

**The Dynamics of Interpretive Communities and the Contemporary  
Saudi Novel: A Study in the Reception of Abdo Khal, Raja Alem,  
Rajaa Alsanea and Yousef al-Mohaimeed**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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## **Dedication**

It is a pleasure and an honour, for me, to present this thesis

to my beloved husband Mohammed Algahtani

my wonderful daughters Samar, Mayar and Yara

and my ambitious son Badr

This thesis is dedicated with love and gratitude to them all.

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## Abstract

The research undertaken in this thesis focuses on the reception by different groups of readers in both the Arab and Western worlds of four novels written by Saudi authors: Abdo Khal's *Tarmī bi-sharar...* (Throwing Sparks), Raja Alem's *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* (The Dove's Necklace), Rajaa Alsanea's *Banāt al-riyāḍ* (Girls of Riyadh) and Yousef al-Mohaimed's *Fikhākh al-Rā'iḥa* (Wolves of the Crescent Moon). In order to analyse this critical discourse, this study draws on Fish's (1980) concept of 'interpretive communities', combining this with a detailed examination of the socio-cultural and ideological contexts that shaped the reception of these works.

This thesis is divided into eight chapters. Chapter one elaborates the research background, the aims of the study, its significance and the research questions that both motivate and structure this thesis. Chapter Two provides a detailed account of available research and theories related to the Saudi novel and the reception theory as well as the data used and the methodology applied. Chapter Three discusses the political, social and cultural contexts that have shaped the Saudi literary space, detailing how these are reflected in the Saudi novel and the extent to which they have affected its development. Chapter Four highlights the important factors that have significantly affected the status and reception of the contemporary Saudi novel.

Chapters five and six examine the reception of these four contemporary Saudi novels by different groups of Arab readers, focusing on two main groups of readers and readings: Arab journalists, both Saudi and non-Saudi (simplistic readings); and Arab literary critics, both Saudi and non-Saudi (professional readings).

Chapter seven explores how these four Saudi novels have attracted the attention of Anglophone journalists and academics following their translation into English. It argues that the cultural experiences of Anglophone readers differ from those of the original target audience, which influences the act of textual interpretation.

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## Note on Translation and Transcription of Arabic

This study follows the style of the transcription of Arabic used by *The International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Full transcription is provided of Arabic names and titles. The names of Arab authors with publications in English are kept in the form used with their English publications, e.g. Algozaibi, Alsanea, etc. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Arabic are mine. The symbols used to transcribe are as follows:

أ	a
ب	b
ت	t
ث	th
ج	j
ح	h
خ	kh
د	d
ذ	dh
ر	r
ز	z
س	s
ش	sh
ص	ṣ
ض	ḍ
ط	ṭ
ظ	ẓ
ع	‘
غ	gh
ف	f
ق	q
ك	k
ل	l
م	m
ن	n
ه	h
و	w
ي	y
ة	a
short vowels a, i, u	long vowels ā, ī, ū

# Chapter One

## Focus of the Study and Research Framework

### 1.1 Research Aims

Saudi novels have started to attract the attention of readers and scholars, particularly in the West, as a result of the events of 9/11. Prior to that, interest in Saudi fiction was very limited. However, since 2001, this interest has been reflected in part in the increase in the number of translations of Saudi novels into English. The rapidly increasing rate of publication of these novels and the critical acclaim that a number of them have received is testament to changes in the modes of production and reception of the Saudi novel. As explored in detail in a later chapter of this thesis, several Saudi novelists have now won international literary prizes. Abdo Khal won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF)<sup>1</sup> in 2010, with Raja Alem winning the same prize in the following year and Mohammad Hasan ‘Alwān in 2017. It could be argued, however, that many Saudi novels have still not obtained the reception that they deserve.

Over time, the distribution of Saudi novels has become more widespread in a broader range of countries in both the Arab and Western worlds, due to the fact that some have been acknowledged by critics and scholars. As a result, several Western publishers produced translations into a range of languages as the demand on Saudi fiction increased. Saudi novels are not randomly chosen to be translated; rather it is argued in this thesis that these processes of selection, translation and marketing are conditioned and shaped by a number of different factors and socio-political contexts. These same factors and contexts may also determine to a certain extent why one novel becomes a best-seller while another does not. Past experience suggests that marketing strategies, advertising and an author’s cultural context and gender are all likely to be features that will contribute to the

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<sup>1</sup> IPAF is “an annual literary prize run with the support of the Booker Prize Foundation in London and funded by the TCA Abu Dhabi in the UAE” <[www.arabicfiction.org/](http://www.arabicfiction.org/)>

positive reception of Saudi novels while the themes that they touch upon or their daring expression will help to gain their authors fame or even notoriety.

Although the demand for Saudi fiction in the Arab world is fairly constant, the reception of Saudi fiction by Western readers has varied over time. Some works have been received with great acclaim while others that were greeted with great enthusiasm in the Saudi literary scene have failed to spark interest. This could be related more to their socio-political subject matter or cultural relevance rather than to their literary quality. For example, *Banāt al-riyāḍ* (2005) (*Girls of Riyadh*, 2007) by Rajaa Alsanea has been reprinted several times in the Arab world and then translated into a wide range of foreign languages, including English, German, French, Turkish, Italian, etc. These translations have addressed different readerships in their respective languages, as will be discussed in detail later in this thesis.

This thesis aims to explore the reception of the contemporary Saudi novel by different groups of readers in both the Arab and Western worlds by focusing on four texts: Abdo Khal's *Tarmī bi-sharar...* (2009) (translated as *Throwing Sparks*, 2014), Raja Alem's *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* (2010) (*The Dove's Necklace*, 2016), Rajaa Alsanea's *Banāt al-riyāḍ* and Yousef al-Mohaimed's *Fikhākh al-Rā'iḥa* (2003) (*Wolves of the Crescent Moon*, 2007). Drawing on Stanley Fish's (1980) concept of 'interpretive communities', this thesis will explore the hermeneutic practices of both Arabic-speaking and Anglophone readers from a range of national and cultural contexts, by analysing a corpus of texts from diverse sources. It will also attempt to identify and investigate those factors that draw readers to particular novels and also aim to account for the popularity of these novels in translation, which have ranked among Saudi Arabia's top-selling books.

## 1.2 Significance of the Study

The contributions made in this thesis are significant for a number of reasons. Firstly, it represents the first attempt to examine the reception of Saudi novels in both Western and Arab literary spaces, by using the conceptual and analytical framework of reception theory, more specifically the model of 'interpretive communities' developed by Fish (1980). Applying this new method to the study of contemporary Saudi novels will serve to stimulate future research on Saudi literature and its reception. Moreover, the analysis

of different interpretive communities that forms the core of this thesis will provide useful insights into the construction of Saudi literary space,<sup>2</sup> shedding light on the role which the dynamics of political, social and cultural contexts play in shaping the production, distribution and circulation of Saudi novels. It also examines the conflict between the cultural centre and periphery in the Arab world and the extent to which this governs the reception of these Saudi novels, a previously unexplored topic. Thus, highlighting the importance of centre-periphery issues in shaping the reception of these Saudi novels could lead to more detailed studies of the common issues that control and shape the Arabic literary space. Mapping and understanding the effect of ‘interpretive communities’ on the Saudi literary space has not yet been the subject of in-depth analysis. This study aims to plug this gap and shed light on the dynamics and implications of their influence and validate reception theory as a valuable approach within Saudi literary studies.

Having established the significance of this study, the next section discusses the questions that both motivate and structure this thesis.

### 1.3 Research Questions and the Structure of the Thesis

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the aim of this study is to examine how Fish’s (1980) concept of ‘interpretive communities’ can be used to account for similarities and differences in critical readings of a selection of contemporary Saudi novels by different constituencies of readers in both the Arab and Western worlds. In order to achieve this aim, this thesis consists of eight chapters in total, and has been structured in the following way in order to address the following research questions:

*1. To what extent have political, social and cultural contexts shaped the Saudi literary space?*

Chapter three addresses this question, discussing those Saudi political, social and cultural contexts that have shaped the Saudi literary space, detailing how these are reflected in the Saudi novel and the extent to which they have affected its development. It argues that the changes in these contexts following 9/11 have prompted new literary developments, with the novel emerging as an ideal vehicle for documenting these socio-cultural changes.

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<sup>2</sup> According to Casanova (2004, pp. 4-5), literary space is constituted by writers, histories, literary academic studies, literary works, literary institutions and prizes, as will be discussed in detail in chapter four.

It begins by focusing on the complex historical links between politics and religious power, economic prosperity and social change that have helped to shape contemporary Saudi Arabia. It then explores how the events of 9/11 affected the Saudi novel and its reception since in this period, more than any other, Saudi society and its political regime became a key player on the international stage, a development that in turn led to the rise in the publication and translation of Saudi novels. This chapter also examines social movements in the Kingdom that have significantly impacted on the development of the novel, focusing in particular on discrimination against women, the education system, and gendered roles in Saudi society. The chapter concludes with a detailed examination of the cultural context highlighting the key role that media and literature have played in Saudi society.

*2. Which factors have significantly affected the status and reception of the contemporary Saudi novel?*

This question is the main focus of chapter four, which argues that five important factors have significantly affected the status and reception of the contemporary Saudi novel and explores the reasons for their impact. The first of these is the ideological clash which took place in the 1980s in Saudi Arabia between modernist reformation (*Ḥadātha*) and traditionalists (*Ṣaḥwa*), which led to the rise in power of ultraconservative religious discourse. As this chapter notes, the issuance of *fatwas* relating to Saudi writers themselves and their works had a significant effect on shaping the public awareness of Saudi literature. It also considers how the reception of particular Saudi novels by ultraconservative religious groups has impacted on the reception of contemporary Saudi novels. Secondly, the chapter describes how censorship and the lack of freedom of expression in the Saudi literary space has caused some Saudi novels to be banned and censored. The third important factor examined in this chapter is the digital revolution, in particular the internet, which has paved the way for educational, social and cultural developments.

The focus then shifts to the rise of a new generation of Saudi writers, particularly women, who started to address sexual issues more openly in their novels, shocking conservative members of society because writing about such themes is still prohibited in many Arab countries. By challenging the traditional cultural hegemony and attempting to change

stereotypical images of Saudi society, these young Saudi novelists encouraged new readers to discover their fiction.

The final factor that this chapter discusses is the role that literary prizes have played in bringing the contemporary Saudi novel to international attention and increasing its popularity, distribution and circulation, examining the symbolic capital that prestigious literary awards can bestow. By considering the decision-making process by which particular prizes are awarded, this chapter also draws attention to the concept of the periphery and the centre within the Arab literary scene. Attention is also paid to how these literary awards have influenced the production of translations of Saudi novels into various foreign languages, creating different ‘interpretive communities’ for these prize-winning Saudi novels. A detailed analysis of the influence of these factors on the reception of contemporary Saudi novels is presented in subsequent chapters.

*3. How have these Saudi novels been received by different interpretive communities of Arabic-speaking readers?*

Chapters five and six address the third research question, examining the reception of four contemporary Saudi novels by different groups of readers in the Arab world, using Fish’s (1980) concept of ‘interpretive communities’ made up of “those who share interpretive strategies” (p. 14). These chapters focus on two main groups of readers and readings: Arab journalists, both Saudi and non-Saudi (simplistic readings); and Arab literary critics, both Saudi and non-Saudi (professional readings). It is argued that cultural and social contexts help to create interpretive communities, impacting on how they understand and interpret specific texts, focusing particular on Arab perspectives on the selected Saudi novels. Comparative analysis of responses to these novels in the form of reviews from the Arabic press (both Saudi and non-Saudi) is used to reveal the ways in which these communities can influence readers by establishing their expectations, determining their interpretive strategies and shaping their attitudes toward particular novels.

Chapter five focuses on readings of the selected texts by Arab journalists, both Saudi and non-Saudi, using analysis to identify the differing perspectives of interpretive communities and to reveal the presence of subcommunities of Saudi conservatives and liberals. In chapter six, the attention shifts to the close analysis of literary criticism of

these Saudi novels by both Saudi and non-Saudi Arab professional readers, which offers an in-depth insight into the complexity of the technique, style, and themes found in these Saudi texts. This chapter contains a comparative analysis of the critical responses from these two interpretive communities, examining the interpretive strategies used both these groups to approach these Saudi novels.

*4. How have these Saudi novels been received by different constituencies of Anglophone readers, and which factors might account for any differences in these readings?*

Chapter seven then explores how these four Saudi novels have attracted the attention of Anglophone journalists and academics following their translation into English. It explores how these translated texts have been received by different constituencies of Western readers, and considers the factors which might account for any differences in their readings. It is argued that the cultural experiences of Anglophone readers differ from those of the original target audience, which will influence the act of textual interpretation. In addition, the role of translators, publishing houses, media and marketing strategies in shaping the ways of reading and reception of these Saudi texts is also discussed. As previously, close textual analysis of reviews and articles by Anglophone journalists and academics about these Saudi novels is used to investigate the varied responses to these Saudi texts by different interpretive communities of Anglophone readers and the factors that have affected these responses.

The thesis concludes by summarising the findings of this research and considering the extent to which it has been possible to provide answers to the research questions using critical examination of the chosen materials. It then highlights any remaining gaps in knowledge and the questions that still need to be addressed in future work on the dynamics of interpretive communities.

Having outlined the content of the six chapters of this thesis and their relation to the research questions, the following chapter will discuss the prior research and theories related to the Saudi novel and the reception theory as well as the methodological approach that has been adopted in this study in order to address these questions.

## Chapter Two

# Studying the Saudi Literary Space: Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses primarily on existing literature and on those theories that have been of key importance in informing the approach towards reception of the Saudi novel taken in this research. It also discusses the work of some major reception theorists, namely Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish, whose theories and ideas are relevant to this thesis. Then, the chapter outlines the methodological approach adopted to address the research questions.

### 2.2 Critiquing the Saudi novel in the Saudi Literary Space

The majority of studies concerning the Saudi novel to date have focused on technical concerns, exploring the basic features of a novel. The first detailed discussions of the Saudi novel emerged during the 1970s and 1980s. For example, a study by a Syrian critic Bakrī Shaykh Amīn (1972; 1996) entitled *al-Ḥaraka al-adabiyya fī al-Mamlaka al-‘Arabiyya al-Sa‘ūdiyya*<sup>3</sup> (The Literary Movement in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia), Muhammad al-Shāmikh’s (1972) book entitled *al-Nathr al-fannī fī al-Sa‘ūdiyya: 1895-1925*<sup>4</sup> (Artistic prose in Saudi Arabia, 1895-1925), ‘Umar al-Sāsī’s (1978) book *al-Mūjaz fī al-adab al-‘Arabi al-Sa‘ūdī* (A Summary of Saudi Arabian Literature) and Maṣūr al-Hāzimī’s (1981) book *Fann al-qīṣṣa fī al-adab al-Sa‘ūdī al-ḥadīth* (The Art of Story in Modern Saudi Literature), all traced the history of Saudi literature, examining its emergence and later development. Most of these studies focused on the novel as a genre, as a part of a historical overview of Saudi literature without making any attempts to analyse themes or understand the socio-cultural conditions which shaped these novels.

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<sup>3</sup> The book was originally a PhD thesis in Damascus University.

<sup>4</sup> It was previously submitted as a PhD thesis in the University of London (1966), under the title *Artistic prose in the Hijaz: 1895-1925*.

Publication data from the 1990s and beyond show a marked increase in the number of Saudi novels being published, with some acquiring both a national and international readership (see chapter four sections 4.5 and 4.5.1). During this era, considerable attention began to be given to the Saudi novel and particularly to how social and cultural transformations are reflected in the text. For example, al-Sayyid Muhammad Dīb's (1989; 1995) book *Fann al-riwāya fī al-Mamlaka al-'Arabiyya al-Sa'ūdiyya: bayn al-nash'a wa-l-taṭawwur*<sup>5</sup> (The Novel in Saudi Arabia between Emergence and Development) and Muhammad Ṣāliḥ al-Shanṭī's (1990) book *Fann al-riwāya fī al-adab al-Sa'ūdī al-mu'āṣir*<sup>6</sup> (The Novel in Contemporary Saudi Literature), both focused on themes relating to the socio-cultural context of Saudi Arabia including women's rights, questions of identity and social transformation.

Al-Qahtani's (1994) thesis, entitled *The Novel in Saudi Arabia: Emergence and Development 1930-1989: A Historical and Critical Study*, can be considered the first academic study of the Saudi novel (al-Qahtani, 1994, p. 1). It provides a historical contextualisation of the Saudi novel as a genre without any in-depth textual analysis of specific works, discussing factors that prompted the emergence and development of the Saudi novel, including journalism and study abroad. Al-Qahtani also considers the differences between the Saudi novel and short story, using theories of literary genre to distinguish between them. Although it was published in book form in 1998, it does not consider the development of Saudi novels during the 1990s. However, Al-Qahtani's historical overview of developments in the Saudi novel provided a useful reference point for the discussion of the development of this form which is found here in chapter three: Political and Socio-cultural Contexts of Modern Saudi Arabia.

In his doctoral thesis, *Women's Novel in Saudi Arabia: Its Emergence and Development in a Changing Culture*, the Saudi academic al-Wahhabi (2005) focuses on novels written by Saudi women and places a major emphasis on textual criticism and analysis of technical features and themes such as masculinity and gender, identity, symbolism and myth. His study also underlines how the social and cultural attitudes of contemporary Saudi Arabia are reflected in their novels. The study used an eclectic mix of

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<sup>5</sup> It was written by an Egyptian critic whilst he was teaching in Saudi Arabia.

<sup>6</sup> It was written by a Palestinian critic while he was teaching in Saudi Arabia.

phenomenology, modern cultural studies, Marxist and Feminist theories to analyse a representative sample of novels by Saudi women, examining the changes in the women's novel over the course of three eras. He begins by considering the work of the earliest generation of female novelists writing in the period 1960 to 1980, examining novels written by Samīra Khāshugjī and Hudā al-Rashīd. According to al-Wahhabi, this generation of writers can be considered the pioneers of the Saudi women's novel, since they dealt in their work with "the issues of women's rights and liberation" (al-Wahhabi, 2005, p. 308). He indicates that these novelists tended to write from a romantic perspective with limited awareness of the art of novel writing. Other critics such as al-Nu'mī (2004) have argued that work in this era does not really reflect the concerns of Saudi society because the heroines of these novels and the settings portrayed in them reflect the fact that these female writers were living outside Saudi Arabia. The second era in al-Wahhabi's study covers the period from 1980 to 1991 and here he highlights the relation between the significant changes in Saudi society and stylistic developments in the novels written by Saudi women. The third era that al-Wahhabi focuses on is the post-Gulf War period from 1992 to 2002, and in this section he examines how changing social and political attitudes in this period affected aspects of women's writing, particularly in terms of its style and themes.

Al-Wahhabi's thesis is a valuable contribution to the study of women's novels in Saudi Arabia, and provided useful contextual details about the influence of social movements on novels written by women and their developments, topics which are dealt with here in chapter three. Although al-Wahhabi's work explores the emergence of a new generation of Saudi women writers, it does not discuss the influence of this generation on the Saudi novel after the events of 9/11. As discussed here in chapter four, this new generation who were influenced by broader trends such as globalisation and changes in Saudi literary space itself, used their writing to begin to challenge social taboos and cultural traditions.

Al-'Abbās's book entitled *Nihāyat al-Tārīkh al-Shafawī* (2008) (The End of Oral History) marks another valuable contribution to the understanding of Saudi literature. This detailed account of the contemporary Saudi novel distinguishes between the novels produced from 2001 onwards and those of earlier periods. He does not focus on the reception of these novels, but rather uses the works to illustrate the socio-cultural transformations that led to an increase in both the quantity of novels published and their literary quality. He also

examines the impact of the dominant culture and social changes on novels by Saudi writers, arguing that this prompted the growing use of love and sex as narrative themes in novels. According to al-‘Abbās (2008), the dialectical relationship between the individual and the patriarchal regime has become the main issue of women’s novels, possibly reflecting a desire to break away from this traditional concept. He argues that this patriarchal culture has had a negative impact on narrative discourse, and led to Saudi women’s novels being viewed as detailed representations of reality and a subsequent lack of focus by critics on their literariness. His work offers valuable insights into the reasons why some novels penned by Saudi women have been favourably received despite their technical weaknesses.

Al-Hājirī’s (2009) study, entitled *Jadaliyyat al-matn wa-l-tashkīl* (The Dialectic of Content and Form), analyses Saudi novels written in the period between 1990 and 2006. The author discusses various aspects of narrative themes, using semiotic analysis, symbolism and characterisation, exploring some of the factors that he believes have contributed to the popularity of Saudi novels. He offers valuable insights into the new narrative style used by some novelists who have been inspired by the internet and introduced innovations into this fictional genre. Al-Hājirī (2009) also highlights the role that media play in shaping the reception of literary texts but he limits his discussion to specific factors such as newspaper reviews and internet blogs without examining the nature of these influences on the process of reception in detail. This thesis develops the arguments of media’s influences on the new generation of Saudi writers put forward by al-Hājirī (2009) and examines partly the impact of the media on the reception of Saudi novels in depth (see sections 4.4 and 4.5).

It is only relatively recently that studies of the Saudi novel have begun to take an interest in the area of the reception of literature. Al-Manāṣrah (2010), for example, examines the reception of *Banāt al-riyāḍ* in his book about Saudi fiction. He maintains that the widespread popularity of this novel was due to a variety of reasons, including its title, the fact it was banned by the Saudi authorities when first published, the age and gender of its author, the popularity of Alghosaibi,<sup>7</sup> who penned its preface, and of the publishing house

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<sup>7</sup> Ghazi Alghosaibi was one of the best known writers in Saudi Arabia. In addition to being a poet and novelist, he had also worked as a politician and diplomat. He had authored various essays and books

(al-Saqi), all of which conditioned readers' reception of the novel. He then mentions that these factors have helped *Banāt al-riyāḍ* to receive more critical attention than any other Saudi novels. Al-Manāṣrah (2010) argues that Saudi readers tend to interpret the meaning of this Saudi novel from a feminist perspective and criticises them for using feminist terminology in their writing without any in-depth analysis, suggesting they have no real understanding of this theory. His work has served as a valuable resource for this study, as he identifies a number of reasons why Saudi novels have grown in popularity. In addition, his overview of the reception of *Banāt al-riyāḍ* has helped to inform my own thinking on different types of interpretive communities. However, al-Manāṣrah's study has a number of limitations, the main one being that it was restricted to the reception of a single Saudi novel and only focused on a limited number of Saudi readers' responses. Thus, more extensive research needs to be undertaken to develop a more in-depth understanding of reader-response in the context of the Saudi novel.

