sector.

The book attracted great popular and critical attention among both 'Arab' and 'Western' readers. Its success story remains a controversial issue. The ongoing controversy is of major interest in this context as it sheds light on the translation policy and marketing strategies of major Western media outlets, or, as Lale Behzadi (2014: 111) puts it, on a kind of "literary colonialism" prevalent in the decision on what is translated, and how the translation is presented and advertised. As Behzadi (2014: 102) points out convincingly, the categorization of the book as 'chick lit' trivialized both the genre and the author as a kind of soft entertainment, without taking into consideration the literary merit of the novel which can be read as 'chick crit' (cf. Booth, 2010: 167-169), as a parody, or as an adequate expression of the contemporary way of life in a segment of today's globalized, urbanized youth (Behzadi, 2014: 109). (At this point, one might remember that the 'Arab Spring' – nowadays often disparagingly termed as 'Arabellion' – also wanted to

⁶ For a summary of her book cf. Algahtani 2016: 29; Martinez-Weinberger 2011: (esp.) 164-169; Al-Ghadeer 2006: (esp.) 297-301; Al-Ghadeer 2017: 405; Behzadi 2014: 98f; Al-Rasheed 2013: 227-231; Al-Rasheed 2015: 140-144. "Girls of Riyadh" is Alsanea's only novel. Although she announced a new book for 2012 (Abdullah, 2011), this project seems not to be realized yet. She works as a dentist in KSA.

show that Arab youth is part of global youth.) Marilyn Booth, the original English translator of the novel, and an acclaimed researcher and translator, argues that “revisions made by press and author to my translation assimilated it to chick-lit generic conventions in the anglophone marketplace” and that various transformations linked it to a tradition that she calls “Orientalist ethnographicism” (2010: 149 and passim). The strategy of orientalizing or simplifying the work of (Saudi) Arabic female authors can already be demonstrated by the paratextual framing of the marketed book (Booth, 2010: 161f, 166f). The covers and cover texts of the English and German translations, for instance, promise to offer an insider’s, ‘authentic’ view of a closed society – a rare glimpse into the ordinary life for young women in KSA, i.e. a normally concealed world of women’s lives that generates the curiosity of the reading public (Behzadi, 2014: 101f). In contrast to the original cover with shades of blue and pink color and with ironic icons, the front covers of the translations comply with the paratextual requirements of ‘chick lit’. The cover of the English translation signalizes playful ease in an Oriental environment, the cover of the German translation shows a waving rose-pink veil, and thereby uses an age-old orientalist trope and may suggest the veil will be lifted, a hope later to be disappointed. The back-cover text of the English translation links the novel directly to “Sex in the City” by Candace Bushnell (1996) and thereby raises expectations which are “dashed by the text’s tameness” (Booth, 2010: 166), and the German jacket blurb speaks of a “modern Shahrazad” and thus associates the book with the famous “Tales of Thousand and One Nights” (Behzadi, 2014: 106f). To name every female Arabic narrator a “modern Shahrazad” has become a new trope – at least in the German context. Although a number of Arab literary critics, among them Al-Ghadeer (2007: 301; 2017: 405), considered the novel to have limited aesthetic and artistic qualities, Booth (2010: 175) acknowledges that the Arabic original (*Banat al-Riyadh*) can be read as a critique of the patriarchal Saudi system – not in a generalizing way, “but rather as a system that exploits consumer culture to compensate or reward privileged youth ... for adhering to status quo social arrangements” (Booth, 2010: 167). She also highlights the fact that the subplots, the language use, and the intertextual references support this impression (cf. the quotations at the beginning of every chapter, including references to the Quran, classical and contemporary Arabic prose and poetry, and prominent Western authors). And she admits that the novel’s “exuberant linguistic landscape” had drawn her interest in translating the book (Booth, 2010: 170).

3. Selected Authors

In the following, I will look at three novels by prominent women writers in greater detail.