Al-Bashīr's (2012) MA dissertation entitled *Talaqqī al-riwāya al-Sa'udiyya fī al-ṣaḥāfa 2000-2010: ṣaḥīfat Alriyadh namūdhajan* (The Reception of the Saudi Novel in the Press 2000-2010: *Al-Riyadh* newspaper as a case study) is one of only a few to deal with the reception of Saudi novels. He examines the reception of the Saudi novel, adopting Todorov's classification of reading into projective, explanatory and poetic types to explore the relationship between reader and text and the process of understanding meaning. Projective reading, he argues, focuses on the author and/or his/her society rather than focusing on the text itself while explanatory reading refers to the reader's tendency to summarise the story and the events it contains. The final type, poetic reading, consists of in-depth analysis of the text, and al-Bashīr (2012) applies this type of reading to Abdullah al-Ghathāmī's reading of *Banāt al-riyāḍ*. Al-Bashīr (2012) also contextualises the reviews published in *Alriyadh* by providing a history of the Saudi press that illustrates development in the criticism of the Saudi novel. The fact that al-Bashīr bases his findings on the reception of novels using criticism from a single Saudi newspaper constitutes an important limitation for his study. In addition, no attention is paid either to the critical reception in the non-Saudi Arab press or to Western reception of Saudi novels. More extensive research remains to be undertaken that will produce more in-depth analysis of

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including some of his own poems, and novels. Some of his poems and novels have been translated into English.

various categories of readers in order to understand the dynamics of ‘interpretive communities’ and the factors that influence the reception of Saudi novels.

This brief review shows that to date the dynamics of the reception of Saudi novels has received little attention in recent studies about the Saudi novel. Moreover, those studies that have examined the reception of Saudi novels tend to be limited in scope, focusing purely on critical responses to novels published in the Saudi press. Thus far, Fish’s (1980) theory of ‘interpretive communities’ has not been applied to the analysis of popular and critical discourse about the contemporary Saudi novel. This thesis represents an original contribution to the research area of contemporary Saudi literary space.

Given this brief literature, the next section focuses on the reception theory that serves as the theoretical framework of this study.

### 2.3 Major theorists of Reception theory

Reception theory is a type of reader-response literary theory with an approach which might be summarised as ‘More power to the reader’ since it considers the reader to be the co-creator of a literary text (Eagleton, 2011, p. ix). Reception theorists, including Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Tony Bennett and Steven Mailloux, all claim that the reader plays a central role in producing the meaning of a literary text.

This literary theory was proposed by the School of Constance in Germany in the 1960s, which transferred authority from the author of the text to the reader (Holub, 1984, p. 84). Jauss made a major contribution to reception theory, focusing on the role of the reader in the literary experience. In his article, ‘The Change in the Paradigm of Literary Scholarship’, Jauss (1960) emphasises the significance of the reader’s role in the interpretation process. According to Jauss (1960), literature should be viewed “from the perspective of the reader or consumer” (Holub, 1984, p. 57) and he considers any literary work “as a dialectical process of production and reception” (ibid.).

#### 2.3.1 Hans Robert Jauss: the historical horizon of the reader

In his article “Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory”, Jauss (1982, p. 15) states that “the historical coherence of works among themselves must be seen in the interrelations of production and reception”. Jauss was influenced by Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics that stresses the importance of the relation between the past and the present when addressing the question of the historical consciousness of the reader (Holub, 1984, p. 42). Jauss (1982, pp. 22-23) suggests that it is necessary for a reader to be aware of the history of literature because the past influences present readings. In his opinion, “the reader’s prejudices do not distort or misconstrue the text’s meaning or the author’s intention” (Machor & Goldstein, 2001, p. 2). Rather, Jauss views these prejudices as “a positive constructive influence [...] establish[ing] the subjective horizon of the reader” (Machor & Goldstein, 2001, p. 2).

Hence, the readers’ own experiences of reading and the historical reception of the text can affect their judgments throughout further sequential readings, as Jauss (1982, p.20) argues that the aesthetic implication

lies in the fact that the first reception of a work by the reader includes a test of its aesthetic value in comparison with works already read. The obvious historical implication of this is that the understanding of the first reader will be sustained and enriched in a chain of receptions from generation to generation.

According to Jauss (1982, p. 24), readers’ responses to a text cannot exist independently; they have to be fused with the narrow horizon of readers’ literary expectations, and also within the wider horizon of their experience of life, where their expectations about the text may disappoint the social and cultural expectations of readers.

This theory views literary meaning as the process of interaction between the reader and the text and brought about a revolution in the way literature and literary criticism was perceived. Jauss (1982, p.25) argues that the way in which the text is viewed at the historical moment of its first appearance satisfies or disappoints readers’ horizon of expectations. A literary work which originally “satisfies the desire for the reproduction of the familiarly beautiful; confirms familiar sentiments; sanctions wishful notions; makes unusual experiences enjoyable as sensations” (ibid) can be rejected by later readers as a result of a “change of horizons”.

This thesis adopts the view put forward by Jauss that past experiences of reading influence present readings in order to understand the extent to which the history of reception of the Saudi novel as a genre, has helped to shape the reception of the contemporary Saudi novel. The historical literary experience has significantly impacted on the interpretation of Saudi literary texts because it determines the horizon of expectation of readers, which can represent a historical horizon of readings as will be discussed in chapter three.

### 2.3.2 Wolfgang Iser: conditions of interaction

While Jauss focuses mainly on the readers' horizon of expectations, Iser (1974) is interested in the act of reading and establishes the concept of the 'implied reader' as that "incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text, and the reader's actualisation of this potential through the reading process" (Iser, 1974, p. xii). Iser's approach to reception theory is phenomenological, and he posits that the involvement of the reader coincides with the production of literary meaning (ibid, p. xi).

Iser (1978, p. 20) highlights the importance of the relationship that exists between the reader and the text, seeing this as a collaborative interaction between them which constructs a literary world. This collaboration consists of both the author's artistic efforts and the readers' aesthetic efforts:

If the virtual position of the work is between the text and the reader, its actualisation is clearly the result of an interaction between the two, and so exclusive concentration on either the author's techniques or the reader's psychology will tell us little about the reading process itself. This is not to deny the vital importance of each of the two poles—it is simply that if one loses sight of the relationship, one loses sight of the virtual work. (Iser, 1978, p. 21)

According to Iser (1978, p. 107), structures within the text and structured acts of understanding are "two poles in the act of communication". The success of this communication depends on the extent to which "the text establishes itself as a correlative in the reader's consciousness" (ibid). In this sense, the success of the communication between the text and the reader is dependent upon the text's ability to activate the individual reader's capability to process and understand this text (ibid). By using this concept of correlation, Iser (1978, pp.107-110) attaches significance to and envisages a form of synchronisation between the literary work and the reader, which leads to the successful communication between the two poles. Thus, successful communication

requires alignment of reading with the expectations of the reader in which s/he becomes engaged. According to Iser (1978, p. 109), in order to establish communication, the text may gain access to the reader's consciousness by the reader's expectations throughout the reading process. The synchronisation is thus activated by the reader's wondering viewpoint that continues throughout "different consecutive phases of reading" (ibid).

Iser (1978, p.108) also argues that the meaning of the text is made by the interaction between both the reader and the text, explaining that the "game will not work if the text sets out to be anything more than a set of governing rules". The interpretation of the text "depends as much on the reader as on the text itself" (ibid, p.107). The text's structure contributes to the manner in which the reader receives a text. For Iser (1978, p. 111), textual schemata play a major role in influencing the way in which the reader chooses to interpret the text.

Iser (1978, p.108) also considers that reading is a process that consists of several phases, each of which reveals "aspects of the object to be constituted" (p.109). Although these aspects are associated with the object, they do not represent it (ibid). During the process of reading the text, the manifestation of the aesthetic object remains incomplete until synthesis occurs. Until then, the reader's viewpoint is free to wander and switch perspective, exploring the text and contributing to the creation of the virtual literary work (Iser, 1978, pp.114-116).

When synthesis occurs, differentiated perspectives become combined and inseparable (ibid., p.116). The past, present and future and the memories, modification and expectations of these respectively interact, converging in the present time in which the reader reads (ibid). The "wandering viewpoint" and its "synthesising operations" transform the text into an "expanding network of connections", enabling it "to pass through the reader's mind" (Iser, 1978, p. 116). Iser's theory can provide insights into how a text is able to establish a correlation with particular readers by activating their capacity to understand the text.

While Jauss and Iser hypothesise that the readers' horizon and their literary experience have an influence on the act of textual interpretation, Fish's (1980) theory draws on them and offers a detailed explanation of some aspect of their theories. The main focus here is

on Stanley Fish's concept of the interpretive community and the extent to which this can offer insights into the constraints placed on readers' individual interpretive strategies and interpretations of the text.

### 2.3.3 Stanley Fish: interpretive community

Fish does not share the formalist belief that text alone is the unchanging, basic, neutral, and knowable component of the literary experience. In *Is there a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities*, Fish (1980) focuses on the reader's role in interpreting and in co-creating the literary work (Fish, 1980, p. 3). According to Fish (1980, p. 147), the text means nothing in itself; it is the reader who gives the text its form and its meaning. This is why Fish claims that readers "write texts" (ibid, p.14). Fish (1980, p. 167) was interested in why different readers reach the same interpretation when reading the same text; and why the same reader "will perform differently when reading two different texts" and proposed the concept of 'interpretive communities' by way of explanation. In doing so, Fish avoids the trap of undue emphasis on subjectivity. He argues that, despite the seeming potential for the limitless proliferation of individual interpretations (ibid., p.11), a literary work is not approached by an individual reader in isolation since every individual effectively belongs to a community of readers. Fish proposes that "it is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or reader, that produce meanings" (ibid, p14). According to Fish (1980), a reader's experience within a community constrains his/her idiosyncratic interpretations and the uncontrolled assertion of personal readings of the text.

Fish (1980, p.14) defines interpretive communities as being "made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading but for writing texts, for constituting their properties". He explains that the same interpretation of a specific text is "the product of the possession by two or more readers of similar interpretive strategies" (Fish, 1980, p. 171). He believes that there is no stable basis for meaning and there is no interpretation that will always be true for every perspective (ibid), since meaning is not found in the text but produced by an interpretive community.

Fish (1980, p. 11) states that literature is "an open category, not definable by functionality or by disregard of propositional truth, or by a predominance of tropes and figures, but

simply by what we decide to put into it". This quote identifies his viewpoint in relation to literature in these words. His theory regards the reader as a maker of literature and he posits that literary textuality is not merely in the text alone as various influences that are external to the text also contribute to giving it meaning.

Fish (1980) also introduces the concept of linguistic competence that is related to the intended reader, who has the ability to approach a text with particular interpretive strategies. According to Fish (1980, pp.45-46), the reader's internalised conception of a language that is shared by the native speakers of that language limits one's reading experience. These limitations are the normative boundaries within which the experience of the reader, using a given language, prevails (ibid, p.45). With regards to textual interpretation, linguists place emphasis on the linguistic code whereas literary critics focus on meaning (Widdowson, 1975, p. 5). Widdowson (1975) considers that stylistic analysis is a combination of code and context and that reconciling these elements generates the ultimate meaning of the text, and making a piece of literature understandable and capable of interpretation, even though it may break linguistic rules (Widdowson, 1975, p. 39). According to Fish (1989), the context which helps to bring meaning to the text is the interpretive community. The reader's context lies outside the text and makes a valuable contribution to creating the literary work, with Fish (1989, p. 9) claiming that reading activities "might have a social or public direction rather than a merely personal one".

All readers belong to an interpretive community "whose assumptions about literature determine the kind of attention [a reader] pays and thus the kind of literature he makes" (Fish, 1980, p. 11). He claims that experience-defined meaning comes from reading, and how one reads a text is socially and culturally constructed (ibid. p. 152). Readers are social and dependent on a particular community, which makes them a product of their community. Interpretive communities influence reader strategies and limit their acts of interpretation because they generate conventional, public ideas since they form part of social institutions (Fish, 1980, p.167). Fish (1980, p. 152) draws attention to the importance of the structuring of the reader's experience, arguing that "the context is experiential", and reader expectations and ultimately significance are established as a result of the restrictions of that context. Fish (1980, pp.158-159) argues that these activities include

the making and revisiting of assumptions, the rendering and regretting of judgments, the coming to and abandoning of conclusions, the giving and withdrawing of approval, the specifying of causes, the asking of questions, the supplying of answers, the solving of puzzles.

He has argued that reader's activities "are interpretive" and "constituting meaning" (ibid., pp.158-159) and make up "the structure of the reader's experience" (ibid., p. 161).

He argues that the similarities or differences seem to be "something independent of and prior to interpretive acts, something which produces them" (ibid., pp. 167-168) and claims that "the stability and the variety are functions of interpretive strategies rather than of texts" (Fish, 1980, p. 167). These interpretive strategies exist before reading and "they are the shape of reading" (ibid., p. 168), giving texts their form. In Fish's theory, interpretive communities are not stable "because interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but learned" (Fish, 1980, p. 172). He states that

interpretive communities grow larger and decline, and individuals move from one to another; thus, while the alignments are not permanent, they are always there, providing just enough stability for the interpretive battles to go on, and just enough shift and slippage to assure that they will never be settled (Fish, 1980, p. 172).

Agreement about the text's meaning then, "rather than being a proof of the stability of objects, is a testimony to the power of an interpretive community to constitute the objects upon which its members (also and simultaneously constituted) can then agree" (ibid., p. 338).

Thus, it is very difficult to find clearly defined boundaries between interpretive communities. Fish seems not to be concerned about defining the boundaries between interpretive communities, since he is interested only in literary criticism in the academic domain. He posits that readers within an interpretive community will interpret a text similarly whereas disagreement on interpretations will still occur between interpretive communities. "In this new vision both texts and readers lose the independence that would be necessary for either of them to claim the honor of being the source of interpretive authority" (Fish, 1989, p. 142). Fish (1980, p. 168) illustrates his theory by using Milton's poem *Lycidas*. He explains that the decisions which he makes about the meaning based on his prior knowledge of the poem's genre and its author influences his interpretation of the poem. These decisions, Fish argues, are made prior to the act of reading a specific

text, and thus they not only influence the interpretations of this text, but would also ‘write’ the text (ibid, pp.168-169).

#### 2.3.4 Steven Mailloux and Tony Bennett

In his book, *Interpretive Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction*, Steven Mailloux (1982), a scholar of American literature, attempts to provide “a useful corrective to the formalist interpretations dominating practical criticism” in the academic studies of American fiction (Mailloux, 1982, p.12). He focuses on five reader-response theorists, dividing them into two main groups: the psychological reading critics (David Bleich and Norman Holland) and the social reading critics (Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish and Jonathan Culler). Mailloux (1982) focuses mainly on Iser’s model relating to the temporal aspect of the reading act, as well as on Culler’s notion of literary competence that allows readers to understand the author’s intention. According to Mailloux (1982, p.112), ultimately, the author’s intentions “should be conceptualised as the author’s most complete intentions. [...] What is most complete and authoritative is best defined in terms of the intended structure of the reader’s response”.

Like Iser, Mailloux maintains that there are “certain formal units in the text that cause the reader to perform certain actions” (ibid, p. 206). He focuses, then, on those features of the text that influence the reader to interpret in certain ways in which the act of reading impacts on the reader’s interpretation. Like Fish, he claims that “literary texts and their meanings are never prior to the employment of interpretive conventions; they are always its results. Texts do not cause interpretations, interpretations constitute texts” (ibid, p. 197). Similar to this critic, Mailloux defines interpretive conventions as "group-licensed strategies for constructing meaning" (ibid, p. 149). However, while Fish claims that interpretation is carried out by professional critics, Mailloux describes this as a “politically interested act”, explaining that it “participates in a politics embedded in institutional structures and specific cultural practices” (ibid, p. 149).

Mailloux (1982) examines some reading models of reader-response interpretations of Hawthorne's *Rappaccini's Daughter*, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, and Melville's *Moby Dick*. He concludes that in “constitutive hermeneutics, the interpretive conventions are everything; they constitute the text in every one of its aspects” (ibid, p. 202). Thus, it can be argued that Mailloux’s critical practices resemble those of Iser’s and Fish’s critical

practices. Despite his attempt to develop a model of social reading, Mailloux's work has been criticised on the grounds that "a coherent model never emerges because of the contradictory assumptions underlying each chapter" (Kuenzli, 1983, p. 89).

Like both Fish and Mailloux, Tony Bennett, a British sociologist, critiques formalist interpretations and proposes the 'reading formation'. For Bennett (1983), the object of literary theory and literary criticism should not be the text but what he called 'reading formations'. In his article, "Texts, Readers, Reading Formations", Bennett (1983) raises a set of questions concerning reading of texts, particularly popular fictions. He states that his aim is to introduce the concept of a 'reading formation' which he defines as "a set of intersecting discourses that productively activate a given body of texts and the relations between them in a specific way" (Bennett, 1983, p. 5). He argues that, "meaning is a transitive phenomenon. It is not a thing that texts can have, but is something that can only be produced, and always differently, within the reading formations that regulate the encounters between texts and readers" (ibid, p. 8). He claims that the reader usually activates the text s/he reads within a reading formation that creates the interaction between them. Furthermore, he argues that "the text has no meaning effects that can be constituted outside such reading relationships. It has no meaning that can be traduced" (ibid, p. 15). According to him, then, the "analysis must start with the determinations that organise the social relations of popular reading" (ibid, p. 16). Hence, Fish, Mailloux and Bennett all reject the foundational norms established by aesthetic theory and focus instead on 'interpretive communities', 'rhetorical hermeneutics' and 'reading formations'.

On the basis of this theoretical discussion, it can be concluded that the major proponents of 'Reception theory' including Jauss and Iser, and those who espouse 'Reader- response Criticism' such as Fish, Mailloux and Bennett, all agree that it is the reader who gives the text its meaning. As discussed in this section, Jauss focuses mainly on the historical relationship of the text and its readers' responses, explaining how the reception of a text can change over time. Iser's theory concerns readers within the production of the text and the concept of the 'implied reader'. He explains how the reader is constructed and activated within the text's schema. However, his approach may not be sufficient when dealing with actual reader responses. Mailloux agrees with Iser that authors guide their readers concerning how to read and is interested in explaining the pragmatism of rhetoric, focusing particularly on the field of 'rhetorical hermeneutics'. He engages in rhetorical

textual analyses, considering the ways in which rhetorical practices can control reader response. Bennett falls into the traps of the objective/subjective paradigm when trying to maintain the difference between the object (the text) and the subject (the reader's response).

While these approaches focus on both texts and readers, Fish claims that it is the interpretive community that invests a text with meaning. The methodological approach adopted in this study is underpinned by Fish's concept of 'interpretive communities' since the main aim of this study is to trace similarities or highlight differences in the responses produced by Arabic-speaking and Anglophone interpretive communities. Focusing on this aim, rather than on highlighting the historical development of a text's reception or examining the changes in readings from one horizon of expectations to another, Fish's concept of 'interpretive communities' can be used to help us to understand the many possible conflicting interpretations of these selected Saudi novels that can be produced within a particular frame of time. Moreover, Fish's theory appears to be a valid approach that can account for the similarities or differences of interpretations in the different communities of critics and journalists examined in this study.

Fish's theory of 'interpretive communities' continues to raise some of the questions that those who are interested in reading practices have studied from different perspectives and allows us to develop a range of hypotheses about readers and interpretations. Fish's theoretical notions have been applied in diverse fields including media, cultural studies, law, translation, business and marketing, and religious studies. For example, in media studies, journalists are viewed as members of an interpretive community that is "united by its shared discourse and collective interpretations of key public events" (Zelizer, 1993, p. 219). Similarly, Berkowitz and TerKeurst (1999) adopted Fish's theory to examine the relationship between journalists and news sources within an interpretive community that shaped their interpretations. Media scholars still continue to use Fish's concept of 'interpretive communities' to explore "how members of a specific audience criticized a mainstream news program by reference to their experiences in a counter-public sphere revolving around social activism and alternative media" (Rauch, 2007, p. 995). Fish's theory has also been applied in religious studies focusing on "the community's role in [...] the interpretation of the Bible" (Petric, 2012, p. 54). More recently, his notion of interpretive communities has been used in translation studies, to explore how interpreters'

interpretive strategies are shaped by the conventional rules of their interpretive communities (Sibul, 2014).

On the basis of these examples, it can be argued that although Fish's notion of 'interpretive communities' was originally proposed in 1980, decades later it has retained its usefulness and can provide a valid approach for examining actual reader reactions to particular texts or discourses across a range of academic disciplines.

In this thesis, the concept of 'interpretive communities' is used to explore how four contemporary Saudi novels and their respective English translations were received by different groups of readers from the Arab and Western worlds, as will be discussed in the next section.

## 2.4 Methodology and theoretical framework

This section outlines the methods used to address the research questions. First, criteria for selection of the texts to be analysed in this thesis will be explained in detail. The method used to collect data reflecting reader responses to the selected Saudi novels will then be outlined. Finally, the relevance and importance of Fish's (1980) concept of 'interpretive communities' for the current study will be discussed, explaining how this concept will be used to analyse the reception of the selected contemporary Saudi novels and their respective English translations.

### 2.4.1 Texts and Contexts

In view of the research aims and the research questions motivating this study, four Saudi novels were selected. Three main criteria were applied when selecting these texts: first, the novel had to be written between 2000 and 2010 to reflect the changes that took place in the Saudi novel post-9/11; second, it had to have been translated into English and have gained some recognition in the global marketplace; third, it had to be initially banned in Saudi Arabia, due to the inclusion of taboo topics such as sex, religion and politics.

The first of the selected novels is *Fikhākh al-Rā'iha* (2003) (Traps of Scent) (translated as *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*, 2007) by Yousef al-Mohaimeed. Like all the authors discussed here, al-Mohaimeed wrote his novel in a conservative society governed by

Saudi cultural heritage. This work describes the suffering of vulnerable individuals and their inability to change their situation. It also raises important social issues like the status of illegitimate children in a society dominated by racism and tribalism. Techniques such as flashback and interior monologue are combined with symbolism and a dreamlike quality when narrating the intertwining and alternating stories of the three central protagonists: Turad, Tawfiq and Nasir. Turad survived by stealing from tribesmen until he is caught trying to steal camels and has his ear cut off. Tawfiq was castrated after becoming a slave, while Nasir, abandoned in a box in the street by his unmarried mother, loses his right eye when attacked by a cat. As the original Arabic title suggests, all three characters face problems as a result of the sense of smell.

This unusual motif creates a memorable novel and enables the writer to use a variety of narrative techniques, showcasing his ability to write lucidly, and indirectly challenge the prejudices of the traditional dominant culture. Al-Mohaimed “manages to raise a number of the most serious issues in contemporary Saudi society, ranging from slavery and human rights to the omnipresence of tribalism in civil society, arranged marriages and social conditions of orphans, to name but a few” (Kratka, 2008). He belongs to a new generation of Saudi writers using the novel to discuss significant social issues and challenge long-established taboos in Arab society, and his work has caught the attention of readers and critics in the Arab world and beyond.

The second novel under discussion, *Banāt al-riyād* (2005) (translated as *Girls of Riyadh*, 2007) is by Rajaa Alsanea. In this novel, Alsanea describes the limitations and restrictions that her conservative society has imposed on both men and women, forbidding any contact or interaction between the sexes outside marriage. This makes it more complicated for four female protagonists of the novel (Gamrah, Michelle, Sadeem and Lamees,) to experience love. Despite their social status as members of the so-called upper class, they face the same obstacles as other young Saudis. However, modern technology in the form of the mobile phone and the internet gives them the freedom to communicate with the opposite sex while lowering the risks of being caught out. Exemplifying the significance of this mode of communication, the novel’s narrator uses e-mail to tell her story to the world. Thus, the text not only describes the struggles of the female characters trying to find their place in the world but reflects the narrator’s own struggle for freedom of expression.

The novel chronicles the fate of the four main protagonists. After getting married, Gamrah, the most conservative of the girls, finds her husband is not interested in her and has had an affair with an Asian woman. Her marriage ends after only few months when she announces she is pregnant. Sadeem, the hopeless romantic, is convinced that love will conquer all and that she will marry her lover; but after breaking up with Waleed, her three-year relationship with Firas also comes to an end. Michelle constantly rebels against social restrictions, comparing life in Riyadh with contemporary Western society. Despite her dotting parents, she faces prejudice in Saudi society as her mother is not an Arab. This leads her lover Faisal to break off their relationship and marry another woman. Only Lamees succeeds in achieving all that she wants because she is very much aware of social conventions and manipulates these to her best advantage, allowing her to cope successfully with married life.

*Banāt al-riyād* was originally published in Lebanon and was banned in Saudi Arabia where it was seen as a controversial text. However, it went on to attract great popular and critical attention in both the Arab and Western worlds. A quick glance at the popular website, Amazon, reveals that the English edition of this novel received over 70 reviews and comments during the first year of publishing its translation (Amazon, 2007). The interest of Western readership and publishers in Alsanea's novel created a major debate in the Arab world, which questioned whether it was worth translating, highlighting a clear division in the novel's reception across Arab and Western cultures. As later discussion of responses to this novel will show, a number of different reasons may explain this popularity.

*Tarmī bi-sharar...* (2009) (translated as *Throwing Sparks*, 2014) by Abdo Khal, the noted Saudi author, is the third novel to be examined. It won the International Prize for Arab Fiction (IPAF), known as the Arabic Booker in 2010. In this novel, the author candidly describes the damaging impact of extreme wealth on the male protagonist's life and his environment. It narrates the painful stories of individuals who succumb to the seductive powers and fatal attraction of palace life, only to become enslaved by it. The novel reveals the secrets of the palace and also of those who become its puppets, and who lose everything: their desire to live, their happiness and their families. Khal's novel is set in one of Jeddah's most deprived areas and events alternate between the slums and the

palace. Khal (2009) explores the contrast between “the poor class that dwells in the ‘Hell’ district and the inhabitants of the palace (paradise) who live in an ivory tower” (Gohar, 2012, p. 24).

*Tarmī bi-sharar...* received a mixed response from Arab literary critics. Some praised it highly for its treatment of sensitive political issues while others argued that it offered nothing new, focusing on clichéd themes, as shall be discussed in chapters five and six.

The final novel of the four selected is Raja Alem’s *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* (2010) (translated as *The Dove’s Necklace*, 2016) and was also an IPAF winner (2011). This novel is deeply rooted in the spirit of the author’s hometown Mecca, and explores the secret life of Mecca that goes on behind its closed doors. However, “its characters are desperate to break the walls confining them to the Meccan space and are eager to open windows to the world, both material and spiritual” (Arabicfiction, 2011). The novel opens with the discovery of the naked body of a young woman in the poverty-stricken old neighbourhood of Mecca called ‘Abu Alroos’ and this neighbourhood that knows everyone’s secrets and crimes, narrates the story of the city. Alem’s novel also relates how Mecca’s historical areas have been destroyed by foreigners working for mafia-like building contractors. Inspector Naser attempts to find the young woman’s killer, initially believing the corpse to be that of a missing local girl, Azza. Her lover, Yousef, is helped to hide from the police by Muadh, a photographer. The female protagonists Azza, Aisha and Noura all try to free themselves from harsh social restrictions. When Inspector Naser finds the emails that Aisha sent to her German lover he discovers that Azza is living in Madrid, having fled there with the help of a rich man. Once in Spain, she changed her name to Noura and became an artist, spending her life painting. The novel mixes history, contemporary reality and fantasy, leaving the reader to determine the killer’s identity within the labyrinthine complexity of the world Alem creates.

The novel *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* and its translation received reviews from both Arabic and English language newspapers, which highlighted the fact that this was the first novel written by a Saudi woman to win IPAF. Alem was also interviewed on a variety of media. This coverage attracted readers from diverse backgrounds to discover more about the novel. Readers from the Arab world enjoyed the distinctive style of Alem’s writing and,

following its translation into English, it is also available to a wider audience. These responses are examined in chapters five, six and seven.

#### 2.4.2 Data collection procedures and research process

As previously noted, this study is primarily concerned with the reception of four selected Saudi novels and their translations in the Arab and Western worlds. Thus, textual analysis of the texts themselves lies outside the scope of this study. Instead, this study focuses on responses to these novels available in published form. The corpus of reviews that was examined for this study was drawn from a wide range of materials, consisting of both journalistic reviews and academic articles, all of which were published between 2003 and 2016. This material was gathered from databases such as Scopus, ProQuest, Web of Science, AskZad<sup>8</sup> and the archives of Arabic and English language newspapers and magazines. The aim was not to attempt to identify and analyse all relevant materials appearing throughout the period of the study. Instead, only those published materials that were easily accessible and in the public domain were investigated. The selection excludes those responses which ultimately republishing excerpts from novels, summary, commentary and marketing, as those do not reflect the way these Saudi novels were perceived among the reading activities. Moreover, those sources published in a language other than Arabic and English are excluded.

The responses were selected because their content focuses on one or more of the Saudi novels in the selection. In addition, with regards to geographic distribution, the sample covered nearly all regions of the Arab world and Anglophone Western countries. The responses of Saudi journalists and literary critics were drawn from the major Saudi daily newspapers and their cultural/literary supplements, including *Alriyadh*, *Okaz*, *al-Jazirah*, *al-Madina*, and *Alyaum* (see Appendix 1.1) as well as from academic journals. The responses of non-Saudi Arab journalists and literary critics were obtained from the press of several Arab countries including Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco etc. (see Appendix 1.2). Regarding Anglophone Western responses to the translations of these Saudi novels, reviews were mainly gathered from American and British newspapers and their literary

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<sup>8</sup> This is a large digital library and academic database that offers access to numerous Arabic newspapers, magazines, articles and books originally published in the Middle East and beyond.

supplements, including *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Boston Globe*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent* (see Appendix 1.3) as well as from Western academic journals.

Regarding the research procedure, several strategies were applied in searching and collecting data of readers' responses to these Saudi novels. First, reading the data that had already been collected in order to be familiarised with issues and themes represented in the data. In this stage, any data concerning the Saudi novel was also read. Second, making a list of initial themes that emerge from the data. Third, identifying shared themes and searching for similar and different interpretive strategies in the collected data. Fourth, categorising the critical readings of these Saudi novels into different groups based on the different issues that readers tended to focus on. Fifth, reviewing these groups and reducing the data to the most relevant results relating to the aim of this study. In this context, defining and naming were found for different interpretive communities and sub-communities were also named here. Each of these interpretive communities raises a main research question. Finally, textual analysis was used in examining readers' responses to these Saudi novels, where the analysis is engaged with respect to Fish's theory of 'interpretive communities'. In addition, this analysis also examined the complex interplay between the paratexts of these novels and the commercial, social, cultural and political factors that shape readers' responses to these Saudi novels.

In total, the corpus of Arab and Anglophone Western responses that was analysed consisted of some 180 press articles and reviews from around 66 periodicals that were published in the period 2003-2016. In processing and generating the data, all texts were collected and analysed in the original language in which they were published. Then, Arabic quotes from Arab literary critics and journalists were translated into English by myself. It is noteworthy to point out that any study reliant on material from the Arab press is likely to face difficulties in tracing sources, especially as little research has been carried out previously on the reception of these Saudi novels. The difficulty in gaining access to information and materials is partly due to the fact that electronic archives are relatively new for publications in the Arab world. Therefore, the contribution of this thesis lies also in its documentary value, as it traces both the Arab and Western reception of these four Saudi novels, offering reliable materials for researchers intending to focus on reader-responses to these Saudi novels.

In considering how Arabic-speaking readers and English-speaking readers have received these selected Saudi novels, they were divided into different interpretive communities through their shared discourse and their interpretations of key features of these Saudi novels, as will be explained in the next section.

#### 2.4.3 Identifying interpretive communities

At first glance, these readers were categorised by their similar positions, which can be either positive or negative, of the novel that they set up and discuss certain meanings and standards of interpretive strategies that are used to evaluate particular novels. With respect to Fish's (1980) theory related to 'interpretive communities', it has been found that these selected Saudi novels have met mixed evaluative reception from different groups of readers of both the original and translated versions of these texts.

As Fish's (1980) theory stresses, if two readers do not have a shared heritage or culture then their reading of the same text is likely to be very different and their understanding will vary according to their own social, political and cultural views. Thus, this study divided the material collected into two main interpretive communities, the dividing line being language and culture: Arabic-speaking readers and English-speaking readers. As chapters five, six and seven will distinguish between both the English-speaking readers as well as peers from the culture where the novels were written.

These two interpretive communities (Arab and Anglophone) can be of course subdivided into a number of subcommunities who adopt a particular approach, which Fish (1980) defines as an *interpretive strategy* to read these Saudi novels. Therefore, during data analysis, it has been noted that another important dividing line seems to exist between 'professional reading' and 'simplistic reading'. The simplistic reading, which refers to journalists' responses, seems to be reductionist while professional reading, which is represented by literary scholars and critics, seems to have a level of 'sophistication' or 'experience' that was not reflected in the journalistic 'literal' readings of these Saudi novels.

Drawing on Fish's (1980) theory, the term 'interpretive communities' can be defined as a group of readers who use the same strategies for interpreting a text, therefore, they are

part of a single interpretive community. In our case, it has been noted that some journalists within their interpretive community may refuse to accept other interpretations of these Saudi texts or even find them wrong and try to challenge them, producing different interpretations that may become a subject of debate over these novels. Fish's notion can provide an answer to the question of why there was both agreement and disagreement between those readers who hold similar or different points of view about these Saudi texts.

Fish (1980) also refers to expectations and assumptions generated by prior knowledge that can shape readers' attitudes towards a text. These pre-reading assumptions can explain the influence that interpretive communities have on the readers' preunderstanding, including their prior knowledge that they have learnt in schools, media, mosques and their previous experience of reading novels. Fish's (1980, p. 160) argument only focused on the academic literary critics, describing them as the intended reader "whose education, opinions, concerns, linguistic competence and so on make him capable of having the experience the author wished to provide". In the current study, Fish's notion of intended reader can be applied to literary critics but not to journalists in our case. Fish (1980, p. 166) states that literary critics learn their reading strategies in a larger academic community. In reading these Saudi novels, literary critics could rely on their theoretical knowledge and interpretive activities arising from their previous experiences. In tracing the critical response to these four Saudi novels, literary critics who share their interpretations with other critics through their publication are in the same interpretive community, as will be discussed in chapter six and seven. The decision-making process establishes by deciding what kind of genre the text belongs to, what themes are to be focused on and what approach will satisfy the need to write about these themes. Thus, before reading these novels journalists and literary critics have particular purpose to focus on certain elements or to ask some questions and seek their answers. These assumptions can be influenced by different paratextual elements that can create certain expectations about a text and become essential in shaping interpretive strategies to answer these pre-reading assumptions that can direct readers' interpretations of the novel, as the following chapters will indicate.

Fish (1980, p. 164) argues that the intended meaning is not in the text but rather is constituted by interpretive acts. This intention, Fish explains, "is known when and only

when it is recognized; it is recognized as soon as you decide about it; you decide about it as soon as you make a sense; and you make a sense [...] as soon as you can” (ibid.). Thus, the reader in this study (critic; journalist) tends to recognise the main themes and ideas expressed by the author in his/her text. The structure of the reader’s experience is important to describe the reader’s efforts at understanding the text’s meaning “by pointing to the interpretive strategies employed by that same reader” (Fish, 1980, p. 161). Thus, the analysis of readers’ responses to these selected Saudi novels tends to describe how journalists and literary critics have used certain interpretive strategies to interpret these texts and to explore attitudes beyond their interpretations.

## 2.5 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has briefly discussed literature that has included scholarly writings and research related to the Saudi novel. So far, however, there has been little discussion on the reception of the Saudi novel, which the current study aims to investigate. Thus, it can be argued that the ‘interpretive community’ is a major factor involved in the reader’s perception of these Saudi works. The media controversial debate and the critical acclaim that these texts have received highlight the importance of analysing these responses. This would give very different views and perspectives of the novels and would allow for a fairer comparison and understanding of the overall reception of these Saudi works. In this chapter, it has been reflected in the dynamics of different interpretive communities that are formed of Arab readers and Anglophone Western readers on one hand; and are constituted of subcommunities that have represented the gap between professional and lay readers on the other. Thus, identifying similarities and differences between those interpretive communities can answer the research questions and test the research hypotheses. The following chapter will discuss the political, socio-cultural contexts that have influenced the Saudi literary space.

## Chapter Three

# Political and Socio-cultural Contexts of Modern Saudi Arabia

### 3.1 Introduction

The structure and dynamics of Saudi literary space, including how literature is received there, cannot be separated from the overall political, social and cultural climate of the state itself. Therefore, before addressing the reception of Saudi novels by different interpretive communities, it is important to understand the political, social and cultural contexts of contemporary Saudi Arabia. The principal aim of this chapter, then, is to highlight the complex roles these elements have played and continue to play in the process of Saudi modernisation. Thus, this chapter attempts to address a number of relevant issues. It begins by tracing the complex historical links between politics and religion in the Saudi context since the establishment of the alliance between Ibn Sa‘ūd and *Sheikh* Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb until 9/11 and its aftermath. It then considers the reasons why social change failed to keep pace with Saudi Arabia’s newly found economic prosperity, highlighting the role of the religious authorities in opposing the process of modernisation, and in particular its stance towards women. The focus then shifts to the cultural sphere, examining the key role which education has played in Saudi’s modernisation project. It concludes by focusing on those specific factors which helped pave the way for contemporary developments in the Saudi literary scene.

### 3.2 The political context of Saudi Arabia

The history of the Saudi state can be divided into three phases. The initial phase comprises the period from 1744 to 1818 when Muhammad ibn Sa‘ūd, Prince of al-Dir‘iyya<sup>9</sup>, gave his support to the religious reformer Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb to spread his Islamic vision (al-Hazimi, et al., 2006, p. 3). The second phase lasted from 1820 to 1891.

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<sup>9</sup> A small town in Najd in the central region of Saudi Arabia.

The third phase began in 1932 with the coming to power of King ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Al Sa‘ūd (Ibn Saud) and the establishment of the modern state of Saudi Arabia (Al-Rasheed, 2002, pp. 72-86). Pre-unification and during World War I, Saudi society lacked cohesion due to fighting between various tribes. During the 1930s, these conflicts between tribal groups and local rulers in the Arabian Peninsula were ended, when most of these groups were united under a central regime. Concerted efforts were needed to transfer power from the old regimes of local rulers and traditional *Sheikh* leadership but gradually a new form of government emerged as the Saudi state was established.

Historical analysis suggests that the alliance originally formed between Ibn Sa‘ūd and *Sheikh* Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb during the years of the first phase of the Saudi state extended well beyond this into the second and third phases. This cooperation supported the House of Sa‘ūd and their establishment to control the Kingdom in order to expand the realm of their authority (Steinberg, 2005, pp. 24-27). The law in Saudi Arabia is based on the Qur’an and *Sunnah*, and the power of the ‘*ulamā*’, Islamic scholars who are responsible for religious law, greatly influenced government decisions and actions. At that time, the ‘*ulamā*’ were seen as “partners of the royal family” (Yizraeli, 2012, p. 24) and their position in relation to modernisation had impeded development in the Saudi state. Thus, during the first two decades of the establishment of the State, developmental plans faced various difficulties, as a result of strict adherence to a particular form of religious ideology and economic policy, as will be discussed in detail later. Nevertheless, the new governmental system achieved some of its goals and started the transformation of Saudi society.

However, more wide-spread changes began to be felt following the discovery of oil and the start of the oil industry in the early 1950s, and the oil boom following this decade was a major factor in the development process. In the early 1970s, Aramco (Arabian-American Oil Company) began to increase production levels to take advantage of the high prices in the world oil market. Since then, on the basis of growing oil profits, the Saudi economy has greatly influenced development plans in the Kingdom (Al-Rasheed, 2002, p. 136). Aramco itself played a significant role in Saudi Arabia’s political, social, economic and cultural transformation by employing various strategies. Firstly, the company intentionally increased oil production in order to use this money to develop the Kingdom, and secondly, it worked with foreign employees, especially Americans, whose

presence contributed to changing the Saudis' traditional way of life, and led to the spread of modernisation (ibid.). Aramco was also interested in improving the health, skills and knowledge of its Saudi workers, and they, in turn, had a major influence on the surrounding community.

The government's desire to increase the pace of development and to rapidly expand oil production faced various challenges. Although it was working hard to achieve its ambition to transform the nation, by raising the living standards of the population, it met with opposition from the religious authorities since their conservative ideology rejected modernisation in order to protect the community from what they viewed as the corruption of Western values (al-Dakhil, 2009, pp. 23-25). The Kingdom's decision-makers were fully aware of the importance of the need to maintain the relationship between the royal family, religious leaders and Saudi society in order to retain full sovereign control over the state at that time. As a result, the decision was made to focus on rapid economic development, and to delay some aspects of the process of the social transformation of Saudi Arabia in order to avoid any potentially damaging domestic conflicts until the new regime was more solidly established. This decision was to have far-reaching consequences, limiting the social, cultural and political development of Saudi society for decades, for reasons which will be explained in more detail later in this chapter.

With respect to international relations, Saudi Arabia has become the central economic and strategic hub in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Saudi political power and financial aid have helped many Muslims all over the world; in particular, it has supported the Palestinian cause, defending the Palestinians' right to live in peace in their own country. Oil has become an important factor in forging relationships between Saudi Arabia and other countries. It has also given Saudi Arabia a strong position in the global political environment, since "[its] ability to put oil onto the market in times of crisis gives it a unique standing among all oil producers" (Bronson, 2005, p. 373). Since the 1930s, America has become interested in building a relationship with Saudi Arabia, and the US-Saudi business relationship developed dramatically thanks to Aramco and joint collaboration on oil production. According to Bronson (2005, p. 374), this partnership became a 'special relationship' that continued to develop through the decades of the Cold War and proved "useful for managing certain political realities". This relationship is intended to provide support for mutual interests, and to deal with any political challenges.

Historically, the two countries faced Iraq's invasion of Kuwait together in 1990 and cooperated in ending the Gulf War. Moreover, they have supported each other to cope with the War on Terror since the events of 9/11.

### 3.2.1 Political implications of the Gulf war and 9/11

On 2 August 1990, the then Iraqi President, Saddam Hussein, ordered Iraqi troops to invade Kuwait without warning. Following this, King Fahd asked for America's help, agreeing to host approximately half a million soldiers who collaborated with Saudi troops and other foreign coalition forces. As a result, "American and Saudi military officers operated through a joint command structure and closely coordinated their activity" (Bronson, 2005, p. 385), which succeeded in ending the unprovoked Iraqi invasion and led to the successful liberation of Kuwait.

Following Iraq's withdrawal, the Gulf States lost all confidence in their aggressive neighbour, since the Iraqi military continued their menacing activities all along the region's borders (Bronson, 2005, pp. 386-388). The Saudi government began to reshape its political agenda, in an attempt to recover from the aftermath of the war. In addition, it made new plans to tackle a growing number of problems which had been caused by the war, including its international relationships, various social issues and cultural challenges. These problems highlighted significant changes in Saudi society as later discussion will clarify. The key impact of the 1990s was that the US-Saudi relationship began to deteriorate in the wake of events which took place during this decade.<sup>10</sup> Bronson (2005, pp. 390-391) notes that against a backdrop of increasing anti-American feelings in Arab countries as an inevitable result of US policy in the Middle East, "Saudi leaders lost confidence in America's regional policy and tight US-Saudi relations were becoming increasingly unpopular at home" (ibid.).

On September 11, 2001, the Pentagon and the World Trade Centre were attacked by 19 hijackers, 15 of them Saudis, and these events were to have a major influence on US-Saudi relations (Aarts, 2005, p. 399). For instance, Saudi citizens, students and

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<sup>10</sup> For more information on this issue see Paul Aarts, 'Events Versus Trends: The Role of Energy and Security in Sustaining The US-Saudi Relationship' in *Saudi Arabia In the Balance: Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*, pp. 399-429.

businessmen experienced various problems, especially in requesting entry visas to the United States. Following the events of 9/11, Saudi Arabia has become an important figure in the Western media, with various articles and TV programmes strongly criticizing the Saudi government and society (Lacroix, 2005, p. 47). In the United States, anger increased against Saudi Arabia, and many American writers and journalists called for regime change in Saudi Arabia (Aarts, 2005, p. 399). Additionally, the issue of the ideology of Wahhabism (*Wahhābiyya*) was raised as the most prominent concern in the American debate. The debate continues and most studies have tended to focus on the roots of the crisis, as Al-Rasheed (2007, p. 9) pointed out:

The events of 11 September brought about new dimensions in the controversy surrounding *Wahhābiyya*. The west, through its academic community, media specialists and think-tank consultants, became an active agent in the debate about *Wahhābiyya*.