3.1 Badriyya Al-Bishr's "Hind and the Soldiers" (2006)

The first author, Badriyya Al-Bishr, is known for her sharp criticism of Saudi society, the religious establishment and the state, and for her support of gender equality and liberation of women in KSA. She was born in Riyadh in 1967, obtained a BA and MA degree from King Saud University and a PhD in sociology from the Lebanese University in Beirut in 2005. From the 1990s on, she wrote short stories and columns for diverse Saudi and pan-Arab magazines and newspapers. In 2006, she and her husband, a famous Saudi comedian/actor, decided to move to Dubai with their four children because they no longer felt safe in KSA. In 2011, Al-Bishr was the first woman to win the prize for the "best newspaper column" at the Arab Journalism Awards ("Arabic Press Awards"; cf. Al Tamimi, 2012). She is the author of three novels: following "Hind and the Soldiers", she published "The Seesaw" (2010), and "Love stories on al-A'sha Street" (2013), which was longlisted for the prestigious International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2014 (popularly known as "Arabic Booker"; cf. Hussain, 2015). Since May 2014 she has hosted a popular talk show which focuses on social and cultural issues in KSA on the Dubai-based satellite television channel MBC1 (Taylor, 2014).

"Hind and the Soldiers"⁷ is a first-person narrative, in which Hind, the main female character, tells her journey to self-realization from childhood to adulthood. On her quest for self-fulfillment, personal individuality and freedom of choice, the sensitive and curious girl, adventurous adolescent and mature woman Hind is confronted with the so-called "soldiers". These are various forces that deny her self-expression and whose main preoccupation is to control girls and young women, to discipline them, and turn them into docile and obedient daughters, sisters, and wives. Whereas her father, a retired soldier, can only deal with his young daughter in a patronizing and paternalistic matter, the true "soldier" in the house remains her mother. She represents the older, illiterate generation of Saudi women, who have internalized and now uphold the rules of a male dominated society and act as its accomplices by punishing every harmless transgression: she is hard, strict and adheres to a puritan version of Islam according to which even songs and singing are the greatest of sins. She is unable to love because of the sufferings she herself has had to endure in her life. Like the teachers in school she threatens the girls with the horrors of hell and gives them hardly a chance to develop a

⁷ The original, *Hind wa-l-'askar*, was published in Beirut and saw its fifth edition in 2013. It was translated into German (2010) under the title "The Smell of Coffee and Cardamom". Although the traditional coffee ceremony figures prominently in the novel and stimulates feelings of Saudi belonging, it is not the main topic. For a summary of the novel cf. Martinez-Weinberger, 2011: 46f; for a detailed analysis and interpretation cf. Al-Rasheed, 2013: 194-201; Dhahir, 2014: (esp.) 72-88.

healthy sense of self-esteem.⁸ The curriculum at school aims to prepare the girls to be competent homeworkers. Only the fairytales Hind is able to borrow from her schoolmates, open up a new world for the girl, and nurture her imaginative faculties. In childhood, Hind is allowed to play in the streets, although she and her sisters are made to fear the world outside their home. In all, this is an experience that plays a key role in Hind's growth, but it also creates nightmares, after once when she is sexually harassed by neighborhood boys. During puberty Hind is hidden away from the eyes of male outsiders and subject to stricter rules. However, she uses diverse strategies to compensate for the childhood world in the street. After her mother punishes her for meeting a man in a restaurant by locking her up for three days in her women's guest room, Hind discovers her talent for writing and its liberating effects. In order to avoid scandal, the mother forces the disobedient daughter to marry her maternal uncle's son, a lieutenant in the army. The arranged marriage soon results in conflicts. Hind finds solace and escape in writing, and when her husband objects against her name appearing next to her articles in the press, the young woman resorts to publishing under a pen-name and sending her articles to other parts of the Arab world, to journals which her husband is unlikely to read. However, the birth of a girl instead of the expected boy, prompts the husband to divorce her. The young mother has to return to her parental home with her daughter, but decides to start a new life as a social worker in a non-segregated hospital. In order to do so, she promises her mother to wear the face cover, although she knows that the hospital's environment with an international staff does not allow such complete veiling. Through her work, Hind hopes to assert her sense of worth and contribute to bringing up her daughter. Despite ongoing surveillance by her direct environment, the protagonist is sometimes able to transgress the prescribed limits at work and to take the initiative; in addition, she receives positive and encouraging comments on her published articles from her readers. But in the end, she feels alienated from the society that obliges a person to wear social masks and hide individuality in order to survive. Through her friend Shadha (whose father had spent time in prison and exile as a result of his opposition to the regime before he was allowed to return to his country), Hind becomes acquainted with Walid, Shadha's brother, an open-minded young man. It is significant that it is the discussion of a book that brings the two together, and a trip to the desert away from the oppression and control of the city ends in the union of heart, soul, body, and mind. Empowered by this new experience, Hind is self-confident enough to resist her mother's wish that she should agree to become the second wife to a captain (the mother's thinking here was that Hind has no choice given her divorce). Furthermore, for the time being, she arranges to leave the country for Toronto to her eldest brother Fahd, in order to manage her life away from conventional

⁸ The strained relationship between mother and daughter is a recurrent theme in Arab women's literature. Cf. Abudi, 2011: (esp.) 1-18, 256-311; cf. the same source for issues also addressed in this and the next two novels, such as the preferential treatment of boys in traditional milieus (64ff), the phenomenon of maternal enforcement of patriarchal values (69ff), and the custom of arranged marriages (76).

opinions, and not to rush into a legal union with Walid until she has known him better.