It is striking that the US-Saudi relationship after 9/11 is considered to be ‘normal’; the reason for this being, as Aarts (2005, p. 403) explained, concerns relating to energy and security. To some extent, it can be argued that the contribution of the Saudi government to the War on Terror has helped create a shared vision and restored the relationship.

In response to these events, Saudi Arabia became more serious about fighting terrorism and worked on rooting this out, partly due to the shock caused by a terrorist attack on a residential compound in Riyadh when a number of Arab and Muslim residents were killed. Following this, the government introduced various changes including the reform of education syllabuses, to eradicate the intolerant ideas of traditional radical Islamists (Hardy, 2008, pp. 104-106). This context has made a major contribution to the creation of a more moderate atmosphere across Saudi society, as will be discussed in the next section.

### 3.3 The social space in Saudi Arabia: development and key challenges

The majority of the Saudi populations belongs to various Arab tribes distributed across different regions: Najd (central), northern, southern, eastern and western Saudi Arabia. The western region, known as Hijaz, consists of several cities: Mecca, Medina, Taif and Jeddah. The Hijazi people belong to diverse ethnic groups from the Arab and non-Arab world. During the nineteenth century, Muslim refugees came to Mecca from different countries and remained in the region after completing their pilgrimage in search of

“religious education or refuge from their own countries after such countries had succumbed to colonial rule” (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 12). Hence, Hijaz became the most cosmopolitan region in Saudi Arabia. Although the widespread image of Saudis is that most of them were nomadic Bedouin, in fact, the Saudi population consisted of village and town dwellers (Al-Rasheed, 2002, p. 9).

As mentioned earlier, the Saudi government has tried to make social improvements since its initial development plan, aiming to change the Bedouin’s traditional lives by creating new modes of livelihood for them (see section 3.2). Thus, they were attracted into various categories of employment including the armed forces, the police, the National Guard, Aramco, agriculture and market trading. These typical occupations offered them good monthly salaries, which promoted a more secure and steady income, and resulted in significant social and economic changes (Altorki & Cole, 1989, p. 122). These steps were considered as laying the foundation for the modernisation of society.

The rapid pace of the modernisation process was influenced by two major factors: (1) economic growth, which reached a peak in the 1970s due to the oil boom; (2) the power of the government and its political strategy. Both these factors brought about the transition from tribal life to urbanisation in Saudi society and a series of transformation processes created numerous improvements in health care services, standards of living and welfare plans.

However, the power of the religious authorities is one of the key factors that have challenged the process of modernisation in Saudi society. As AlMunajjed (1997, p. 103) explains, the social system in Saudi Arabia “is functionally related to various categories of religious and other thought, including religious ideology, tribal laws, local traditions and beliefs”. Prominent religious figures, known as the guardians of traditionalism, have impeded developmental plans in Saudi society. These conservative elements have had a considerable impact on local populations who have suffered from weaknesses in infrastructure and delays in the introduction of technology for several decades (Okruhlik, 2009, pp. 94-97). Originally, they opposed the introduction of television networks, telephones, radio and vehicles, on the grounds that these technological innovations would prove damaging to Islamic values and culture, and therefore must be forbidden in accordance with religious teachings (Al-Rasheed, 2013, pp. 108-110). In addition, the

delay in providing education for girls was due to a *fatwa* issued by these religious authorities, as discussed in the following section. However, their oppositional attitude gradually became more flexible under pressure from the government, and there were widespread demands to permit the establishment of different types of technological disciplines.

### 3.3.1 Women's status and gendered spaces

As mentioned previously, religious power has been described as the main vehicle for the Saudi political regime. The conservative ideology is also often considered to be the most influential factor in shaping the restrictive social conditions imposed on Saudi women. For instance, some religious leaders protested against girls' education and initially prevented women from working outside the home, and then from working in certain jobs, and from driving. Their attitude towards girls' education was forced to change following King Faisal's decision to open a number of new schools for girls throughout the Kingdom from the early 1960s onwards (AlMunajjed, 1997, p. 65). However, approval for this decision was sought from religious leaders in order to ensure that this was not considered as being in conflict with *shari'a* and cultural traditions (el-Fassi, 2014, pp. 123-124). Hence, women are educated to become good mothers and obedient wives, and "segregation is a deeply ingrained social custom in the country and the principle of coeducation is widely rejected" (AlMunajjed, 1997, p. 36). According to AlMunajjed (1997, pp. 43-45), segregation in education and work within such a conservative society impacted on women's status, and became a serious problem, leading to various restrictions on women's lives.

Discrimination against women is an integral part of the education system as the curriculum for females is different from that studied by males (*ibid.*, p. 67). As an example, female students are not allowed to specialise in certain subjects, including oceanography, architecture, engineering and agriculture, and these departments at Saudi universities are not open to women. However, the spread of education has had a considerable impact on women's status, with the last two decades seeing a number of changes in the levels and modes of women's participation in the public sphere. Most noteworthy during this period is the fact that, as in some other Gulf States, unprecedented numbers of Saudi women are enrolling at university with figures standing at 56 percent

of the total number of students at Saudi universities in 2010 (Haghighat-Sordellini, 2010, p. 86). Thus, highly educated women have challenged perceptions of their traditional role in terms of their participation in the labour market.

However, as previously mentioned, segregation continues to greatly affect women's opportunities to work, and working women face criticism from conservative and traditionalist elements in Saudi society who believe that Muslim women should stay at home to take care of their husbands and children (Piela, 2012, p. 105). On the other hand, educated and open-minded men defend the right of women to work and to earn money. For decades, as a result of the prevailing cultural attitudes, women were limited to roles in teaching or banking but the new era of modernity allows Saudi women access to various social and economic resources, and to gaining greater participation in the public sphere. Within this context, literature has been seen as a predominantly male-centred profession, but women's contribution to literature has recently changed. Since the new millennium, the Saudi literary space has witnessed significant prolific literary works published by Saudi women, as will be discussed in the next section.

Despite these changes, Saudi Arabia retains a significant gender gap, as recorded in the "2010 Global Gender Gap Report" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 1). According to Al-Rasheed (2013, pp. 15-16), the continuing restrictions on Saudi women's lives are not only the result of *Wahhabiyya* but of a combination of religious and political factors and social custom which help to create and maintain gender inequality. As Altorki (2000, p. 233) observes:

It has sometimes been asserted, especially in the west, that "Islam" is responsible for the marginal status of women in Saudi Arabia. This ahistorical contention, however, flies in the face of the fact that her inferior position results from cultural and social constructions by men and not from formulations in sacred texts.

Tribalism remains a significant factor to the gender gap in Saudi society, especially in keeping women in a patriarchal relationship under the control of their male relatives, which places restrictions on their freedom (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 18; Altorki, 2000, p. 231).

In the post-9/11 period, King Abdullah, who was seen as an ardent supporter of women's rights, supported the introduction of significant changes in terms of economic

opportunities and political participation. Thus, Saudi women have been given 30 seats on the Kingdom's Consultative Council (*Majlis al-Shūra*) allowing them to contribute to public political debates for the first time. When the monarch announced this news on 25 September 2011, it was seen "as a historic date for women's emancipation in Saudi Arabia" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 21). This decision has had a major impact on Saudi women, who have been inspired over the course of the decades to attempt to improve their circumstances in society. Saudi women are now allowed to participate as candidates and voters in the municipal elections. As the next section explains, this period of social progress has also witnessed a diverse range of developments in Saudi cultural sphere.

### 3.4 The cultural context of Saudi Arabia

In order to truly understand the dynamics of Saudi literary space, it is necessary to be aware of the distinctive nature of the cultural context in Saudi Arabia, which has had a significant influence on the development of the literary scene there. As previously observed, the religious authorities, oil-fueled economic growth, the Gulf War, and the events of 9/11 have all contributed to the transformation of Saudi society. In terms of the Kingdom's cultural context, a number of additional factors, including education, media and censorship, have all helped to form Saudi distinctive culture to a greater or lesser degree.

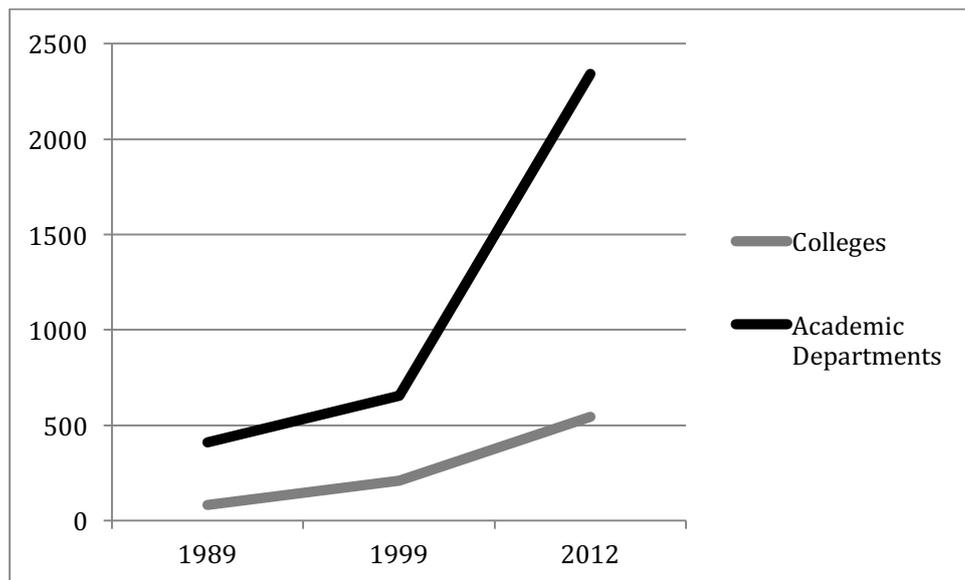
#### 3.4.1 Developments within the education system

When the third Saudi state was initially established, there were only a few schools, mainly situated in the Hijaz region but numbers increased under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, which was established in 1953 (al-Hazimi, et al., 2006, p. 7). The government paid attention to the importance of education as it was seen as the main vehicle for development in Saudi society, for as Alghosaibi (1992, p. 126) has observed: "the road to development starts with education and ends with education". At that time, many teachers came to Saudi Arabia from different Arab countries and remained to teach Saudi students for decades. Today, however, the majority of teachers in every village, town and city across the Kingdom are Saudis. The progress made in the area of educational development can be seen in the dramatic increase in the number of schools and students which has taken place since the 1930s. When modern Saudi Arabia was

founded, there were only 12 schools throughout the Kingdom; over the space of a decade this figure increased to 27 (al-Hazimi, et al., 2006, p. 6). The government then began to make concerted efforts to raise the level of education, with numbers peaking in the first decade of the new millennium. According to the latest Ministry of Education statistics, there are now 35,402 schools for boys and girls, with 5,673,814 students currently in obligatory schooling (Ministry of Education , 2015).

As regards higher education, originally there were just a handful of colleges, including the religious college in Makkah, founded in 1949, and the Arabic Language and *Shari'a* College in Riyadh, opened in 1954 (al-Qahtani, 1994, p. 23). In 1957 the Ministry of Higher Education was established and King Saud University opened, considered to be the first university in Saudi Arabia. Today, there are 24 public universities, 10 private universities and 32 private colleges (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013, p. 21). The following graph (figure 3.1) illustrates the changes in the growth in the number of colleges and academic departments in Saudi higher education.

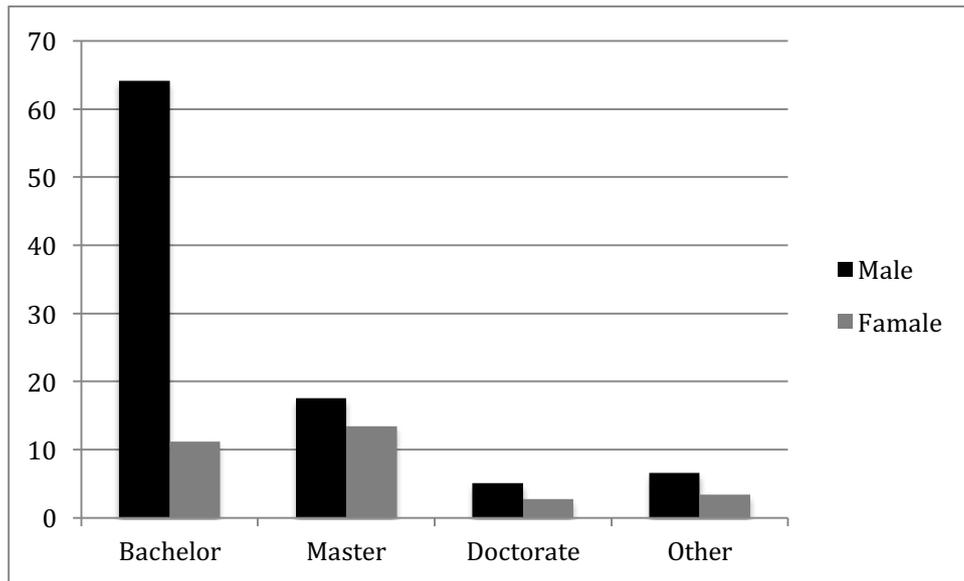
Figure 3.1: The development of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia (1989-2012)



Source: The Ministry of Higher Education (2013, p. 21)

In addition, many students have been sent to foreign countries to follow higher education courses and training programmes (figure 3.2). This development in particular has impacted on the social and cultural sphere, which in turn has affected Saudi literary space.

Figure 3.2: The number of Saudi students currently studying abroad



Source: (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013, p. 99)

### 3.4.2 The Media frontier

The second factor that has had a significant impact on the development of the contemporary Saudi cultural scene is the media, and in particular, journalism. It can be considered to be an important contributory factor since it has not only encouraged the growth in numbers of literary works available, but has also been instrumental in introducing various foreign works in translation.

According to al-Qahtani (1994, p. 27), the history of Saudi journalism can be divided into two stages. The first stage saw the publishing of independent journals, beginning with *Jarīdat Ṣawt al-Ḥijāz* in 1924. This was followed by the second stage, which is still ongoing, and saw the establishment of semi-official publications (ibid.). The period between the 1930s and the 1960s witnessed the founding of several newspapers, including *Alriyadh*, *Okaz*, *al-Bilad*, *al-Nadwah*, *al-Jazirah* and *Alyaum*, which still exist. Some newspapers pay specific attention to literary works and studies of cultural issues, and have introduced new creative writing to the public. As an example, cultural supplements in *Al-Jazirah* and *Alriyadh*, which appear on a weekly or daily basis, have published short stories, poems, extracts from novels, book reviews and critical studies. These supplements have helped to disseminate Saudi modern literature and encourage its development.

In addition, some Saudi journals and magazines publish literary issues that often discuss poetry, short stories, and novels. For instance, *Al-Manhal* (founded in 1936), *Majallat Qāfilat al-Zayt* (1953), *Majallat al-‘Arab* (1966), and *Majallat al-Fayṣal* (1976) have published a number of articles that discussed various issues relating to the Saudi novel. These magazines are considered to be an extremely useful resource for researchers in the field of Saudi culture and literature.

Printing facilities were initially established in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s and as the number of publishing houses rapidly increased they began to publish books and novels (Sa‘āti, 1979, p. 180). Saudi publishing houses can face problems with the distribution of their publications, as some works can be widely found in a range of outlets whilst others are limited to particular retailers (al-Qahtani, 1994, p. 36). Additionally, the Riyadh International Book Fair, literary club activities and national or international academic conferences have all played their part in enhancing cultural and intellectual life in Saudi Arabia. However, the market for creative literary works is limited due to the widespread censorship of domestic distribution, which has significantly influenced the reception of Saudi fiction as will be discussed in the next chapter.

### 3.4.3 Modern Saudi Literature

As previously mentioned in this chapter, early modern Saudi literature was generally influenced by the underdeveloped conditions in the Kingdom’s literary and social contexts. The impact of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb on the social and cultural sphere led to the emergence of religious poets such as Aḥmad ibn Mishrif (al-Hazimi, et al., 2006, p. 10). There is evidence that Saudi poetry was influenced by various literary schools, including the *Diwan*, the writing of the ‘Mahjar’ poets and critics, and of the ‘Apollo’ group (ibid., p. 12). The poems written in this era followed the classical romantic style of poetry reflecting the cultural heritage of poets such as ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Uthaymīn and Aḥmad al-Ghazzāwī (ibid.).

Following this era, the first signs of critical analysis began to appear in the writing of Muhammad Ḥasan ‘Awwād. He criticised the traditional style of these poems, and called for innovation by presenting some ideas regarding the reform of Saudi poetry. Later,

developments in education created new elements in the poetry of the second-generation poets, for example, Ḥusain Sirḥān and Ḥamza Shihāta, who both made changes to the content and language of their work (al-Hazimi, et al., 2006, p. 15).

A new generation of Saudi poets attempted to produce free verse and prose poetry under the influence of the Egyptian revolution (1952), the movement of Arabic literature (from the mid-nineteenth century) *al-Nahḍa*, and Western literature in translation. Two prominent Saudi poets, Ghazi Algosaiibi and Muhammad al-‘Alī, have had a major impact on the development of free-verse poetry (ibid., p. 17). Saudi poets have continued to renew their technical level drawing on modern forms, innovative language and metaphors. In recent times, a number of new voices have appeared on the Saudi literary scene, male and female writers who have established their own poetic style to compose prose poems, including Fawziyya Abū Khālid, Muhammad al-Dumainī, ‘Abdullah al-Safar, Huda al-Daghafaq and others.

With regard to the short story, the first examples of this genre emerged in the 1930s and 1940s and were published in various newspapers and magazines. At the beginning of this era, writers generally followed traditional forms and ideas regarding the art of story writing. The short story was also seen as “another type of social essay” (al-Hazimi, 2001, p. 7). Following this phase, writers became more aware of the literary potential of this genre, primarily because they benefited from improved access to literature from elsewhere in the Arabic-speaking world and Western works in translation. Thus, the short story as a genre became more common during the 1970s and 1980s, reflecting a new awareness of creative writing (ibid., p. 10). The works produced by Saudi storywriters in this era, such as Ibrāhīm al-Nāṣir, Sa‘ad al-Bawārdī, ‘Abdullah al-Jifrī, and Najāt Khayyāt to mention but a few were considered “better than the earlier attempts” (al-Hazimi, et al., 2006, p. 23).

During the last two decades, the Saudi short story has become a fully-fledged modern literary form in its own right, thanks to the aesthetic and intellectual experience of the new generation of short story writers. However, some writers from this generation began to turn to writing novels because this longer narrative form allowed them to tackle a wider variety of issues and develop more characters than the short story. Authors who made the successful transition from writing short stories to penning novels include Muhammad

‘Alwan, Sa‘ad al-Dusarī, Abdo Khal, Noura al-Ghāmidī and Badriyya al-Bishr, all of whom became well-known novelists.

### 3.4.3.1 *The rise of the Saudi novel*

*Al-taw‘amān* (The Twins) by ‘Abd al-Qudūs al-Anṣārī was the first novel to be published in Saudi Arabia, in 1930 and although he is generally considered to be the pioneer of this literary form in the Kingdom, little more of note appeared until the publication of Ḥāmid Damanhūrī’s (1959) novel *Thaman al-taḍḥiya* (The Price of Sacrifice) (al-Qahtani, 1994, p. 11). This work is considered to be pivotal in the history of the Saudi novel, because it was the first example of a more robust technical narrative. This second phase also witnessed the publication of the first novel by a female novelist, Samīra Khāshuqjī, *Wadda‘t Āmālī* (I Bid Farewell to my hopes) in 1960, using a pseudonym *Bint al-Jazīra* (A daughter of peninsula)<sup>11</sup>.

In the decades which followed, a number of literary experimental novels were published, reflecting different levels of artistic accomplishment and technical development. In the 1980s, there were

many social and economic changes, accompanied by changes in the way people thought about things. Many more writers emerged as a consequence of these changes; a new generation had new topics to treat, and they did so in a way different from their predecessors. (al-Qahtani, 1994, p. 113)

As an example, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Mishrī published five novels, leading some critics to see him as one of the most important Saudi novelists during this era (al-Nu‘mī, 2009, p. 23). The 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium witnessed some important new changes in Saudi Arabia, which encouraged the development of a contemporary style in novels (al-Hazimi, et al., 2006, pp. 28-38). For example, Ghazi Algosaiibi’s novel *Shaqqaṭ al-Ḥurriyya* (1994) (An Apartment Called Freedom) and Turki al-Hamad’s trilogy *Aṭyāf al-Aziqqa al-Mahjūra* (Phantoms of the Deserted Alley), consisting of *‘Adāma* (1997) (Adama), *Shumaisī* (1998) (Shumaisi), and *al-Karādīb* (1998) (al-Karadib) were

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<sup>11</sup> There is a difference among critics about the date of publication of her first novel. The first two novels *Wadda‘t Āmālī* (I Bid Farewell to My Hopes) and *Dhikrayāt Dāmi‘a* (Tearful Memories) were published in 1960 in Beirut.

published in Cairo and Beirut in order to by-pass the restriction imposed by the censorship in Saudi Arabia. Both Alghosaibi and al-Hamad represent rebellious attitudes against radical cultural and social issues, leading their novels to be initially banned in the Gulf region. Thus, they are often considered as the most prominent liberal intellectuals in Saudi Arabia, who have paved the way for Saudi novelists to break taboos and to be voices of enlightenment in their society. Since then, the Saudi novel has achieved significant recognition, both within Saudi society and beyond as will be discussed in detail in chapter four of this thesis. Currently, there are many well-known novelists, including Khal, al-Mohaimed, ‘Alwan, Bakhīt and al-‘Atīq among others. This new generation of Saudi novelists tends to express their innermost desires and act as critical voices, willing to break many taboos in discussing topics considered to be daring in the Kingdom. Khal, for example, has noted that his works "address the sacrosanct trio of taboos in the Arab world: sex, politics, and religion" (Flood, 2010). As a result, some of these novels have been rejected by Saudi society because the ideas they put forward are considered to be unacceptable, a topic which will be explored in greater depth in the following chapter.

#### 3.4.3.2 Saudi Women's novels: *The Pioneers*

As mentioned earlier, social constraints have played an important role in the position of Saudi women; literature has traditionally been seen as a predominantly male-centred profession (see section 3.4.1). The first Saudi novel *Al-taw'amān* (The Twins) written by the male writer al-Anṣārī, was published in 1930 and it took a further three decades before the first novel published by a Saudi woman, Samīra Khāshujī, appeared in 1960. This delay can be explained in part by the limited educational opportunities for Saudi women, the first school for girls only opening in 1960. In fact as Al-Wahhabi (2005, p.72) notes:

In the early years of modern Saudi Arabia many families lived outside the country, in Egypt and Lebanon, in order for their daughters to be able to study, when women's education in the Hejaz and other areas seemed to be as prohibited as smuggled drugs.

Saudi women writers who started to publish their works in the 1960s and 1970s, had studied abroad, which helped them to write and publish their novels during an era when the dominant patriarchal cultural and social context was not conducive to the emergence of female novelists (al-Nu‘mī, 2009, pp. 23-25). This section focuses on those Saudi

women writers who have made an important contribution to the development of Saudi literature.

Samīra Khāshuqjī, Hudā al-Rashīd,<sup>12</sup> and Hind Bāghaffār<sup>13</sup> are viewed as the pioneers of Saudi women's novel by many critics (al-Hazimi, 2001, al-Wahhabi, 2005). However, their novels were weak in terms of literary technique and since their heroines often lived abroad, such works did not reflect the realities of Saudi society. Both Khāshuqjī and al-Rashīd are considered to be early liberal voices in Saudi Arabia (Al-Wahhabi, 2005, p.131) and during that period their works and ideas were not welcomed by many of their fellow Saudis.

By the 1980s, the second generation of Saudi women novelists was witnessing signs of socio-cultural change and of resistance to this, as Arebi points out:

By the early 1980s women university graduates had grown in number, and state development strategists called for their integration into the labor force. The religious leaders, on the other hand, objected to any measures that would allow women a higher degree of mobility outside the home or lead to the relaxing of rules. (Arebi, 1994, p.17)

During this phase, still relatively few novels written by women were published due to the restrictions imposed on their creative writing as a consequence of this conflict between modernism and conservatism. However, the tentative moves towards change in Saudi society helped to encourage the rise of the Saudi women's novel (al-Qahtani, 1994, p.113 and al-Wahhabi, 2005, p.132) and the female writers who started to publish their work during this phase, including Amal Shaṭā<sup>14</sup>, Ṣafīyya 'Anbar<sup>15</sup>, Raja Alem<sup>16</sup> and Bahiyya Bū Subayt<sup>17</sup>, focused on the cultural and social issues affecting women in Saudi society. While Shaṭā, 'Anbar and Bū Subayt all used relatively plain language and a romantic style to reflect on women's issues in their narrative, Alem opted instead for a highly elaborate form of language and a text rich in mythical allusions.

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<sup>12</sup> She has been considered by many Arab critics to be the third Saudi woman novelist after publishing her first novel *Ghadan Sayakūn al-Khamīs* (Tomorrow will be Thursday) in 1977 in Cairo. She is also the first Saudi woman to work for the BBC Arabic service.

<sup>13</sup> Her first novel *al-Barā'a al-Mafqūda* (Lost Innocence) was published in Beirut in 1972.

<sup>14</sup> Her first novel *Ghadan Ansā* (Tomorrow I will Forget) was published in Jeddah in 1980.

<sup>15</sup> She published her first novel *'Afwan, Ya Adam* (Sorry, Adam) in Cairo in 1986.

<sup>16</sup> Her first novel *4 Sifr* (4 Zero) was published in 1984 in Jeddah.

<sup>17</sup> Her novella *Durra Min al-Aḥsā'* (A Pearl from al-Ahsa') was published in 1985 in Riyadh.

Alem's debut novel, *4 Sifr* (4 Zero) published in 1984, established her as one of Saudi Arabia's modernist writers who adopt "experimental style[s], where the language is seen as difficult, images are unclear, and so on" (al-Wahhabi, 2005, p. 227). Her novels also describe different traditional and historical customs and folklore specific to Mecca and she has become one of the most highly acclaimed novelists in the Arab world. She has won a number of literary prizes, including the UNESCO Arab Woman's Creative Writing Award in 2005, the Paris-based Lebanese Literary Club Award in 2008 and The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF) in 2011. Some of Alem's novels have been translated leading to her becoming increasingly well-known across the globe; for example, *Ṭawq al- Ḥamām* (The Dove's Necklace) (2010) was translated into English, French, German, Italian and Polish. Participating in the 2008 London Book Fair, she clearly situated herself as an international writer, declaring in her speech: "I am one with a dreaming movement in the world". Since then, a new generation of Saudi women novelists has begun to attract the attention of readers and scholars in both the Arab and Western worlds, following their translation into English. This new era also witnessed a new kind of narrative written by Saudi women writers including al-Juhani, al-Khamis and al-Bishr, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

### 3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined a number of different factors which have influenced the political, social and cultural contexts in modern Saudi Arabia, showing that some of these have significantly affected the development of this modern nation. From the outset, the alliance between Ibn Sa'ūd and *Sheikh* Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb has illustrated the complex links between politics, religion and culture in the Saudi context and the potential for conflict and challenge in the modernisation process. The role of the religious opposition has been one of the most important factors in shaping life in Saudi society, and this internal debate and ideological conflict between conservative and more liberal voices has been ongoing over the decades, especially during the 1980s. However, increasing governmental pressure, especially in the aftermath of the shocking events of 9/11, has meant that, more recently, extremism in religious discourse has gradually given way to a more tolerant and conciliatory tone.

Another of the key factors which has played a determining role in transforming Saudi Arabia's once traditional Arab existence into a contemporary cosmopolitan lifestyle has been the economic impact of the oil industry. Income gained from this successful economic resource has made a major contribution to social reform by increasing the provision of education, which has arguably done more to bring about social and cultural change in Saudi society than any other single factor.

Developments in the political, social and cultural sphere in Saudi Arabia have also resulted in literary developments, with the novel emerging as an ideal vehicle for documenting these socio-cultural changes and contemporary challenges and tackling the often contentious issues which arise from rapid modernisation. The Saudi novel's newly-found maturity as a literary genre is reflected in the fact that works by contemporary Saudi authors, male and female, have found their way onto bestseller lists in both the Arab and Western worlds. The extent to which the dynamics of the Saudi literary space have been influenced by the factors addressed in this chapter will be explored in detail in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four

# The Structure and Dynamics of the Saudi Literary Space

### 4.1 Introduction

As previously mentioned in chapter three, political and socio-cultural contexts have had a significant impact on the Saudi literary space. For many decades, the Kingdom's religious institutions have influenced public attitudes towards literature produced by Saudi writers. In this chapter, an insightful exploration of the conflict between Saudi novelists and the popular criticism of their works will reveal how political and socio-cultural contexts have served to shape the interpretive strategies of Saudi readers, and also helped to construct the public attitude towards the novel. Not surprisingly, some criticisms of Saudi authors are based on the ideological belief that their novels represent acts of rebellion against a conservative culture. The main aim of this chapter is to examine the factors that have significantly affected the status and reception of the contemporary Saudi novel. The controversial attitude towards Saudi liberal writers, who often raise certain debates regarding the reception of their works, can be due to two main reasons. First, a reference to the 1980s conflict in Saudi Arabia between modernist reformers and traditionalists (*Ḥadātha* and *Ṣaḥwa*) often reminds readers of the fatwas against certain writers and their works. Second, novels written by liberal writers are often considered by ultraconservative Muslims to be a means of corrupting public morals, which led some Saudi novels to be censored and banned for decades. However, the digital revolution, particularly the rapid expansion of the internet, has contributed to significant changes in Saudi society, and paved the way for a new era. Thus, a new generation of Saudi writers, particularly women writers, emerged as a consequence of these changes, publishing novels which reflected serious challenges to the customs and traditions of Saudi society. This chapter also examines the role which literary prizes play in bringing particular novels to the attention of various readers, and to what extent these prizes have helped award-winning or short-listed Saudi novels to become bestsellers, prompting their translation and subsequently their entry into the world literary market.

## 4.2 *Hadātha* versus *Ṣaḥwa*

Although nearly three decades have passed since the conflict arose between *Ṣaḥwa* (the Awakening movement) and *Ḥadātha* (the modernist reformation) emerged, it is still reflected in various cultural and religious attitudes in Saudi society. The main cause of this historical rift was the period of major socio-economic transformations experienced by Saudi society after the shock of the oil boom. As discussed in chapter three, significant changes took place in the Kingdom in 1970s, and therefore, Saudi citizens were already struggling to come to terms with a new identity after this dramatic economic boom. This phase of transformation witnessed the emergence of a new educated generation with a radically altered worldview, the result of travelling abroad for study or tourism. Thus, these new reformist intellectuals tried to play a modernizing role in Saudi conservative society. However, the religious leaders of *Ṣaḥwa*, which set itself up in opposition to *Ḥadātha* thought, employed all available means to influence public opinion into accepting their rejection of this reformist religious and cultural outlook.

The question of *Ḥadātha* came to the forefront in 1985, when al-Ghadhāmī's book *al-khaṭī'a wa-l-takfīr: min al-binyawiyya ila al-tashrīhiyya* (Sin and Atonement: from Structuralism to Deconstruction) was published. The main questions addressed in this book concerned traditional culture and problematic ways of thinking in conservative Islamic societies, and this led to a counter-revolution by the conservative religious leaders. The new reformist ideas put forward by al-Ghadhāmī and other Saudi intellectuals led to a series of clashes about social and religious issues between the two factions which

spread from newspapers to mosques, cassettes and books. These clashes began a battle of mass defamation with charges of treachery, secularism, Freemasonry and Westernization, questioning each modernist reformer's religion, his loyalty to the country and intellectual integrity. It also caused some personal risk and threat that remained for a decade. (al-Ghadhāmī, 2005a, p. 6)

This strong resistance against *Ḥadātha* and all that it represented was due to its power and the threat it was perceived to represent to conservative traditions and values of Saudi society. Due to the conservative nature of society at that time, popular sentiment was opposed to reform. The intellectual and literary avant-garde in Saudi Arabia was focused

mainly on literature as a form of creative discourse. Thus, *Ḥadātha* leaders and writers introduced new currents in poetry and fiction, by using work in cultural supplements and magazines to encourage new ways of writing drawing on diverse Western literary theories. However, this movement later produced a struggle that confronted Saudi writers, when the passionate and persuasive arguments used by *Ṣaḥwa*'s leaders gained them public support from many Saudi institutions. These conservative Islamic establishments were responsive to the discourse of *Ṣaḥwa*'s leaders and cooperated with them to attack *Ḥadātha* writers, who began to face harassment because of their desire for more progressive ideas in writing and thinking (al-Dūsarī, 2014, p. 20). The most serious problem facing the acceptance of *Ḥadātha* was the connection between the call it made for reform in all social and cultural aspects of life and its attempts to promote secularism in a deeply conservative society (al-Khidīr, 2011, pp. 400-401). Thus, fearing the influence of *Ḥadātha*, *Ṣaḥwa*'s leaders incited ordinary Saudis against them, claiming to be defending them against Western cultural corruption. For instance, in order to persuade the Saudi public about the threat posed by *Ḥadātha* writers, *Ṣaḥwa*'s leaders wrote a series of articles and essays about their work, criticising the lack of clarity in their poetry and prose and claiming that they insulted the Prophet Mohammad and Islamic values (ibid.). Sa'īd al-Ghāmdī released a cassette in the spring of 1988 that was widely circulated in Saudi society. It railed against the *Ḥadātha* writers accusing them of blasphemy and urged the government and 'ulamā' to condemn al-Ghadhāmī and his like to imprisonment. A book by 'Awaḍ al-Qarnī (1988) also heavily criticised *Ḥadātha* writers, al-Ghadhāmī in particular, warning the Saudi public about their writings despite the fact he had not actually read any of these works. Al-Qarnī's book reportedly sold 80,000 copies in the first week it was published and was shortly followed by another anti-*Ḥadātha* work written by a Syrian author, 'Adnān al-Naḥwī (1989), who was domiciled in Saudi Arabia (al-Ghadhāmī, 2005a, pp. 14-15). Two chapters of the book were devoted to criticising the work of al-Ghadhāmī, another that of Adonis<sup>18</sup> and Kamal Abu Deeb.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Adonis is the pen name of the popular Syrian poet 'Alī Aḥmad Sa'īd Aṣḥar. He is considered one of the most influential symbolist Arab poets of the modern era in the Arab world. He has also been a perennial Nobel Prize contender since the late 1980s (Antoon, 2014).

<sup>19</sup> Born in Syria, Abu Deeb graduated with honours from the University of Damascus, before travelling to the UK and gaining his D.Phil from Oxford University. He was Chair of Arabic at the University of London. He has authored three poetry collections and has published numerous books and articles on Arabic literature and cultural studies (Sultan Bin Ali Al Owais Cultural Foundation , 2015).

Many members of *Ṣaḥwa* who engaged in this came from other regions of the Arab world. These conservative Muslims criticised the weird poems and literary essays produced by liberal writers against the background of a "dominant culture of acceptability", which, in turn, negatively influenced public attitudes against modern literary texts written by Saudis. According to al-Ghadhāmī (2005a, pp.10-11), some Syrian, Egyptian and Moroccan intellectuals were willing to accept *Ḥadātha* in their own societies but were strongly opposed to Saudi Arabia being radically transformed by modernity because this would represent a catastrophe for the Arabic language and Islamic culture. Thus, this widespread Arab attitude also gave backing to those Saudi conservatives, who believed that *Ḥadātha* was an attempt to eradicate Islamic civilization and identity. They espoused an ideological doctrine that believes that literature should reflect conservative norms and promote a particular set of traditional Islamic values.

It can be argued that the culture of the centre (the hegemonic traditional culture) in Saudi society was in opposition to the culture of periphery (the liberal modern culture), which produced a momentous clash between these ideological attitudes, dividing the Saudi cultural scene and society into two opposing factions. The anti-modernist doctrinal attitudes held symbolic power, controlling popular opinion and circulating these ideas to members of the same interpretive community. In this scenario, only certain forms of literature in particular contexts are considered to be acceptable by these conservative groups. Meaning (interpretation of texts) is socially produced, with *Ṣaḥwa*'s leaders using a religious ideology that draws upon the principle of social proof. This symbolic power created a state of fear among some Saudi writers and academics and they avoided this conflict by not using *Ḥadātha* discourse or even communicating with *Ḥadātha* leaders. Al-Ghadhāmī (2005a, p. 21) illustrates the impact of religious opinion on members of conservative society, noting that one Saudi man went to an Imam asking for a fatwa concerning the permissibility of dealing with modernists or taking money from them. This relationship between self and others is shaped by the power within society that makes the final decision about whether a literary work is accepted or rejected.

These battles between Saudi liberal writers and their conservative opponents generated passionate reactions and this cultural clash was played out in literary supplements, daily newspapers and literary clubs (al-Khiḍir, 2011, p. 409). The conservatives also preached

their message in mosques, schools and universities, using cassettes and sermons. They responded to liberal writing with a tried and tested strategy, attempting to discredit writers and their discourse decrying its morally corrosive effect on society.

In 1988, intensification of the campaign against *Ḥadātha* leaders led the Ministry of Information to issue an official order prohibiting the use of the word *Ḥadātha* in all Saudi media, including press, television and radio. Articles using the word were also edited, replacing the term with alternative words such as ‘development’, ‘renewal’ and ‘improvement’ (al-Ghadhāmī, 2005a, p. 33).

#### 4.2.1 Ultraconservative readers: Ideological responses to Saudi novels

As previously mentioned in this chapter, the battle against *Ḥadātha* in the eighties has had a significant impact in shaping cultural awareness in Saudi society. The intolerant religious discourse constructed a particular prejudiced position against modernists and any ideas that contradicted their own ideology. These negative attitudes have affected the social reception of Saudi novels both directly and indirectly since 1980s. As an example, al-Hamad’s trilogy *Aṭyāf al-Aziqqa al-Mahjūra* (Phantoms of the Deserted Alley), consisting of ‘*Adāma* (1997), *Shumaisī* (1998) and *al-Karādīb* (1998) has received a mixed critical reception. Whilst his novels were enthusiastically received by some critics in the Arab world, some Saudi religious scholars rushed to prohibit the distribution of these novels in Saudi Arabia. Following this ban, some religious scholars issued three *fatwas* against al-Hamad and his books in order to prevent these from being read. The most draconian of these fatwas gave permission to kill the writer for his blasphemy (al-‘Uqlā, 1999). Al-‘Uqlā’s fatwa provoked a major controversy in the Saudi literary scene, with various individuals arguing in defense of or attacking al-Hamad. His work provoked strong reactions following the issuance of three fatwas and al-Hamad reported that he received several public death threats intended to make him seek refuge in another country (al-Hamad, 2006). Despite this, al-Hamad is often considered to be one of the first to express his views explicitly in writing, whether in his journalistic articles or novels, paying scant heed to censorship.

In al-Hamad’s trilogy, the protagonist Hisham al-Aber focuses on the lifestyle of young people in the 1960s and the early 1970s in Saudi Arabia, using a flashback technique and

a third person narrator to recount events in two cities, Dammam and Riyadh. He represents Arab youth in crisis at that period, facing political, sexual and intellectual conflicts. In the third volume, *al-Karādīb*, Hisham grows frustrated during his imprisonment for political reasons, and asks himself “Aren’t God and Satan just two sides of the same coin?” (al-Hamad, 2005, 137). This phrase is most frequently quoted in reviews written by religious scholars or opponents of al-Hamad and his writing. In their opinion, this offensive phrase proved the writer is an infidel (*Kāfir*), which provoked violent reactions in the public sphere. Notably, the opponents of the novel read this as an expression of al-Hamad’s own religious views, ignoring the fictional context of the novel in which it appears. In various media interviews, the writer has emphasised that this particular phrase is said by a fictional protagonist in a literary context and does not represent his own opinion (al-Hamad, 2012). The most common reason for a text eliciting such strong responses is that the readers share a set of interpretive strategies (Fish, 1980, p. 171), thus forming what the theorist refers to as an interpretive community. According to Fish, the interpretive activities of such a community “are not free, but what constrains them are the understood practices and assumptions of the institution” they belong to (ibid., p.306). In this case, the way in which these conservative Saudi readers interpret al-Hamad’s text has been influenced by a set of common experiences, namely, their religious beliefs and institutional perspectives. The similarity and stability of how they choose to interpret the statement made by Hisham al-‘Aber in al-Hamad’s novel can be said to be a direct result of the power of a particular religious discourse which exercises the strongest influence over this group of readers. As Fish (1980, p. 337) argues:

If the understandings of the people in question are informed by the same notions of what counts as a fact, of what is central, peripheral, and worthy of being noticed- in short, by the same interpretive principles- the agreement between them will be assured, and its source will not be a text that enforces its own perception but a way of perceiving that results on the emergence to those who share it.

In this instance, this particular group of Saudi readers focused on those aspects of the text of *Al-Karādīb* that supported their view of novels as a source of what is assumed to be blasphemous, which may have a negative influence on public values.

Based on this notion, some Saudis espousing ultraconservative Islamic doctrines wrote articles and books warning their fellow Saudis about the moral dangers posed by al-Hamad’s novels. Al-Kharāshī’s (2011) book *Naẓra Shar‘iyya fī Kitābāt wa-riwāyāt*

*Turki al-Hamad* (Religious view of Turki al-Hamad's Writings and Novels) has been made freely available to the public on different websites<sup>20</sup>. In his book, al-Kharāshī (2011) reads al-Hamad's novels from a conservative religious perspective and argues that some phrases would not be said by any true Muslim believer but only by someone whose conversation was marked by apostasy and rejection of Islamic values (al-Kharāshī, 2011, p.190). Then, he draws a comparison between al-Hamad's trilogy and Mahfouz's trilogy<sup>21</sup> which is also seen as a source of corruption (al-Kharāshī, 2011, p. 256). This shared understanding has therefore become a predominant form of discourse which is able to rapidly shape social opposition toward Saudi authors and their novels, creating a gap between literature and society. Thus, some Saudi novels such as those by al-Hamad, Khal, Alsanea, al-Muhaimed and al-Juhani have met hostile reactions from the public in Saudi Arabia because of the impact of the religious discourse that is still used in contemporary debates about them and their novels.

Due to the power that religious discourse wields in shaping public opinion towards these novels, the clash between al-Hamad and ultraconservative opinion has also informed the terms of debate for most critics and journalists whenever they discuss the development of the Saudi novel. Saudi literary critics generally paid attention to the importance of al-Hamad's trilogy, stating that it shook up the conservative Saudi society and has become a model in breaking taboos, and in doing so it opened the door for a new generation of Saudi writers to challenge this dominant discourse (al-Nu'mī, 2009, p. 31).

The ultraconservative Islamic readers as an interpretive community adopted similar strategies in their readings of Alsanea's novel *Banāt al-riyād*. They focused on its theme of rebellion against traditional values, and sometimes expressed their view in violent terms: "This novel is a great sin...and its writer must repent" (al-'Ashmāwī, 2005). Moreover, some members of this interpretive community took out a court action against the writer herself and the Ministry of Culture and Information to reverse the decision concerning the granting of permission for the novel to be published (Ghallāb, 2006 and

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<sup>20</sup> See for example these forums: (a) [http://www.elthwed.com/vb/showthread.php?1437-%D3%E1%D3%E1%C9-%DF%D4%DD-%C7%E1%D4%CE%D5%ED%C7%CA-\(10\)-%CA%D1%DF%EC-%C7%E1%CD%E3%CF](http://www.elthwed.com/vb/showthread.php?1437-%D3%E1%D3%E1%C9-%DF%D4%DD-%C7%E1%D4%CE%D5%ED%C7%CA-(10)-%CA%D1%DF%EC-%C7%E1%CD%E3%CF).

(b) [http://www.saaaid.net/Doat/naseralsaif/22.htm?print\\_it=1](http://www.saaaid.net/Doat/naseralsaif/22.htm?print_it=1)

<sup>21</sup> Al-Kharāshī links between al-Hamad's trilogy and Mahfouz's *The Cairo Trilogy: Bayn al-Qaşrayn* (Palace Walk, 1956), *Qaşr al-Shawq* (Palace of Desire, 1957) and *Al-Sukkariyya* (Sugar Street, 1957) in terms of the number of parts, similarities between the protagonists of these trilogies, Marxist perspective, sexual scenes and ridicule of religion and religious scholars.