Hind and Fahd, Shadha and Walid represent the new generation who strive for their basic rights and want to free themselves from societal control and oppressive regimes. These figures are contrasted with other women and men portrayed in the novel who are unable to break out of the vicious circle, and, finally either submit to the conventions or turn to militancy (cf. Hind's girlfriend Mudi, one of her younger sisters, or her brother Ibrahim). Still others flee the country with a secret lover from one day to the next (cf. one of Hind's female colleagues).

The next novels under discussion also offer a scathing criticism of patriarchal traditions embedded in the social and political fabric of the country but they go further by shedding light on the multilayered interconnection between various forms of discrimination (gender, race, class) and politics. In addition, both novels are more complex and experimental in their narrative techniques and likewise rich in historical references.

3.2 Layla Al-Juhani's "Ignorance" (2007)

Layla Al-Juhani, born in 1969 in the northern city of Tabuk, has a BA in English literature from King Abdul Aziz University in Medina (1995), an MA in foreign languages (2000), and a PhD in psychology from the University of Tiba in Medina. She has won prizes for her short stories and has written two novels (apart from the novel analyzed below, "The Wasted/Barren Paradise", 1998), a prose text on the meaning of ageing ("When you are in Your Forties", 2009), and academic works on education.

Already the title *Jahiliyya* is unusual for a work of fiction.⁹ The Arabic term, commonly translated as "Age of Ignorance", and not "Days of Ignorance" as in the English translation of the novel (2014), generally refers to the pre-Islamic era in west-central Arabia – a period characterized by polytheism. Thus, for many later writers *jahiliyya* was simply the antonym to Islam ("submission to one God"), although it is also argued that the term *jahiliyya* was not originally seen as the opposite of knowledge of "divine truth", but as the antithesis of extreme, aggressive, violent behavior to moral reasonableness and self-control. And we will see that both meanings figure prominently in Al-Juhani's novel. Since the 18th century the idea of contemporary *jahiliyya*, already held by some Muslim scholars in pre-modern times, has attained new relevance in puritanical, reformist, and

⁹ My great thanks go to Dr. O. I. Tijani for providing me with a scanned copy of the novel's second edition. – For an analysis of the novel cf.: Al-Ghadeer, 2011: 269-271, and 2017: 405f; Al-Rasheed, 2013: 203-207; Al-Sudairy, 2017: 69-112; Ba'ishan, 2007; Vauthier, 2014.

fundamentalist circles. Over recent decades, the radical Islamist interpretation of *jahiliyya*, which identifies every society as un-Islamic, that does not follow God's commands (the so-called *sharia*), has gained particular attention, as it was to provide the pseudo-legitimation for Islamist terrorist acts. While the militants represent a small minority, the idea of *jahiliyya* as a contemporary moral and social reality seems to be quite widespread in view of the (diversely diagnosed) shortcomings of modern society (Shepard, 2001: 37-40). In Juhani's novel both *jahiliyyas* are combined. Although the front cover of the Arabic original alludes to pagan pre-Islamic times (next to the image of an idol, maybe Hubal, one of the Gods venerated in pre-Islamic Western Arabia, we find an astronomic table with ancient Arabic names of days and months), the narrative is set in modern times, mostly in Medina, the second holiest city in Islam, which like Mecca is known for the unique diversity of its population. In contrast, the cover of the English translation reduces the content of the novel to a mere love story. The 'scandalous' love between ('the white') Lin and ('the black') Malik¹⁰ is indeed part of the narrative but its focus is on the prevalence of racism in Medina (Saudi society), and by extension on the politics of race and gender. This is still a taboo subject, rarely dealt with in Saudi works of fiction. As a result, Al-Ghadeer (2017: 406) praised the novel as an "effective juxtaposition of the personal, the historical, and the political".