*Alarabiya*, 2006). They judge the novel from an ideological stance and seem unable to read the literary text as fiction, interpreting it by means of their particular standards and criteria based on their rigid religious beliefs. Thus, they describe the author Alsanea as a rebellious woman because of the liberal opinions expressed by characters in her novel. Their evaluative comments suggest that they are directly criticising the author herself, focusing on her rather than on her text, repeatedly advising her to confess her sins and beg for forgiveness, as will be discussed in chapter five.

These interpretive responses of this group influenced wider public response to this novel, particularly when some religious scholars cautioned their congregation against reading it in sermons delivered in mosques (Alsanea, 2006). This religious discourse clearly influenced some reviewers heavily with their judgments focusing on moral issues such as love and sex in male-female relationships and the wearing of the *niqāb* and hijab. Al-Shuwī‘ir, (2006) as an example, wrote an article in defence of Islamic values. Qāḍī (2005) strikes a similar chord when she describes the novel as “a scandalous story about the girls of Saudi’s capital city” and assesses the text as though it were an autobiographical account. As with the case of al-Hamad, readers from this group addressed the author directly by using threatening language, such as “How dare you speak on behalf of Saudi women!” (al-Kharīf, 2005). Al-Kharīf’s (2005) reading also confuses the protagonists of the novel with the author. Interpretations of this type make personal attacks on the writer herself rather than critiquing the text as a piece of literature, with reviewers failing to differentiate between the novelist’s real life and the fictional world of her work.

Other novels written by Saudi authors including Khal’s and al-Muhaimeed’s novels have been also rejected by these ultraconservative Islamic readers as they are potentially controversial and attack what are perceived as key tenets of religious belief. Khal’s novel *Tarmī bi-sharar...* (2009) faced equally strong reactions on the grounds that its representation of sexual issues could negatively impact on public morality. Some ultraconservative members tried to banish Khal by bringing a case against him (Faḳhī, 2010) or by calling for his dismissal from his job as a teacher. Some ultraconservative groups call themselves *Muḥtasib* also tried to ban the sale of his novels in Saudi bookstores or even at the Riyadh Book Fair, when the novel *Tarmī bi-sharar...* won the 2010 Arabic Booker Prize (Zain, 2010). In an interview, Khal expressed the opinion that some conservative segments of Saudi society find it difficult to accept these novels as

they have been trained to follow the ideology of a particular religious discourse for decades and have learned what is acceptable and what is not (Khal, 2012). Thus, it might be argued that their attitudes towards Khal's novel do not differ markedly from the previous readings of al-Hamad's novels, which reveal how the dominant religious beliefs and perceptions shape readers' reactions. This might also be seen as a symbolic capital of some religious leaders that have influenced some Saudi journalists' readings, as will be discussed later in the next chapter. According to Roberts (2006, pp. 37-38), certain individuals and groups (ultraconservative Islamic scholars in our case) are more likely to be able to influence public opinion:

Those who shout the loudest and whose words are the prettiest will gain more members. And when interpretive power is given to such a group, the more members who advocate a specific position, the more likely it will be that position is accepted as fact by a majority of the people. (ibid.)

Readers interpret the meaning of novels according to the messages they hear repeated throughout their lifetime. Hence, these messages and the interpretive schemas they encourage amongst those forming part of their community can help to influence readers to interpret the meaning of novels in similar ways.

However, the post-9/11 era produced a cultural shock in Saudi society, when religious intolerance was held responsible for an act of extremism and this may have led to some changes in the cultural discourse and also in the attitude towards novels. To provide one specific example, Salman al-'Uda is one of a number of Saudi religious scholars who have recently shifted their previous position in relation to some Saudi novels. In an interview, he stated that authors such as al-Hamad and Alghosaibi should not be judged on the basis of their novels, on the understanding that these are texts of fiction, not autobiography (al-'Uda, 2012). This suggests that a new more tolerant attitude has emerged as a result of the cultural developments in this era. However, some religious scholars still criticise al-Hamad, particularly when he was arrested in December 2012 for his tweets<sup>22</sup>, when there were calls for him to be placed under house arrest for the rest of

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<sup>22</sup> The comments he posted attacked radical Islamists, stating that "a neo-Nazism is on the rise in the Arab world", he meant Islamic extremists who have distorted the Prophet Mohammed's "message of love" (<http://stream.aljazeera.com/story/201212250316-0022449>). His posting provoked various debates on social media in Saudi Arabia between his supporters and opponents but he was later freed without being put on trial.

his life and for his books and novels to be withdrawn from bookstores in Saudi Arabia (al-Luḥaydān, 2012).

It can be argued that a complex relationship between authors and readers has been produced by the conservative nature of Saudi society, which has led to a particular type of social reaction towards literature. This suggests that many Saudi citizens are not yet ready to accommodate these particular themes. This conflict often occurs between elements within a cultural discourse system, one which is visible, the other implied (al-Ghadhāmī, 2001). The power of the ultraconservative religious discourse and the issuance of fatwas relating to Saudi writers themselves and their works have had a significant effect on shaping the reception of Saudi novels. Most ultraconservative Saudi readers, who publicly criticise novels they judge as unacceptable, were unable to differentiate in their criticism between the opinions of the writer and the content of their fictional works. A possible explanation for this might be that the similar form of ideological background in which they engage can affect their understanding of the text, particularly when they make reference to the question 'does this text pose any threat to my beliefs' and tend to quote directly or indirectly other reviewers.

In this environment, Saudi writers have faced various constraints and, in some cases, have even been imprisoned, factors which have negatively affected the development of the Saudi literary scene; as Shboul (2007, p. 204) observes:

The remarkably belated 'beginning' of the genre in Saudi Arabia is not simply tied to the 'ability' of Saudi authors to write novels. Rather, it has to do with their 'perception' of their conservative society's 'reception' of the potentially unsettling 'alternative intentions' of novels that deal with sensitive issues in that society.

While the social controversy concerning these liberal writers was raging, some Saudi writers applied self-censorship to avoid touching upon the most sensitive issues. However, others have continued to criticise extremist discourse and social tradition in their writings, publishing their works outside Saudi Arabia. Some literary works were censored or banned. For example, novels by Alghosaibi were banned from entering Saudi Arabia until 2010<sup>23</sup>. Censorship and the lack of freedom of expression can pose serious

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<sup>23</sup> Alghosaibi confirmed in an interview (2011) that the Saudi Ministry of Culture and Information lifted this ban on selling his books in 2010. Available from: <http://sabq.org/2hPede>.

problems for the media, publishers and individual writers in Saudi Arabia, as will be discussed in the next section.

#### 4.3 To speak or not to speak: the power of censorship

The Saudi literary scene is particularly affected by legislation and restrictive practices imposed across the Kingdom, as censorship “is often aimed at stopping the publication or distribution of content deemed politically, morally, or religiously sensitive” (Schwartz, et al., 2009, p. 4). The Ministry of Culture and Information is responsible for everything that is broadcast and published in Saudi Arabia. It supervises newspapers, magazines, television channels and all media outlets. The Publications and Publishing policy which was issued in 1402 AH (1981) and updated in 1421 AH (2000), guarantees freedom for expression which is “derived from the Islamic approach and public policy of the State which includes the dissemination of the virtue of morality and the teachings of Islam” (Bureau of Experts at the Council of Ministers, 2000).

Article 13 of this policy states that all books must be subjected to direct supervision by the Department of Arabic Publications in the Ministry of Culture and Information. Every author, publisher or distributor wishing to print a publication must submit two copies to the Ministry in order to obtain pre-publication authorisation before printing or marketing any kind of publication (ibid.). Then, within 30 days from the date of application, any copies submitted will be authorised and returned to the concerned party or rejected for the reasons specified (ibid.). Thus, this department plays a crucial role (gatekeeper) in the dynamics of publishing and distribution activities in the Saudi literary scene, where the administration imposes a number of restrictions including the censorship of books and manuscripts of literary works. As well as books, the press, radio and television programmes have also been subjected to censorship.

It can be argued that this restriction has led Saudi writers to resort to various alternative ways to convey what they wish to say, leading them to write in a sensitive manner, thus avoiding direct conflict with those in authority. It is worth noting that some Saudi writers have used and continue to use pseudonyms, precisely to avoid facing problems from the general public and the authorities. For example, the female novelists Siba al-Harez, who wrote *al-Ākharūn* (The Others) (2006), Warda ‘Abd al-Malik, author of *al-Awba* (The

Return) (2006), and Ṭayf al-Ḥallāj, who penned *al-Qirān al-Muqaddas* (The Holy Link) (2006) all used pseudonyms, as did Shīkh al-Warrāqīn, the male author of *‘Iyāl Allāh* (The Sons of Allah) (2007). They wished to protect their identity because their works openly discuss sexual, religious and political issues that are deemed unacceptable by the conservative society of Saudi Arabia. It has also been noted that some Saudi writers, Alem for instance, make extensive use of complex language and symbolism to discuss sensitive socio-cultural issues. This can act as a veil, rendering the meaning inaccessible to the average reader.

On the other hand, there are some Saudi writers who choose to challenge censorship in an openly daring manner. However, literary works which represent or discuss scenes of the holy trinity of taboos, namely sex, religion and politics are censored and banned in Saudi Arabia. This was the case for novels by Munif, al-Hamad, al-Mohaimed, Hifnī, al-Juhanī and Alsanea because they were seen as posing a major threat to the dominant, patriarchal Saudi ideology. To cite but one example, novelist Khal won the 2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction for *Tarmī bi-sharar...* (Throwing Sparks), a satirical account of a wealthy modern society clashing with ancient traditions. However, his winning novel was banned in his own homeland. Hence, many Saudi writers tend to publish their books in Cairo and Beirut in order to obtain better distribution.

According to Casanova (2004, p.110), for writers who find themselves “at odds with the norms of their native literary space”, the international arena offers an alternative space, where they are “able to make their way only outside their homeland”. Casanova also stresses that “the writers who seek greater freedom for their work are those who know the laws of world literary space and who make use of them in trying to subvert the dominant norms of their respective national field” (Casanova, 2004, p.109). It may be argued that the same analysis applies to these critically acclaimed Saudi novels, which only came into existence in international literary space when they were published outside Saudi Arabia while their translation into English (the globally dominant language) led to recognition by Western readers. For instance, al-Hamad’s trilogy was published in Beirut and became “an instant best seller in the Arab world. Although it has been condemned by some religious clerics and is officially banned in Saudi Arabia, it is avidly and widely read there” (Shboul, 2007, p. 206).

Despite this widespread censorship, a new generation of Saudi writers and readers has found different ways to overcome these restrictions. Until the 1980s and early 1990s, government censorship was able to exercise total control; however, with the advent of the internet, mobile telephony and satellite television, this situation has shifted dramatically. A new generation of young Saudi writers has been able to take advantage of these new digital technologies and social media platforms to write, share and publish their work and ideas. This has enabled a new generation to engage in political participation in Saudi Arabia, spreading ideas about human rights and freedom of expression in different media forms (Al-Rasheed, 2008, pp. 13-17), as will be discussed in the next section.

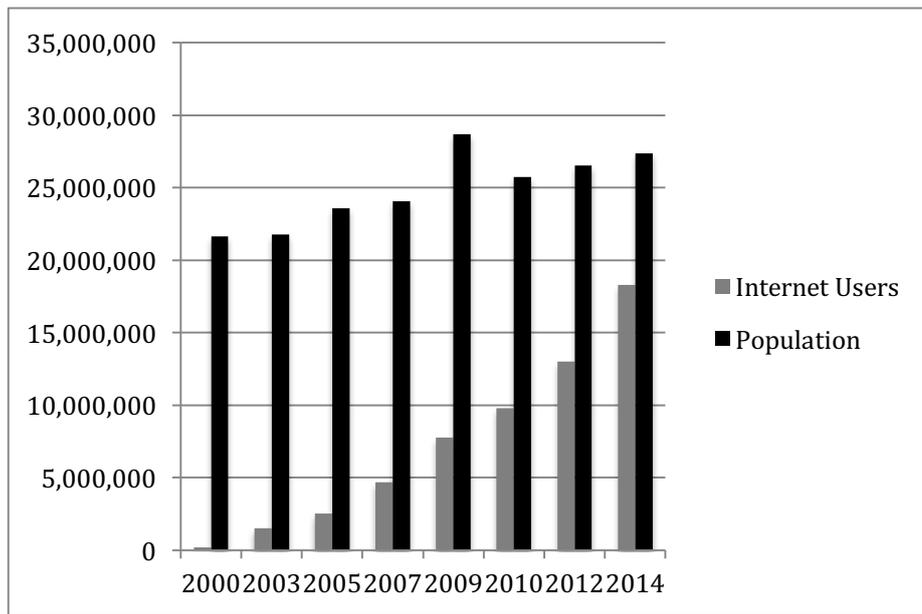
#### 4.4 The Digital Revolution

As previously mentioned in chapter three, Saudi Arabia is one of the most conservative societies in the Arab world. The so-called digital revolution, particularly the rapid expansion of the internet, has contributed to significant changes in Saudi society, and paved the way for a new modernist era. This new technology has opened the door to developmental changes in educational, cultural and commercial sectors by providing the opportunity for various issues to be discussed more freely than is permitted in the press, which still faces restrictions.

Some Saudi governmental institutions were connected to the internet in the early 1990s, the first being King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals in 1993. By the mid-1990s, internet access spread throughout the Gulf region, but it was only made generally available to the Saudi public in 1999 (al-Tawil, 2001, p. 625). This delay can be explained by two main reasons. Firstly, the religious and cultural conservatism, which prevailed in Saudi society, influenced the expansion of internet use with some of the more conservatives voicing their strong opposition to the introduction of the internet (ibid.). This resistance was based on their belief that direct interaction with foreign cultures might affect the values and norms of users, particularly women and young people (Shteivi, 2003). Secondly, as Milner (2006, p. 188) notes, political institutions often wish to control and restrict citizen access to online information via the internet in order to protect their regimes and the Saudi government was concerned about controlling information flows in order to protect both State security and cultural identity.

Given these restrictions, the rapid growth in the number of internet users in Saudi Arabia is all the more striking, making it, in terms of internet users, “one of the largest countries in the region enjoying Internet services” (al-Tawil, 2001, p. 632). A recent report on user statistics highlighted growth opportunities in the Saudi ICT market, with ever-increasing interest from both the government and the general public in using more smart technologies in the future (Internet World Stats, 2014).

Figure 4.1 The growth of internet access in Saudi Arabia.



Source: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/sa.htm>

Figure 4.1 indicates the major shift which has occurred in the levels of internet access in Saudi Arabia since 2000. At that time, there were just 200,000 internet users, representing 0.9% of the population. Just over a decade later, in 2012, this number had mushroomed to 13,000,000, with another steep increase in 2014 bringing this figure to 18,300,000, or approximately 67% of Saudi population.

Since 2000, this technological revolution has greatly influenced the lives of Saudi users, particularly women. This new medium of communication has increased the independence of Saudi women, enabling them to express their concerns and ideas in their own voice. Shteivi (2003) first highlighted the internet’s potential to help free Arab women from social pressures and isolation. It also seems that participation in internet forums and blogging has allowed Saudi women to write freely in cyberspace in contrast to the restrictions placed on their freedom within the public sphere of their own society (Al-

Salem, 2005, p.63). In addition, this virtual form of communication has helped to facilitate their ability to discuss and modify their views with various audiences, giving them a global voice (Wheeler, 2005, p. 105). Despite this freedom, some Saudi women still face the fear of the social and cultural powers which may limit their writing and expression even within the virtual community. Hence, they commonly use a pseudonym to protect their real identities in case of aggressive reactions to the challenges they may pose to mainstream Saudi cultural values in their writings.

For Saudi writers, the internet has provided an alternative means of publicising their literary texts, giving them a much broader audience than they might have achieved via more traditional print media channels. In the past, social restrictions and censorship meant that writers were prevented from dealing with some sensitive issues. As evidenced in this study, the novel *Banāt al-riyāḍ* is a good example of how discussion in virtual communities can help to encourage dissemination of particular literary works. This novel was officially judged to be a work that rebelled against the dominant culture and therefore it was initially banned by the Saudi authorities<sup>24</sup> (Ghallāb, 2006). However, despite or possibly because of this ban, demand for the novel increased with young readers lauding it online and spreading its fame throughout the global market place. As a new public space, the internet may allow writers to reach a large number of readers and then to “act as a trendsetter or role model [meaning that] the author can be an ‘opinion maker’, someone who sets the tone” (Lenze, 2012, p.159).

Hence, the internet has had the potential to reform Saudi literary space in various ways, some positive, some negative. Firstly, internet forums were one of the most important factors in forming a new cultural discourse. For instance, the forum *al-sāḥa al-‘Arabiyya*<sup>25</sup> (the Arab arena) ([www.alsaha.com](http://www.alsaha.com)) witnessed the debate between Arab traditionalists and modernist reformers, which brought about significant changes in the

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<sup>24</sup> The novel *Banāt al-riyāḍ* was published by Dar Al-Saqi, Beirut; and was banned more than once in Saudi Arabia. Then, during the next year of its publication, it was allowed to be sold in the Riyadh International Book Fair which opened the door for its sale in some Saudi book shops afterwards.

<sup>25</sup> This website began in 1997 as the first website for Arab dialogue in the Arab world, created by a group of UAE youth who were passionate about technology during their university study, each of whom did not write with their real names. This website encouraged the debate about different political and socio-cultural issues, where people from around the Arab world discussed various opinions, orientations, ideas and interests that may differ from others. As a result of discussing some sensitive issues, the website was blocked in Saudi Arabia. It continued to be accessed from different countries but in 2012 the founders decided to close the website.

ideological attitudes of some militants (al-Khidir, 2011, p. 435). This online interaction helped to promote greater levels of tolerance and understanding of other opinions, and respect for differences between both sides of the debate. In a less positive vein, some Islamist writers used their influences on public opinion to attack certain intellectuals and modernist writers in an attempt to prevent the public from reading their texts. Thus, al-Hamad was widely attacked in different forums which incited public feelings against him and affected the reception of his novels. Attitudes of this kind have shaped the public awareness of Saudi novels and their reception, as will be discussed later in the next chapter. Finally, the increasing numbers of internet users reflect a shift in the cultural identity of younger Saudis. This has prompted the rise of a new generation of Saudi writers, who have challenged aspects of their cultural heritage and rejected social restrictions, freely discussing these issues on the internet, which has facilitated a revolution that the Saudi authorities were unable to prevent or control.

#### 4.5 The Rise of a new generation

As mentioned in chapter three, the major changes in the socio-political reality of the Kingdom that have taken place over the course of the 1990s have also been reflected in the radical transformation of the Saudi novel. These changes have also profoundly affected both Saudi national identity and cultural production in the Kingdom. During this phase, a new generation of Saudi writers, particularly women, emerged as a consequence of these changes, publishing novels which reflected serious challenges to the customs and traditions of Saudi society. These new women novelists are highly educated and have actively participated in the public sphere in fields as diverse as commerce, education, and media. Writing novels has provided them with a great opportunity to discuss and explore taboo issues, challenging patriarchal society and sometimes arousing its wrath. Their novels have become a strategic means of expressing their personal ideas and vision, allowing them to “hide behind an imaginary world, created out of fragments of reality, personalities, and historical moments” (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p.176).

Throughout this era, Saudi women novelists started to draw attention to the importance of socio-political issues by focusing on reflecting the reality of their lives in contemporary society (al-Wahhabi, 2005, p.273). This in turn enriched their narrative with different styles aimed at changing aspects of that society. These novels also saw the emergence of

new literary techniques, developed to reflect social issues and to strongly critique prevailing ideologies. For example, in their novels Zaynab Ḥifnī, 'Umayma al-Khamīs, Laila Aljohani, Nūra al-Ghāmdī and Badriyya al-Bishr all represent the changes in Saudi society by specifically focusing on social themes. They deal with various feminist issues as a means of demanding their rights and challenging patriarchal society, making use of their protagonists' voices to encourage their readers to think about issues such as love, tradition and sexuality.

Al-Rasheed (2013, p.178) points out that this new generation has expressed more "awareness of their plight as women" than their predecessors who were hesitant about discussing social issues and gender inequality. Some of these novelists have faced public censure and provoked the anger of the authorities. For example, Ḥifnī, described as an activist, who keeps discussing different social issues such as gender inequality and gender relations, was banned from writing and travelling for number of years following publication of her work *Nisā' 'ind Khaṭ al-Istiwā'* (Women on the Equator) in 1996. Women's issues including love, marriage and divorce frequently feature as themes in her novels; and her press articles also reflect her interest in these topics. Ḥifnī's novels such as *Lam A'ud Abkī* (I Stopped Crying) (2004), *Malāmiḥ* (Features) (2006) and *Sīqān Multawiya* (Twisted Legs) (2008) all explicitly represent sex, gender inequality and freedom-themes which are often considered taboo in Arab women's writings.

As mentioned in chapter three, the social and cultural developments in Saudi Arabia had a significant impact on women's lives and on gender relations. Saudi women novelists tried to represent this change in their novels, referring to new opportunities for travel abroad, employment, and the arrival of foreign workers. For instance, in her novel *al-Baḥriyyāt* (The Coastal Women) (2006) al-Khamīs focuses on women's lives in Najd (the central province of Saudi Arabia), especially the experiences of migrant women from various countries. In this novel, the author tries to draw attention to the struggle which these women face when attempting to fit into the local society, often failing and finding themselves permanently marginalised. She also criticises the racism in Najdi society, where traditional culture and tribal customs control women's freedom. Her female protagonists reflect complex changes in Saudi society and discuss the effects of religious discourse on women's status over the course of time. The novel also highlights a number of issues of particular relevance to Saudi women, including marriage, divorce and

women's rights.

In her following novel *al-Wārifa* (The Leafy Tree) (2008), al-Khamīs focuses on female identity, comparing the lives of women from different areas of Saudi Arabia on the one hand, and contrasting these with the lives of women from foreign countries on the other. In addition, she addresses the effect of study abroad on the female protagonist, Aljawhara, who travels to Canada to complete her medical training. This experience gives her a wonderful opportunity to develop her personal and social skills, and to learn how to manage her relationships with both male and female colleagues in the workplace. Al-Khamīs uses her heroine to present her own opinions about gender segregation in Saudi society and how this marks it out. In interview, al-Khamīs has noted that writing is the crucial means of finding liberation from the influence of one's historical heritage and the dominant culture (*Asharq al-awsat*, 2008).