The novel is divided into eight chapters of unequal length. The titles may sound mysterious at first: "Falling sky", "He has not yet seen the angels", "What's beneath the color", "The smell of sorrow", "Google hallucinates". And the reader is only gradually informed about the background of the story which is told from multiple perspectives. Each of the main characters – Lin, Malik, Lin's brother Hashim, and her father (the mother is only mentioned by others) – presents his or her viewpoint and his or her inner feelings and thoughts. The personal flashbacks and reflections, including critical introspection, often come close to an inner monologue although it is a third person narrative. As the main protagonist, Lin receives more space than the other figures.

Two principal events frame the narrative: the situation in Iraq in 2003 before the anticipated invasion and war, and the aggression against Malik by Lin's brother and one of his companions because of his relationship to Lin. Every chapter starts with a short press release on the 2003 preparations for invading Iraq. Whether the news reports are authentic, or not, is not important but rather that the real and the fictive are intertwined. As from the seventh chapter, other "documents" are inserted (historiographic works, poetry, Internet pages). These not only enhance the continuity of *jahiliyya*, but also illustrate the abandonment by society of the

¹⁰ Traditionally, the marriage between a (free) Arab woman and a black man is a taboo. This applies all the more in the case of a well-educated woman.

original ideals of Islam. The relation between pre-Islamic and contemporary *jahiliyya* is further enhanced by the unfamiliar calendar which is used from the very beginning to introduce the chapters.¹¹ Whereas days and months are given “pre-Islamic” names, the year is specified as “12 after the (operation) desert storm”, that means 12 years after the Second Gulf War in 1991 and the US-led intervention in response to Iraq’s invasion and annexation of Kuwait. The classical names are “explained”¹² in the last chapter which in contrast to the earlier chapters bears the heading “From the year of shock and awe” and ends with a frenzied repetition of a poetic verse, indicating the outbreak of the war. This dramatic composition seems to suggest a discursive link between aggression in the local context and that in the regional context, leading to a radicalization in rhetoric and behavior.

The short initial chapter consists of the reflections of Hashim after he and his companion attacked Malik and left him half-dead on one of the streets of Medina. Hashim who always calls Malik “the animal”, asks himself anxiously, “Is he dead?” This repeated question remains unanswered because until the end, Malik is in a coma, an intermediate state between life and death, termed *barzakh*, the word which in Muslim tradition is usually understood as a barrier between hell and paradise. What is most interesting in this context is the mystical-philosophical interpretation of the term in which *barzakh* denotes “the dark substances”, i.e. the bodies, which are “dark by nature” and only become “light on receiving the light of the spirit” (cf. Carra De Vaux, 1960/1986: 1072; Zaki, 2001). Malik experienced marginalization, exclusion, discouragement, disdain and contempt at an early age. Only the love and respect shown him by Lin helped him to overcome his submissive attitude. Lin is described as soft and calm, a 30-year-old, unmarried woman, who is focused on her medical studies and her work at a hospital where she learns about the tragic fates of other women. As she is more interested in “what’s beneath the color”, she remains by the bedside of her dying beloved. Nonetheless, her father finally refuses to allow a legal union between his daughter and Malik because he anticipates its rejection by their social environment. Lin’s brother is portrayed as the exact opposite of Lin: pampered by his mother, without education or job, hanging around in the streets, only interested in satisfying his selfish (material and sexual) needs, unstable, aggressive, and violent, and the very epitome of a hypocrite.

¹¹ Subtitles specify the exact time or place. – All this gives the impression of short film sequences.

¹² In fact, different lists of the days and names used in pre-Islamic times exist (De Blois, 2000: 260). Lin is said to have found the list (Al-Juhani, ²2008: 175-177) in “Google”.

3.3 Raja Alem's "The Doves' Necklace" (2010)

Raja Alem, born in Mecca in 1956¹³, with a BA in English literature from the University of Jeddah, whose life is currently divided between Paris and Jeddah, is the most prominent and prolific author among the writers mentioned.

Her oeuvre encompasses ten novels, five plays, one biography, short stories and children's stories (Fähndrich, in Alem, 2014: 583). For her long and densely-written novel "The Doves' Necklace" she was co-awarded with the 2011 "Arabic Booker". The novelist's uniquely complex style, her postmodern experimentation with language, form, and narration, which draws on a wide range of oral traditions, myths and fairy tales, as well as a rich philosophical and literary repertoire of classical Arabic sources and different historical eras, has not only found enthusiastic admirers, but also a number of critics. Whereas her fans praise her narrative style as erudite, intriguing and sophisticated (cf. Martinez-Weinberger, 2011: 108f and passim), opposite views regard her texts as inaccessible and obscure (cf. Al Ghadeer, 2017: 401).