Badriyya al-Bishr is another example of a writer from this new literary generation, defending women's rights in her essays, short stories and novels. She is a novelist, column writer in *Alhayat* newspaper and presenter of a programme on MBC that deals with social and cultural issues in Saudi society. She is known as one of the most outspoken critics of the traditional culture and religious discourse that restrict women's contribution within the public sphere. Expressing herself in a more open and forthright manner, she often tends to focus on the fact that the new generation of educated Saudi women needs more attention from their community in order to achieve their goals and to contribute to the development of their society.

In her novel *Hind wa-l-'Askar* (Hind and the Soldiers) (2006), Hind's mother, Hayla, is a classic example of the older generation of Saudi women, upholders of the traditional Arab masculinist culture. The novel represents the conflict between a mother and daughter, reflecting the clash between these two women who hold entirely different world views. Al-Bishr describes how daughters learn to be obedient from an early age under their mothers' control, and illustrates how gender inequality starts in the relationship between sisters and brothers within the same family.

According to Al-Rasheed (2013, pp. 197-198), this novel delves deeply into the various forms of violence which women commit against women. In this work, al-Bishr shows that writing represents a great opportunity for women to participate in the public sphere.

She describes how her protagonist writes articles in the press as a means of finding herself, and of defending her individuality against the traditional rules imposed by her male relatives. Finally, her protagonist can no longer maintain this resistance, and considers that leaving Saudi Arabia is the only way to escape and live freely. This decision may be modelled on the writer's own reality as al-Bishr decided to move from Riyadh to Dubai with her family after facing many violent reactions from certain sections of Saudi society as a result of her critique of extremist religious discourse in her essays.

In addition to the previous issues, racism is a particularly sensitive issue in Saudi society, which the new generation of Saudi women writers explore in detail in their novels. In her novel *Jāhiliyya* (Days of Ignorance) (2007), Laila Aljohani challenges racial discrimination against Black people in Saudi Arabia using a love story between Leen and the black character, Malek, set in the holy city of Medina. The author criticises the pre-Islamic norms that are still practised in the twenty-first century in her society, making it unthinkable that a white Saudi woman would marry a black man. In this novel, Leen, the female protagonist, falls in love with Malek, who is black, and chooses to marry him but her father refuses to countenance this marriage on the grounds of race and class. Although her father supports his daughter's individuality and independence, he feels he cannot allow her to marry this man in order to protect her from people's reactions in Saudi's rigidly hierarchical society. As a result, Leen's brother, Hisham, an unemployed and unsuccessful individual, kills her lover when he finds out about their secret relationship, destroying their dreams of marriage.

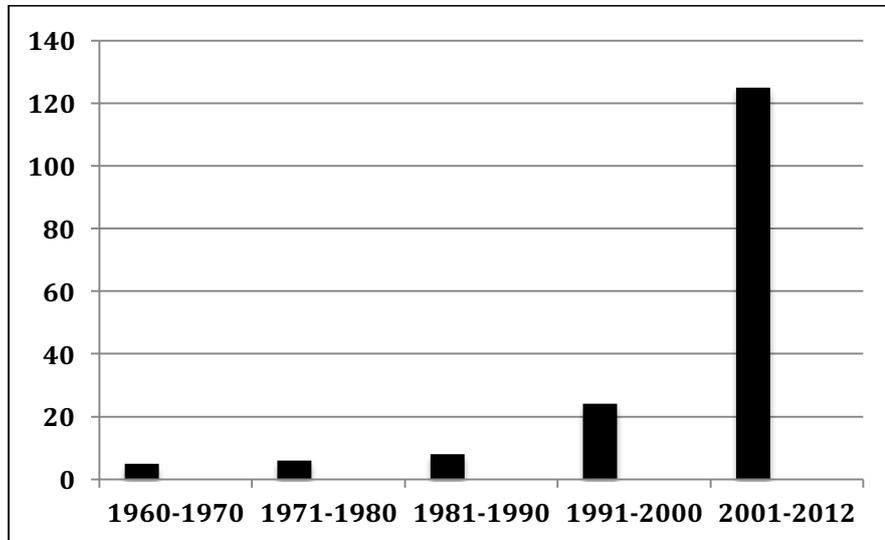
As mentioned earlier, this new generation of Saudi women writers often depict their protagonists as educated and intellectual women, seeking self-expression through their writing which liberates them from social and cultural constraints. These writers not only expose the many contradictions and forms of discrimination in Saudi society, but also directly criticise its social and political frameworks. In doing so, they have produced a new discourse of defending women's rights through writing despite the fear of being punished, censored, or exiled.

#### 4.5.1 Young Novelists: the iconoclasts

The effects of the social changes following the events of 9/11 were reflected in the fact that Saudi women's novels became more influential in society. According to al-Yousef

(2011), this new era witnessed a surge in creative writing (including novels, short stories, and poems) produced by young Saudi women, who have gone on to achieve significant success, both in quantitative and qualitative terms (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: The publication of Saudi women's novels.



Source: (al-Yousef, 2011)

In 2000s, Saudi women writers in this younger generation published their first novels while still in their twenties and early thirties. For example, Nidā Abū ‘Alī was twenty years old when she published her novel, *Mazāmīr min Warāq* (Paper Pipes), in 2003, and Alsanea published her first novel, *Banāt al-riyāḍ* in 2005, when she was twenty-four years old. Both are highly educated, multilingual, cosmopolitan travellers, daily users of social media and consumers of globalised culture. For this new generation, writing is also an act of rebellion to challenge patriarchal society. However, taboo language, normally prohibited in Arab culture, also makes an appearance in some of these novels, bringing new approaches to expressive language and narrative discourse, with some of these texts shocking more conservative members of society in terms of their daring to break traditional cultural taboos.

As explained in chapter two, *Banāt al-riyāḍ* by Alsanea, tells the story of Gamrah, Michelle, Sadeem and Lamees, four well-educated friends who belong to upper class families in Saudi Arabia. The story is told by an unnamed female narrator, who tells her friends’ stories through a series of emails sent out to Yahoo groups every Friday, describing the hidden lives of these young women, commenting on their love lives, gossip and rebellions against cultural tradition. Each chapter is introduced by a paragraph

detailing reader reaction to the narrator's weekly emails, and then another episode recounts the happenings in the lives of the four girls who all face disappointments in their love lives.

Alsanea's novel gained widespread popularity and indeed notoriety for a variety of reasons, including its title, the fact it was originally banned and the age and gender of its author. This novel concentrates on the discussion of girls' love lives, and their rebellion against traditional customs that restrict their freedom. It also focuses on some social issues including arranged marriages, divorce, affairs, and relationships in an Islamic country. The success of this novel has often been linked to the fact that Algosaibi wrote the preface to the work. He concedes that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* is quite distinct from other Saudi women's novels, revealing the exciting world of girls in Riyadh. It was this theme, according to him, that caused such a stir since conservative Saudi society was not ready to confront such issues. Algosaibi's introduction to the novel does not offer detailed analysis of the text, but it became one of the most widely read reviews of the novel in the Arab world, as later discussion of this novel will show, there are a number of different reasons which help to explain its popularity.

It is worth noting that some Saudi women writers still continue to use pseudonyms, precisely to avoid facing problems from the general public and the authorities. This was the case for Siba al-Harez, the female author of *al-Ākharūn* (The Others) (2006), another important example of the novels written by this younger Saudi generation. Al-Harez published her novel under a pseudonym because of her lack of inhibitions in discussing sexual and political issues that are deemed unacceptable by conservative members of Saudi society. The anonymous narrator of al-Harez's novel is from a Shi'a part of Saudi Arabia and studying at a women's university where she gets drawn into homosexuality in one of the most repressed societies in the world. Abandoning her strict upbringing and religious beliefs, the narrator enters forbidden territory where she gets involved with an irresistible girl, Dai. Dai introduces her to the secret world of Saudi lesbians, from lesbian parties and online chat rooms to casual flirtations and physical encounters in hotel rooms. The narrator also reveals details about herself which perhaps play a role in pushing her towards Dai and the world of lesbians. She has a health issue that decreases her chances of getting married; she has also lost her father and her brother and suffers from constant feelings of guilt and oppression. In *al-Akharūn*, al-Harez rebels against Saudi

conservatism and breaks taboos by having a lesbian as the protagonist of her novel and focusing on the issue of homosexuality.

It can be clear then that this new generation of Saudi women writers tackles daring themes and breaks taboos and it is perhaps that has attracted the interest of Western audiences and ultimately led to these works being translated. For example, *Banāt al-riyād* draws attention to the paradox of conservative and liberal culture, as it focuses on taboos including cultural, religious and sexual issues. Thus, whilst this novel was censored and banned, and provoked a wide range of reactions within Saudi literary space, it was welcomed and ‘consecrated’ (Casanova, 2004) by Western audiences. According to Casanova (2004, p.128), the translation of such texts into foreign languages has given them an existence in the world literary sphere that may also make them more visible and acceptable within their own national literary space. But the selection, translation and marketing processes of those texts have been conditioned and shaped by a range of specific motivations and socio-political contexts that merit closer analysis, as will be discussed in chapter seven.

#### **4.6 Literary Prizes: redrawing the boundaries between the periphery and the centre**

The last two decades have seen an increase in the number of Arabic literary prizes being awarded for various types of literature, including poetry, novel, short stories and works of non-fiction. For example, the Souq Ukaz Prize for Arabic poetry, which was launched in 2007 and is funded by a group of Saudi institutions<sup>26</sup>, has encouraged Arab poets to create high quality Arabic poems every year. Similarly, the Sheikh Zayed Book Award, supported by the Abu Dhabi Tourism and Culture Authority (TCA) in the UAE, is presented annually with the aim of encouraging creativity in contemporary Arabic literature and has become one of the most popular and well-known literary prizes in the Arab world. The total value of this prize is AED 7 million (US \$1.9m) annually. The Award has been awarded to various “outstanding writers, intellectuals, and publishers, as well as young talent whose writing and translation in humanities objectively enriches Arab intellectual, cultural, literary and social life” (The Sheikh Zayed Book Award, 2014).

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<sup>26</sup> These include the Emirate of Mecca region, Saudi Commission for Tourism and National Heritage (SCTNH), the Saudi Bin Laden Group and different Saudi banks and companies.

Other prizes in the Arab world awarded for fiction include the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, sponsored by the American University in Cairo<sup>27</sup>, the Katara Prize for Arabic Novel, an Arabic literary prize based in Qatar<sup>28</sup>, and the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, known as the Arabic Booker Prize, funded by the Abu Dhabi TCA, as will be discussed in the next section.

These Arabic literary prizes have helped to raise the profile of novels written in Arabic prompting their translation into various foreign languages. There has been a considerable rise in the number of literary prizes awarded to Saudi novelists in particular, accompanied by a growth in sales of their book in the period following their win. Thus, the Saudi novelists who have won the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, such as Abdo Khal and Raja Alem, have gone on to become some of the most popular and highly rated writers in the Arab world. This section aims to examine the role which literary prizes play in bringing particular novels to the attention of various readers, and to what extent these prizes have helped award-winning or short-listed Saudi novels to become bestsellers prompting their translation and bringing them to international attention.

#### 4.6.1 The International Prize for Arabic Fiction: Rules and Politics

The International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), known as the Arabic Booker Prize, was established in April 2007 (Arabicfiction, 2015). This prize aims to promote novels written in Arabic and broaden their readership internationally through translation into different major languages. When the prize was established, Jonathan Taylor, the Chairman of IPAF, acknowledged that it was intended to influence the production, publication and distribution of the Arabic novel, bringing “recognition and readership to outstanding writers in Arabic”. He also voiced his hopes of “seeing more high-quality Arabic fiction being accessible to a wider world” (Taylor, 2007).

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<sup>27</sup> This prize was first awarded in 1996 and “is presented annually on December 11, the birthday of Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz by the President of the American University in Cairo” (Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, 2016)

<sup>28</sup> This was established in 2014 by the Katara Cultural Village. The total of the prize amount is \$650,000 and the main winner will be awarded \$200,000. The winning novels will be translated into five languages. The prize is divided into two major categories, published and unpublished novels, each of which will have five winners (The Katara Prize for Arabic Novel, 2016).

The prize is awarded annually in March as part of the events of the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair. One of the rules is that entries for the prize must come from established publishers, that is, companies which have been in the book trade for at least two years. In addition, to be considered for the prize, novels must have been published in the period between July of the previous year and June of the current year, and publishers cannot nominate any novel which is still to be published as an entry for the prize (IPAF, 2007). Every publisher may submit up to three novels written in Arabic to compete for the prize. In this sense, publishers themselves act as judges, ensuring that titles are carefully chosen in order to have a chance of being short-listed or winning.

The IPAF jury consists of five members, including a chair. Judges are chosen by an independent Board of Trustees with the assistance of an academic, a critic, and a writer from the Arab world and beyond (IPAF, 2007). To guard against possible allegations of corruption, the names of the judges are not revealed until the shortlist has been made public. “The Judges are responsible for deciding which novels will be long-listed and short-listed, and which will be the overall winner” (IPAF, 2007). They usually read 100 in total and revealed the longlist of 10 novels that were chosen from different Arab countries, and then announced the five shortlisted novels for the Prize. Each short-listed nominee receives \$10,000, whilst the eventual winner receives an additional \$50,000 and his/her novel is translated into foreign languages. This is a great opportunity for writers’ work to be acknowledged as part of ‘World Literature’: “One of the main aims of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction is to encourage the translation of Arabic literature into other languages” (IPAF, 2007).

Although IPAF has sometimes been viewed with some skepticism by some journalists and writers<sup>29</sup>, the prize’s judges are usually highly respected critics, writers and academics and the jury is changed every year in order to maintain the credibility of the award. Every year, when the longlist and shortlist are announced, the nominated novels always face criticism concerning their eligibility for the prize, and perhaps this type of controversy among different media increases interest sales. This is because of centre vs. periphery issues in the Arab World. This understanding represents the texts from the

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<sup>29</sup> See for example [http://www.bbc.com/arabic/artandculture/2009/12/091207\\_als\\_booker\\_2110\\_tc2.shtml](http://www.bbc.com/arabic/artandculture/2009/12/091207_als_booker_2110_tc2.shtml). This may reveal how the conflict between the centre and the periphery in the Arab world affects the literary scene.

centre as a symbolic capital of Arab culture whilst the literature from periphery is still invisible. Casanova (2004, p. 127) argues “the *power* of the capital of the arts is so strong”, where literary texts from peripheries can be consecrated through the critical judgement. Thus, when the culture of the periphery is afforded prestige in the form of literary prizes, this threatens the status quo and provokes a backlash from the centre, eager to reinstate the previous boundaries that protected their privileged position.

Figure 4.3: The winners of the IPAF prize from different Arab countries

Year	Winners	Winners' nationalities
2008	Bahaa Taher	Egyptian
2009	Yusuf Zeydan	Egyptian
2010	Abdo Khal	Saudi
2011	Mohammed Achaari and Raja Alem	Moroccan; Saudi
2012	Rabee Jaber	Lebanese
2013	Saud Alsanousi	Kuwaiti
2014	Ahmed Saadawi	Iraqi
2015	Shukri Mabkhout	Tunisian
2016	Rabai al-Madhoun	Palestinian

Figure 4.3 is a geographical representation of the winners of the IPAF prize from different Arab countries that shows how prize's consecration brings literary texts from inexistence to existence. Media coverage of such debates means that winning novels are widely read and discussed following the awarding of the prize. The purpose of the next section will be to explore the impact of the IPAF on the production and reception of the Saudi novel, helping to push it from the periphery to the centre.

#### 4.6.2 The Saudi Novel: from Periphery to Centre

In many respects, Saudi Arabia would not be described as a peripheral country. However, during the early years of the history of modern Arabic literature, generally referred to as *al-Nahḍa* (the Arabic Renaissance), the cities of Baghdad, Cairo and Beirut were viewed as the major cultural capitals within the Arab world. Taha Hussein<sup>30</sup> pointed out that

<sup>30</sup> Taha Hussein (1889-1973) was one of the most well-known and influential Egyptian writers in the 20th-century. He was also one of the central figures in Arabic literature. He was nominated for a Nobel prize in literature several times.

“Cairo writes, Beirut publishes and Baghdad reads” (Farīd, 2007). This phrase has usually been quoted by the centre’s writers, promoting the literary power of the centre. However, since the mid-twentieth century when other cities in the region began to participate actively in the literary scene, the traditional Arab capitals have slightly declined. Al-Qassemi (2013) argues that “while historic Arab capitals such as Cairo, Baghdad, Beirut and Damascus are embroiled in civil strife, Gulf cities [including Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Doha] are powering ahead as new centers for Arab culture, education and business”<sup>31</sup>.

There are three key reasons for this shift. The first relates to the historical changes in the economic importance of Saudi Arabia. As discussed in chapter three, the development which resulted from the oil boom has brought wealth and influence to a country that was once considered ‘peripheral’ in the world ensuring it is now recognized as a global player in oil trading. This economic growth has also been accompanied by massive urbanization. The second factor of relevance in this context is that the political power of the Saudi state during the Gulf wars, the events of 9/11 and the ensuing ‘War on Terror’ led to the Kingdom repositioning itself on the international stage. As a result, Saudi Arabia is now seen by others and by Saudis themselves as being of central importance in the Arab and Muslim world. The third factor which has specifically helped to change the position of Saudi literature is that writers themselves have improved their strategic writing and have become much more internationally oriented than they were in the past. This means that some Saudi writers have become acclaimed novelists and their work has been welcomed by different publishers and a new readership in both the Arab and Western worlds.

As previously mentioned in this chapter, at the beginning of the 1990s, Saudi novels began to undergo a series of rapid changes. Among the best-known examples are the successful works by Algosaibi and al-Hamad. Both writers were promoted by Arabic critics and academics as being of interest to readers of contemporary Saudi novels in the Arab world despite their novels being banned in Saudi Arabia. Then, some Saudi novels began to be long-listed and short-listed for literary prizes in Arab world and beyond. For

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<sup>31</sup> Recently, General Union of Arab Litterateurs and Writers has been moved from Cairo to Abu Dhabi. The Union of Arab Litterateurs has been established and remained in Cairo for decades. However, it has been moved to the Gulf cities because of the effects of the Arab Spring and the political crisis in the centre (Alfaisal, 2016, p. 142).

example, Alem won a number of literary prizes, including the UNESCO Arab Woman's Creative Writing Award in 2005, the Paris-based Lebanese Literary Club Award in 2008 and IPAF in 2011. Another Saudi novelist al-Mohaimeed also won various literary awards from both Arab and Western countries, including the Abu al-Qasim Ashabbi Prize (Tunisian Award) for best Arabic novel in 2011 (*Asharq al-awsat*, 2011). He also was short-listed for the Jan Michalski Prize for Literature 2010 (Fondation Jan Michalski, 2010). These successes have supported the development of Saudi novels and their reception. As an example, Khal's success with *Tarmī bi-sharar...*, which won the IPAF in 2010, becomes remarkable in itself, as it is the first Saudi novel that won this prestigious prize, as well as testifying to the determination of Saudi novelists to move their work from the periphery to the centre. This is part of a deliberate strategy by the writers themselves to re-orient themselves, as Khal admitted that winning this prize allows him to become universal, particularly when his novel has been translated into English and other languages (Khal, 2010). This novel has received a mixed response among literary critics. There are critics who have shown a lot of praise for this novel because of its sensitive theme, while there are other critics who report that this is nothing new and it is even presented in some western countries and not just in the Arab world. It seems that the IPAF has significantly increased exposure for Saudi novelists in both the Arab and Western worlds, and also impacted positively on the economics of the Saudi book trade, particularly in the case of short-listed novels. However, the most important point is that this award has influenced Saudi novels in terms of their distribution and circulation, and led to them becoming increasingly well known across the globe. Casanova (2004, pp.146-147) argues that literary prizes' function is a form of literary consecration:

They are responsible mainly for making the verdicts of the sanctioning organs of the republic of letters known beyond its borders. As the most apparent of the mechanisms of consecration, they represent a sort of confirmation for the benefit of the general public.

The greatest proof of the positive impact of literary prizes on the international recognition for the Saudi novel is the IPAF, which is recently recognized as the most prestigious prize for Arabic fiction in the Arab world. Saudi writers who have won this prize have suddenly found themselves at the centre of the international literary scene after being marginalized for decades. The prestige that goes with winning this prize has placed their novels at the

top of the bestsellers' lists in Arabic book fairs. The winning novel is also reprinted with a strapline on the cover: 'IPAF Winner 2010/2011', and on the top of the cover are the words 'The Bestseller novel'. For example, Khal's novel *Tarmī bi-sharar...* went on to sell thousands more copies as a result of the prestige of the prize (Emarat alyoum, 2010).

The prize-winning Saudi novels as well as those which have been long-listed or short-listed for the prize have greatly increased their sales, such as *Shāri' Al-'aṭāyef* (2009) (Street of Affections) by Bin Bakhīt, which was longlisted 2010 in the IPAF and sold 2000 copies in just 24 hours during the Riyadh Book Fair (Bin Bakhīt, 2009). Similarly, *al-Wārifa* (The Leafy Tree) (2009) by Umaima al-Khamīs was longlisted for the IPAF in 2010, as was *Fitnat Jeddah* (Turmoil in Jeddah) (2010) by Maqbūl Moussa al-'Alawī in 2011. *Al-Qundus* (The Beaver) (2013) by Mohammad Hasan 'Alwān made it onto the short list in 2013<sup>32</sup>. In support of this view, Todd emphasises that the winners of literary prizes as well as shortlisted novels were dramatically sold as a direct result of the prize. In the case of the "Booker Prize", sales figures for both shortlisted and prize-winning novels saw dramatic increases when the jury's decisions are made public (Todd, 1996, p. 103).

An additional likely effect of this prize is that the successful winning novel is followed up immediately by enthusiastic reviews in the Arab and western press. Such reviews quickly help to secure a reputation for the novelist who might otherwise have taken a long time to become well-known outside of his/her own national literary space. The idea of literary excellence and the prestige of the IPAF are becoming important themes in a number of articles written about the prize-winning novel. After the prize has been awarded, newspaper articles and media interviews with critics and publishers usually make reference to the winning and shortlisted novels, discussing their themes and technical strategies, which can be seen as a useful reader's guide that is likely to affect the reception process of these novels, as will be discussed in detail in chapters five and six.

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<sup>32</sup> A French translation of this novel, *Le Castor* by Stéphanie Dujois, was published in early 2015 by French publishing house Le Seuil.