Like her previous works, "The Doves' necklace"¹⁴ is written in a highly symbolic and poetic language, and alternates between fact and fantasy, the real and surreal; the author uses diverse genres, the techniques of embedded narratives – the "tale-within-tale" technique, already known from "Thousand and One Nights" – and "magic realism", and displays a broad spectrum of male and female characters and historical, legendary, and mythological material. The great number of intertextual references starts with the Arabic title of the novel (*Tawq al-hamam*) which is almost identical with a well-known work of classical Arabic literature: *Tawq al-hamama* ("The Dove's necklace"), a treatise on love by the 11th century poet, historian, philosopher, jurist, and theologian Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) of Muslim Spain (711-1492).¹⁵

Alem's novel is divided into two parts. Whereas the first part mainly deals with the city of Mecca, the second part carries the reader to other places in KSA or on the Arabian Peninsula as well as to Spain (Madrid, Toledo). The fiction may be read as

¹³ The information on her birth year differs extremely. 1956 is the year given by Al-Ghadeer (2017: 401) and Aboud and Ali (2015: 55). Fähndrich (in Alem, 2014: 583) gives 1970 which seems most unlikely; Martinez-Weinberger (2011: 108) chooses "c. 1959".

¹⁴ For an analysis of the book cf. Fähndrich, in Alem, 2014: 585-589; Dhahir, 2016: 127-141; Laachir, 2013: 35-42 (without the second part); Aboud and Ali, 2015: 60-62.

¹⁵ Cf. Arnaldez, 1971/1986: 792f. The treatise is mentioned in the second part of the novel, when Nura (alias Azza) receives a "rare Hebrew translation" of the book as a present by a mysterious old Jewish woman in Toledo, the medieval center for translations from Arabic into Latin.

an homage to Mecca¹⁶ but also as an elegy for Alem's birth place (cf. Dhahir, 2016: 128; Fähndrich, in Alem, 2014: 585) because from the very beginning it is obvious that a major theme of the novel is the transformation of the Meccan landscape over the past decade. As Laachir (2013: 36) puts it: "The novel juxtaposes the rich cultural and spiritual history of Mecca against the ongoing onslaught on its historical buildings and mountains." In her novel, Alem not only sheds light on the power mechanisms behind the destruction of the old parts of her native city, but also recalls and reflects the diversity of Mecca's historical legacy, its character as a multicultural, multiethnic entity – an act she considers necessary for a future "rebirth" of the most sacred city of Islam where the Kaaba, the direction of Muslim prayer, is situated, and which is the destination of millions of Muslim pilgrims every year.

The novel starts like a crime story with the discovery of the naked corpse of a young woman in the narrow "Lane of Many Heads"¹⁷, a poor and marginalized neighborhood in Mecca where most of the characters live. The alley which finally has also to yield to the bulldozers appears as the main narrative voice in the first part of the novel – one of the peculiar features of the story. The all-knowing street with its side-roads is an allegory for the many arms of the powerful state and business elites (the "Octopus Empire"), dubious figures who do not hesitate to have recourse to any means, in particular corruption, intimidation, violence, and murder, to achieve their ends, and are identified as those responsible for the destruction of Mecca's heritage. The female dead body, disfigured beyond recognition, symbolizes Mecca which has also become faceless due to the extinction of its historical sites and old buildings replaced by tall 'modern' edifices of steel and glass.

What follows the discovery of the corpse does not comply with a conventional crime scene investigation and police procedure. Nobody seems to be interested in identifying the ('shamelessly naked') dead body and solving the crime. The procedures are either bungling or tedious. Clues that ought to lead to solving the case are either ignored or deliberately disregarded. The detective inspector assigned to the case takes his time, interrogates a number of persons from the neighborhood and sifts through a huge number of documents by one of the suspects (Yusuf) and one of the possible victims (Aisha). In the process, the lives of the inhabitants of the alley and the dark secrets they hide (family tragedies, forbidden love affairs, shady businesses, etc.) are unveiled. Yet, finally the file is closed without a definite result, because the inspector himself could not resist the bribe

¹⁶ On the central role of Alem's native city in her novels cf. Nuin-Montreal, 2011: (esp.) 44-46 (for the picture of Mecca in "The Doves' Necklace").

¹⁷ Cf. the cover photo of the English translation (2016), whereas the original front cover shows Arabic letters (an allusion to the old manuscript hidden in the "moon-shaped silver case"?), and the German translation shows a collage by Raja Alem's sister Shadia (b. 1960), a visual artist, from her series "The Supreme Kaaba of God".

offered by the business tycoon. Thus, the Lane's very first statement ("The only thing you can know for certain in this entire book, is where the body was found") becomes reality.

The initial chapters introduce the reader to the main characters of the novel, the potential victims (Aisha and Azza, the two friends who both disappeared on the day of the discovery of the corpse) as well as those suspected of having committed the crime. Introverted, divorced Aisha is a former schoolteacher who is confined to her small room after an accident, which took all her family. The Internet is her means of escaping reality, and the email correspondence with her lover David, her German physiotherapist when she was in Germany undergoing surgery, makes up a large part of the novel. The detective, first shocked ("she deserves to be dead") by the frankly erotic emails later becomes addicted to reading them. Azza, the companion and alter ego of Aisha, is the daughter of the neighborhood's grocer known for her artistic talent and daring spirit (she claims to be a sleepwalker in order to go out for her nightly adventures). The reader is led to believe that she was able to escape from the alley as the property of the rich businessmen. Under the name "Nura" she resurfaces in the second part of the novel, blossoms as an artist, but is finally killed because of her insights into the evil machinations of the tycoon. However, maybe "Nura" is just the product of Aisha's fantasy? Or, was it Aisha who was killed by her jealous former husband? Or did Aisha commit suicide?

Among those (falsely) accused of murder are Yusuf, Muadh, Khalil, and aka Salih. Yusuf, a history graduate with a passion for Mecca and for his childhood sweetheart Azza, finds a secure hiding place in the "sanctuary zone" of the *Haram*, the Great Mosque of Mecca. He had worked there before as a wheelchair carrier for pilgrims with limited mobility as he did not find work in his field of research despite his magnificent diploma certificate. But he continues to write his columns on Mecca's past and present. Later, he finds refuge (together with Muadh) in the traditional house of a photographer who has captured and collected rare pictures of Mecca since the early 20th century. Muadh, the son of the Ethiopian imam, and who is expected to replace his father on his retirement, has a passion for the art of photography, and had learnt the technique from the childless Lebanese wife of the late photographer. Khalil, another suspect, who sometimes uses his car as a taxi, had worked as a pilot until he was banned from flying for his drug abuse. Aka Salih, born in Mecca, but of Turkish origin, lives with the threat of deportation after his adopted parents could not secure a legal status for him despite their connections and attempted bribe. He flees to the garbage dump outside Mecca living there underground together with other outcasts from society. All these young men are portrayed as fragmented individuals, and confined by harsh and strict social restrictions, poverty, and the corruption of the economic system. Like their female counterparts they suffer from sexual frustration. It seems that art and literature are perceived by Aisha, Azza, Yusuf, and Muadh as a means to overcome physical and psychological repression.

Sub-plots not only illustrate the extent of reckless capitalism, scandalous stories of corruption, prostitution and daily violence, but they also depict tough women of the older generation who manage to survive due to their energy and self-confidence (Umm Saad; Halima) despite sufferings in their early life, or lovers of culture with a tendency to Islamic mysticism (e.g. Mushabbab). Moreover, Alem does not neglect to mention the voiceless victims of economic exploitation and sexual abuse. The search both for the key that opens every door and the “moon-shaped silver case” symbolizes the search for Mecca’s ancient heritage and original nobility which is in danger of falling into oblivion, thus eliminating the knowledge deemed necessary for its rebirth and the restoration of true Islamic and humanist values such as tolerance, equality, and peaceful coexistence. Mecca was the center of the world for medieval Muslim geographers. As a result, the message of the novel seems to be: it is not only KSA which is on the brink of collapse. What is needed are new visions based on the positive aspects of the historical and cultural heritage.

4. Conclusions

This brief overview of contemporary Saudi women authors demonstrates the extent of social criticism incorporated in a sample of their novels. As long as novelists have more freedom to call for reform in KSA than political and social activists, these bold voices are necessary to ‘speak truth to power’. Without doubt, the novelists have created an awareness of the socio-political grievances and failures of modernity, some of them specific to the Saudi context, others ubiquitous, not restricted to the “Arab-Muslim” spheres. Through their writings they have given an impression of the heterogeneity of Saudi society and the potential of Saudi women. They have shown that they do not need to be represented by others. But as their works cannot be the substitute for a functioning civil society, they need (national, regional, and international) support for their push for substantial reform.

Despite different visions and orientations, the authors mentioned seem to opt for an alternative, more adequate combination of traditions and modernity with guaranteed basic rights and opportunities for self-realization. Their writings may be regarded as a kind of “committed” literature (*iltizam*). However, in contrast to their precursors in the 1950s/1960s, they are not imbued with an ideological spirit. As all the novels close with an open scene, they encourage their readers to find their own creative ways and individual solutions.

The seriousness of recent announcements by the Saudi crown prince Salman (Alsarras 2017) that he intends to transform KSA into a tolerant and open country, must be doubted because his megalomania (cf. future construction projects), his recent major purge of potential competitors for power and his Iran-/Shia-phobia point to the contrary.

References and bibliography

- Abdullah, M.** 2011. "Rajaa al-Sanea: Beyond Girls of Riyadh", in *Al Akhbar English*, 20 Oct. 2010: <http://english.al-akhbar.com/content/rajaa-al-sanea-beyond-girls-riyadh> (accessed 10-09-2017).
- Aboud, A.M. and M.A. Ali.** 2015. "Universal Elements in Saudi Novel: A Study of Al-Gosaibi's 'Freedom Apartment' and Alem's 'The Dove's [sic] Necklace'", in *International Journal of Comparative Literature & Translation Studies (IJCLTS)*, 3 (1): 55-63.
- Abudi, D.** 2011. *Mothers and Daughters in Arab Women's Literature: The Family Frontier*, Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Al-Bishr, B.** ⁵2013 (¹2006). *Hind wa-l-askar*, Beirut: Saqi. German (El-Beshr, B.) trans. (N. Sarraf-Forst). 2014 (¹2010). *Der Duft von Kaffee und Kardamom*, Cologne: Alawi Verlag.
- Alem, R.** ³2011 (¹2010). *Tawq al-hamam*, Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi. English trans. (K. Halls and A. Taleb). 2016. *The Dove's [!/] Necklace*, London: Overlook. German trans. (H. Fähndrich). ²2014 (¹2013). *Das Halsband der Tauben*, Zürich: Unionsverlag.
- Algahtani, N.** 2016. "Defying convention: Saudi women writers and the shift from periphery to centre", in *Women's Studies International Forum*, 59 (1): 26-31.
- Al-Ghadeer, M.** 2006. "Girls of Riyadh: A New Technology Writing or Chick Lit Defiance *Banāt al-Riyād* [*Girls of Riyadh*]. Rajā' al-Sāni' 319 pp. London: Saqi Press, 2006 (A Review Article)", in *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 37 (2): 296-302.
- Al-Ghadeer, M.** 2011. "LAYLĀ AL-JUHĀNĪ. *Jāhiliyyah: Riwāyah*. Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2007. Pp. 183 (Review)", in *Journal of Arabic Literature* 42 (2): 269-271.
- Al-Ghadeer, M.** 2017. "Saudi Arabia", in Hassan W. S. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions*, New York: Oxford University Press: 397-410.
- Al-Juhani, L.** ²2008 (¹2007). *Jahiliyya*. Beirut: Dar al-Adab. Engl. (L. Aljohani) Trans. (N. Roberts). 2014. *Days of Ignorance*, Doha, Qatar: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation.
- Al-Mahrooqi, R. I. and C. J. Denman.** 2016. "Arab Identity and Literature in Translation: The Politics of Selection and Representation", in *Arab World English Journal*, 5 (May): 5-20.
- Al-Rasheed, M.** 2013. *A Most Masculine State. Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Al-Rasheed, M.** 2015. "Deconstructing Nation and Religion: Young Saudi Women Novelists", in Özdalga E. and D. Kuzmanovic (eds.), *Novel and Nation in the Muslim World. Literary Contributions and National Identities*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 133-151.

- Alsanea, R.** 2005. *Banāt al-Riyād*, Beirut: Saqi. Engl. trans. (R. Alsanea and M. Booth). 2007. *Girls of Riyadh*, New York: Penguin. German trans. (D. Kiliyas). 2007. *Die Girls von Riad*. Munich: Pendo.
- Alsarras, N.** 2017. "Reform in Saudi Arabia: Progress or megalomania?", in *Qantara*, 30-10-2017: <https://en.qantara.de/print/29334> (accessed 06-11-2017).
- Al-Sudairy, H. T.** 2017. *Modern Women in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Rights, Challenges and Achievements*, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publications.
- Al Tamimi, J.** 2012. "Pre-conceived judgements affect our abilities: Badria Al Bisher", in *Gulf News*, 15-06-2012: <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/pre-conceived-judgements-affect-our-abilities-badria-al-bisher-1.1036266> (accessed 12-09-2017).
- Arnaldez, R.** 1971/1986 (reprint). "Ibn Hazm", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, vol. III, Leiden: Brill: 790-799.
- Badry, R.** 2016. "(Review Article) Nagel, Tilman, *Angst vor Allah? Auseinandersetzungen mit dem Islam*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 2014", in *Al-Qantara* (Madrid), 37 (2): 511-516.
- Ba'ishan (Baeshn), L.** 2007. "Suqut al-afti'a fi (Jahiliyya) Layla al-Juhani" (The Fall of Masks in "Age of Ignorance" by L. Al-Juhani), in *Al-Jazira, Culture Magazine*, No. 202-204 (11-06/18-06/26-06-2007): <http://www.al-jazirah.com/culture/> (accessed 10-09-2017).
- Behzadi, L.** 2014. "ChickLit und Literaturskandal – 'Die Girls von Riad' als interkulturelles Missverständnis", in *Bamberger Orientstudien* 1: 97-134.
- Booth, M.** 2010. "'The Muslim Woman' as Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: Girls of Riyadh Go on the Road", in *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 6 (3): 149-182.
- Carra de Vaux, B.** 1960/1986 (reprint). "Barzakh", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, vol. I, Leiden: Brill: 1071-1072.
- De Blois, F. C.** 2000. "Ta'rikh (I. 1:) Dates and Eras in the Islamic World: In the sense of 'date, daring', etc.", in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition, vol. X, Leiden: Brill: 258-264.
- Dhahir, S.** 2014. "Turning Oppression into Challenges: Women in Badriyya l-Biṣr's *Hind wa-l-'askar*", in *Arabica*, 61 (1): 69-88.
- Dhahir, S.** 2016. "Homage to Mecca in Raja Alem's *Tawq al-hamam*", in *Journal of Arabian Studies: Arabia, the Gulf, and the Red Sea*, 6 (2): 127-142.
- Hussain, S.** [and M. L. Qualey]. 2015. "Saudi Writer Badriyah al-Bishr: Be the Action, Not the Reaction", in *Arabic Literature (in English)*, 23-03-2015: <https://arablit.org/2015/03/23/saudi-writer-al-bishr> (accessed 06-11-2017).
- Jabra, J. I.** 1971. "Modern Arabic Literature and the West", in *Journal of Arabic Literature* 2 (1): 76-91.
- Laachir, K.** 2013. "Saudi Women Novelists and the Quest for Freedom: Raja Alem's *The Doves' Necklace*", in Laachir K. and S. Talajooy (eds.),

- Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures: Literature, Cinema and Music*, New York and London: Routledge: 32-48.
- Macfie, A. L. (ed.)**. 2000. *Orientalism: A Reader*, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press.
- Martinez-Weinberger, E.** 2011. *Romanschauplatz Saudi-Arabien: Transformationen, Konfrontationen, Lebensläufe*, Würzburg: Ergon.
- Nuin-Montreal, M.** 2011. "Imágenes literarias de la ciudad santa de la Mecca y de otras ciudades saudíes en la obra de Raja Alem", in *Revista de estudios sobre la ciudad como espacio plural*, 3 (2): 37-49.
- Said, E.W.** 2004. "Orientalism Once More", in *Development and Change*, 35 (5): 869-879.
- Shepard, W.** 2001. "Age of Ignorance", in McAuliffe J. D. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. I, Leiden: Brill: 37-40.
- Taylor, A.** 2014. "Saudi cleric pays price for showing his wife's face", in *Washington Post*, 19-12-2014: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/12/19/saudi-cleric-pays-price-for-showing-his-wifes-face/> (accessed 06-11-2017).
- Vauthier, É.** 2014. « De l'inconstance des limites : structures du récit et modes narratifs dans *Jāhiliyya* de Laylā al-Juhanī », in *Arabian Humanities* 3: [1-12] [<http://cy.revues.org/2779?lang=en>].
- Zaki, M. M.** 2001. "Barzakh", in McAuliffe J. D. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. I, Leiden: Brill: 204-207.

The author

Roswitha Badry is Professor of Islamic Studies at Freiburg University, Germany. Her publications and research interests center on the history of the MENA-region since the 19th century, the continued influence of classical ideas in contemporary discourses, Shiite Islam, gender issues, and modern Arabic literature (esp. autobiographies, novels).