Saudi literary space in general benefits from winning these literary prizes, not just the winning author and his/her publisher. Other parties involved in the book trade, including booksellers, reviewers, literary agents and academics also benefit in different ways. Perhaps by attracting greater public attention to these Saudi novels, the “Arabic Booker” Prize has helped to create an atmosphere which is conducive to their entry into the sphere of world literature. In the meantime, there have been some positive shifts in the attitude towards novels banned in Saudi Arabia when these have been awarded the prize or have been shortlisted for it. For example, Khal’s novel *Tarmī bi-sharar*...was originally banned in Saudi Arabia, but after winning the IPAF it was allowed to be sold during the Riyadh Book Fair 2010 (Alhayat, 2010). This attitude may encourage some Saudi novelists to circulate their novels more widely, as mentioned before, since the issue of censorship seems to limit some novels from moving across their national borders.

## 4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has revealed a noticeable development in the Saudi novel in terms of its quantitative and qualitative levels. It has traced the significant influence of the main socio-cultural issues on Saudi novels that reflect social changes in their narrative themes in each era. As has been noted, the conflict between *Hadātha and Ṣahwa* has significantly affected the status and reception of the contemporary Saudi novel, where the controversial attitude towards Saudi liberal writers led certain novels to be censored and banned. However, the rapid expansion of the internet has paved the way for escaping from the social restrictions, providing some freedom. At the same time, the number of Saudi novels, particularly by women, has been remarkable in the 2000s due to different socio-political factors; the novels of the younger generation are somewhat different from the 1990’s novels with regard to their contents and style. Whereas the latter focused on social issues such as self-identity and the development of Saudi society, it can be argued that the new millennium novels show more concern for love and sexual desire in their narratives in order to make their way to the world literary space.

It has also been suggested that the final decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> proved to be an era in which Saudi novelists realized they had the skills to win prestigious and widely recognised literary prizes. The IPAF virtually guarantees that winning novels will enjoy high sales and be widely read throughout the Arab world; their translation into different languages, particularly English, also brings them to prominence

elsewhere. Thus, this combination of factors has raised the profile of Saudi novels to the level that puts them on the road towards being recognized by different group of readers. The following chapter will focus on the reception of four contemporary Saudi novels by Arab journalists, where responses by two main groups of readers, Saudi and non-Saudi, will be analysed.

## Chapter Five

### The reception of Saudi novels by Arab Journalists

#### 5.1 Introduction

Various studies have focused on the effect of media on public opinion, and how “the priorities of the media strongly influence the priorities of the public. Elements prominent on the media agenda become prominent in the public mind” (McCombs, 2002, p. 2). The media, particularly newspapers, have had a major influence on the reception of contemporary Saudi novels and on determining which novels should be considered and which should not. This chapter examines the reception of Saudi novels in both the local Saudi press and the Arabic periodical press (print and electronic newspapers and magazines) that are intended for an Arab audience.

Fish (1980) argues that members of the same interpretive community share their reading methodology and have certain shared assumptions prior to the process of reading which will influence how they interpret texts. In other words, “these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around” (Fish, 1980, p. 171). This being the case, it is possible to argue that the ways in which Saudi and Arab journalists interpret novels are shaped by two influential factors. First, as staff members of specific newspapers, journalists embrace a set of shared interpretive strategies that significantly influence how they shape and define the meaning of contemporary Saudi novels. This community is characterised by the socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts of its members, as well as the influence of their shared modes of interpreting their society. Second, the impact of their geographic community as Saudi journalists, who write for a local newspaper, is part of their conservative society, and it is difficult for them to challenge the dominant culture on the one hand, and to challenge the censorship on the other hand, which might restrict the range of their interpretations and condition their chances of having something published. Other Arab journalists writing for *Al-Jazeera* or *Arab News* online, for instance, may not face the same restrictions or have the same audience. In this case, then, interpretations are not based on the novels’ content but, instead, are shaped by shared ideological and social experiences.

Furthermore, we cannot neglect the broader economic, social and political forces that often appear to have precipitated a much broader set of debates about the changing nature of the Saudi novel. As the discussion in chapter three illustrated, these contexts and ideologies of Saudi society are manifested or negotiated in the practices of readers, creating particular interactions between Arab journalists and their audiences within a shared horizon of expectations.

This chapter focuses on both Saudi and non-Saudi Arab journalists as members of different interpretive communities, united by their shared discourse about two central events that brought the Saudi novel into the spotlight in the first decade of the new millennium. The first of these events was the controversy that accompanied Alsanea's novel *Banāt al-riyāḍ* following its initial publication in 2005. The second concerns the award of those literary prizes that paved the way for Saudi novels to move from local to global recognition.

Prior to both these events, the level of interest shown in Saudi novels by the Arab press was very limited, a fact that may be explained by the idea of centre and periphery in the cultural domain of literature (see section 4.6.2). When these events occurred, they helped to create a much greater level of demand for information about Saudi novels that was addressed by the Arab press community. The relevance of the Arab socio-cultural issues to Arab journalists' discourse and their shared interpretation when addressing both these events led them on the one hand to reproduce viewpoints and stories about these Saudi novels that had been shared across the media. On the other hand, this common interest also meant that other journalists challenged these widespread opinions in order to provide more interesting reading to their audiences. Both of these key literary events produced interpretations of Saudi fiction by Saudi and non-Saudi journalists who were influenced by the social and cultural environment in which they were embedded. As a consequence, non-Saudi Arab journalists chose to interpret *Banāt al-riyāḍ* and award-winning novels by the Kingdom's authors differently than their Saudi counterparts did, creating subcommunities within their interpretive community. Thus, this chapter analyses Arab journalistic discourse produced about the novels under consideration here and examines the differences between these subcommunities' responses to these texts.

## 5.2 *Banāt al-riyāḍ* in the Arab press

### 5.2.1 Saudi journalists' community: the paradox of Saudi culture

Saudi journalistic discourse about *Banāt al-riyāḍ* will be considered first. As previously mentioned in chapter four, ultraconservative Saudi readers predominantly draw on a particular strand of Islamic thought as their main source of interpretation, viewing such a novel as a source of moral corruption. The opinions of this ultraconservative interpretative community gained public attention as a result of being reproduced by journalists, and subsequently influenced readers' response to this novel and shaped their attitude to the discourse about this text and the novelist herself; something which speaks of their power as gatekeepers who have influence over the social and public sphere within the Kingdom.

These pre-reading assumptions have been influenced by readers' assumptions about the fact that the author of the novel was a young Saudi woman, and this may have created certain expectations concerning the novel's themes, characters and techniques amongst journalists who were aware of the particular socio-cultural context in which this text had been produced. In addition, the title of this novel and the comments written by Algosaibi that appeared on its cover also affected readers in the Arab world. The fact that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* was heralded by both Saudi and non-Saudi Arab journalists as representing the new voice of creative writing by Saudi women can be seen to have been influenced by Algosaibi's words of praise, quoted on the book's back cover (see Appendix 2). His comments that the novel was 'an astonishingly worthwhile read', as it "draws the curtain and uncovers what is hidden behind it, the exciting world of young women in Riyadh", and that he had been 'captivated' by it helped to pave the way for the widespread popular recognition of *Banāt al-riyāḍ*. This seal of approval from a well-respected Saudi writer helped to ensure a warm reception for this new author's work.

*Banāt al-riyāḍ*'s readers are introduced to the novel by stating that "any similarity or characters in this novel is intentional" (Alsanea, 2005, p.7). Indeed, most readers already heard that the novel had been banned, and because of that, they will be anticipating scandals long before they come upon it in the text. In addition, they may also be anticipating a negative judgment on it, partly because of its title, and especially because the words "Ladies and Gentlemen: you are invited to join me in one of the most explosive

scandals and noisiest, wildest all-night parties around” (Alsanea, 2007, p. 1) suggest that the decision has already been made. That decision is assumed on the part of the author when she predicted the aggressive reactions to the novel aroused by the proper noun “*al-riyāḍ*”; and therefore when readers get to the end, they may declare the decision or judgment they have themselves made. According to Fish (1980, p.160), it “is the structure of the reader’s experience, the transferring of a moral label from a thing to those who appropriate it”. Thus, the reading experience depends on a reader who is sensitive to the word “*al-riyāḍ*” in terms of its socio-cultural meaning; another reader who is less sensitive will not have a similar experience, and consequently will not have rushed to a decision or judgment in relation to a word with rich and complex connotations. As has been suggested by Fish (1980, p.168), these pre-reading assumptions can lead to certain expectations, and therefore shape the interpretation process based on the interpretive strategies learned from the community and shared with many other members.

Some Saudi-based newspapers published articles viewing the novel as a work rebelling against the values of society. A number of reviewers drew a comparison between the events related in the text and contemporary Saudi reality, and rejected Alsanea’s narrative on the grounds that it was a false account of the lives of young Saudi women. In al-Ghānim’s review (2006), he analyses the content of this novel from a conservative viewpoint, with the outcome of a simplistic and reductionist interpretation. Since he interprets the novel as a false account of life in Riyadh, he accuses the author of lying about young Saudi women’s lives. The journalist also feels that he must defend Saudi women against the novel’s events. Faced with this interpretation, the journalist finds himself between two realities: the reality of his actual experience of life in Saudi Arabia, and the imaginative reality a novel represents which often leads him to make a comparison between the ‘fictional’ and the ‘real’ and ultimately limits him as he invokes his own ‘lived experience’ and ‘horizon of expectations’ in his reading of the text.

Another Saudi journalist, al-Ṭa‘īmī (2005), addresses the novel from the same conservative perspective. Al-Ṭa‘īmī’s reading tends to be more of a personal attack than a reading of the text; the novel’s author here is defamed as a ‘liberal woman’, a label that is not always looked upon in favour in Saudi Arabia (see section 4.2). Al-Ṭa‘īmī states that the author wrote this novel as an expression of ‘pure hatred’ of national social tradition. She also describes the novel as a simple tale, which does not merit being

described as a novel without referring to the narrative structure or the linguistic style that may support her decision. She concludes by suggesting that “the protagonists’ stories in this novel reflect both the author’s own experiences and the impact of the Western culture on her lifestyle as a liberal woman” (al-Ṭa‘īmī, 2005). This reading reveals that the journalist cannot respond to the text without evoking the dominant religious discourse that has already framed this novel as a piece of ‘autobiographical writing’ and a scandalous story about Riyadh girls; thus she cannot accommodate either a new horizon of expectation in addressing the novel or a different interpretive strategy.

Some Saudi journalists of this conservative religious community focused on the title *Banāt al-riyāḍ*, claiming that the title played a significant role in attracting people to read the text, and ensuring the novel reached a wide audience, given that using both words *Banāt* (Girls) and *al-riyāḍ* (Riyadh) is a provocative title for most Saudis. For instance, al-Ṭirīrī (2006) assumed that if the title had been changed, the novel would not have received such attention, as he sees this novel as nothing more than a scandalous story. Another member of this interpretive community, al-Kharīf (2005), pointed out that the popularity of Algosaibi, who wrote the preface to this novel, was the main reason for its success. The journalist confirmed that he was attracted to reading this novel by Algosaibi, as

the novelist and literary merit of Algosaibi and his praise of the novel show satisfaction with its literary quality and precisely gives the text another dimension. Thus, when I read this novel, I will invoke Algosaibi, who has already read this text before me, which means that he takes a responsibility for each rejection or success of this novel. (al-Kharīf, 2005)

Similarly, al-Ḥakīm (2006) explained the reasons for the novel’s immediate success with the reading public that was prompted by Algosaibi’s reputation. Although this journalist conceded that he had not read the novel, he stated that it was highly probable that the novelist of *Banāt al-riyāḍ* was alluding to *Girlfriends* by Dallas Miller<sup>33</sup> (1977) or that she may have been influenced in one way or another by Miller’s story in his novel about

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<sup>33</sup>This novel is about three women in New York who tell their stories of their relationship with men. Although this novel has not been translated into Arabic yet, this Saudi journalist drew a comparison between Alsanea’s novel and Miller’s novel in term of their women protagonists and story. It is likely that he tended to refer to Alsanea’s English ability to read Western novels and perhaps copied their contents.

three protagonists who go through various relationships with men. The question here is: why did he choose this reference to a Western text? Would his readers know what this is? This response refers to Miller's novel to confirm that this novel expresses Western ideas in order to further defame the novel and its author. This reading reveals how some journalists often quote from others in expressing their 'own' opinion about novels, and how that will affect their readers' judgments of these texts.

In this context, al-Dāwūd (2006) warned readers that *Banāt al-riyād* is a novel whose content does not have much to do with its title. He found this novel challenging the accepted norms of the Saudi culture. It was considered scandalous, he argues, because "it exposed in its story of four friends the secret part of girls' lives, where they rode in a car driven by one of them who wore a male robe and were going around in the streets of Riyadh" (al-Dāwūd, 2006).

These Saudi journalists' responses as an interpretive community commonly reproduce the idea of the dominant conservative groups who have previously interpreted this novel in a literalist fashion, condemning it as a moral outrage against the traditional Arab notion of a woman's role in society. Not surprisingly, therefore, some of these journalists claimed that such a novel should never have been allowed to be published in Saudi Arabia (al-ʿAshmāwī, 2005, al-Shuwīʿir, 2006). This notion of literary standards constituted a form of censorship which would allow only the most celebratory accounts of Saudi life to be published. Within shared sets of acceptable ideas, knowledge and interpretive strategies, which make up this journalists' community, the Islamic traditionalists' discourse controls the journalists' reactions which in turn affect the way they think about and respond to this novel in order to maintain their audience that they are writing for in local newspapers. Fish (1980, p.171) states that "if a community believes in the existence of only one text, then the single strategy its members employ will be forever writing it". Accordingly, to belong to a particular group of receivers is to reflect the stability and the identity of this group and, in turn, to produce the interpretation that satisfies the group's norms. These conservative Saudi journalists accept only texts that deal with Islamic values and promote the traditional culture. Thus, if a Saudi novel challenges the accepted norms of this interpretive community, it would be rejected and criticised by its members.

However, other Saudi journalists expressed enthusiastic views and supportive attitudes about this novel, which create discursive practices between different journalists in the same newspaper. These journalists adopt a more varied set of interpretive strategies which is less affected by the prevailing conservative cultural influence. Thus, al-Ḥijlān's review (2005) defends the novel, and argues that it succeeded in discussing social issues such as arranged marriage, divorce and women's role in Saudi Arabia's conservative culture. This review also offers a description of the main characters, highlighting that "Alsanea's novel draws attention to the uneasy co-existence between conservative and liberal cultures in the kingdom, which provoked different reactions to the text" (al-Ḥijlān, 2005). Al-Ḥijlān also points out that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* is only a fictional work and it is not a real story as some people believe, criticising some writers such as al-ʿAshmāwī for reading the novel as though it were a documentary portrait of Riyadh society.

The tendency to defend the author of this novel from the attack of ultraconservative readers is also a key point in these journalists' responses. Hence, some journalists criticise the ultraconservative attitude towards the novelist, dismissing this as a personal attack that reveals a misunderstanding of the text because they do not have sufficient experience to read a novel (al-Ḍāmir, 2006). An editorial article in *al-Eqtisadiyah* (2005) criticises the conservative readings that tend to exclude any work reflecting on possible negative critiques of social values in which conservative cultures are usually rejected. The article states that

*Banāt al-riyāḍ* is a literary work that should be read in terms of both language and literary aspects in the novel, and that is the function of specialists. But it is strange that some readers have used religious and traditional customs to evaluate literature, which is what al-ʿAshmāwī did in his article when he described the work as a great sin that does not satisfy religious ethics. (al-Eqtisadiyah, 2005)

Similarly, al-ʿAsīrī (2006) comments on the novel's successful attempt to reveal the gap between conservative and liberal cultures in Saudi society, adding that "in terms of the cultural issues which it raises, social events it portrays and language functions, the text has succeeded in addressing social reality despite the weakness of its narrative technique" (al-ʿAsīrī, 2006). His reading of the novel frames the novel as a daring challenge to the dominant culture, which encourages novelists to discuss social issues as a means of changing the backward ideas in their society. Al-Ḥusain (2006) also sees this novel as a new way of writing novels on the Saudi literary scene, which aims to challenge certain

traditional ideas about women's role in Saudi society. These journalists seem to think that literature should have a social function, and therefore they are judging the novel also on non-literary criteria, which means they mention its weakness as a piece of 'literature' but do not measure it against these criteria solely or primarily.

Other liberal Saudi journalists from this interpretive community continue to pay attention to the novel's boldness in terms of its themes that profoundly shocked and angered traditionalists, and they have praised the author's courage. For example, al-Dhukīr (2005) compared *Banāt al-riyāḍ* to Algosabi's novels in terms of their audacity in drawing attention to contradictions in the Saudi cultural discourse, this being the main reason for the aggressive reaction of ultraconservative readers towards these novels. Within the same community, Jazā'irī (2005) criticised conservative journalists who focused on the author rather than the novel itself. He then praised *Banāt al-riyāḍ* for its successful ability to

simply describe the concerns of a new generation that lives a realistic world away from the imaginary one. It spoke to a generation that no longer understands many of the social covenantal ideas but trusts the computer screens more than the teacher in the school. (Jazā'irī, 2005)

Similarly, both Faqīhī (2006) and Ba-Ṭarfī (2006) praised the novel and referred to particular cultural themes that had become the topic of daily debates in different media channels between liberal and conservative reviewers. They also accused ultraconservatives of trying to reproduce the historical position of modernists to ban any attempt of a new generation of Saudi writers to challenge their discourse (see the conflict between conservatives and modernists in chapter four). Diyāb (2008) praised *Banāt al-riyāḍ* for serving as an encouraging model for a number of young Saudi writers, who began to use their work to question their society about cultural and social issues. He argues that

this new generation has become more aware of globalisation using new technologies to access international media and intends to reveal the hidden life of their society that has been silenced by the dominant conservative discourse for a long time. (Diyāb, 2008)

Notably, these positive readings reveal that these journalists share liberal ideologies, which have significantly influenced their responses to this novel as reflected in the level

of celebration and praise given to the novel compared to other Saudi novels.

As has been noted, the description of this novel as a source of moral corruption reflects the ultraconservative perspectives and modes of pre-reading represented by some journalists to maintain the dominant religious discourse and public interest in their interpretation. On the other hand, other journalists with different interpretive strategies interpret this novel as an author rebelling against the conservative culture, praising the writer's audacity in breaking taboos, which also seems to be an 'ideological' reading to promote their liberal worldview as opposed to the conservative one. Thus, "both the stability and the variety [of interpretation] are functions of interpretive strategies rather than of texts" (Fish, 1980, p.168).

These attitudes reveal the gap between the conservative and liberal discourses in the Saudi society and present the complex conflict between them. Each interpretive community has its own agenda, using the press to send its messages to the public, which in turn have an effective impact on others' interpretation of the text, creating the meaning "through interpretive strategies that are finally not our own but have their source in a publicly available system of intelligibility" (Fish, 332). In this case, writing and reading become ideological weapons to challenge the hegemony of conservative culture or to defend the accepted form in which their cultural group was made.

### 5.2.2 Non-Saudi Arab journalists' responses to *Banāt al-riyāḍ*: Fictionalising Saudi society

From a Saudi journalistic perspective, *Banāt al-riyāḍ* was found to be the most controversial novel in recent times, radically dividing opinion, to the extent that whilst al-'Ashmāwī<sup>34</sup> (2005) condemned it as "terribly sinful", another journalist praised it as an example of the "remarkably bold expression of young Saudi writers" (Faḳīhī, 2006). Although the controversy about this novel was originally raised in the Saudi press, other Arab journalists continued this debate in different journalistic forms, including articles,

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<sup>34</sup> A conservative Saudi writer, who criticised the novel and asked its author to deny that its protagonists were Saudi girls, as mentioned earlier in this chapter.

editorial columns, interviews and other types of media coverage. Thus, this controversy concerning Alsanea's novel can be seen to have influenced the responses to this Saudi work by non-Saudi Arab journalists and serves to illustrate the connections that exist between pre-reading assumptions and readers throughout the reading process.

Many non-Saudi Arab journalists focused on the controversy and conflict that the popularity of *Banāt al-riyāḍ* unleashed in Saudi society, primarily due to its daring thematic content concerning Saudi women's struggle for their personal rights in the face of conservative traditional culture. This discourse of controversy within Saudi Arabia motivated enthusiasm for reading this novel outside the Saudi context and helped to shape Arab journalistic discourse about it. This theme of controversy features prominently in the titles of many reviews and reports published in the Arab press:

- “Sexual controversy in the Saudi novel” (Bā ‘āmer, 2010)
- “Saudi women novelists break taboos” (Nujaim , 2007)
- “New Saudi novels break taboos with forthright language” (Alghad, 2010)
- “*Banāt al-riyāḍ*: a devilish or daring novel” (Emarat alyoum, 2009)

These titles, typical of those heading up coverage found in the Arab press, suggest that many Arab journalists focus in their readings of Saudi novels on the breaking of taboos that continue to exert a significant influence over everyday life in conservative Islamic societies. This also can be linked to the journalistic imperative to maintain their periodical market interests. Headlines like these can reflect the impact this novel would have on Arab audiences, especially because it seems to offer a new story that would encourage readers to discover more about Saudi society. *Banāt al-riyāḍ* is associated with the idea of scandal and of secrets being revealed, themes which readers may expect to find in a novel written by a Saudi woman. As Fish (1980, p.171) argues that an individual's reading strategies are shaped by being part of a community, non-Saudi Arab journalists as members of the community of journalists understand what kind of strategies can be used to disseminate their messages. Thus, it is likely that some of these Arab journalists deliberately adopted this provocative approach so as to shape the debate over this novel and to make it appear as a scandalous work.

An editorial article in a Jordanian newspaper, *Alghad* (2006), adopted this approach by opening with a reference to *Banāt al-riyāḍ* as being the best-selling novel at the Arabic

book fair (2006) which had taken place in Beirut, although it had been banned in Saudi Arabia and some Gulf countries. Then, the article quoted from some Saudi journalists, reproducing what others had said about this novel as a means to form opinion and highlight the controversy it has caused in Saudi society. By beginning with this quote, the article established a link between scandal and the Saudi conservative society, indicating that this was intended to attract readers' attention. It states that the novel represents

the clash between two different cultures: the first is religious and traditional; the second that of clandestine lives. This is the intersection between the differences in the local memory of Riyadh and of some other groups in Saudi society. For this reason, it seems that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* has become a best-seller because it is a social rather than a literary phenomenon. (Alghad, 2006)

The article makes further connections between the novel and religious conservatism, and questioned the audacity of a young Saudi girl in writing about sexual issues in such a conservative society. The novel, it argues, talks about a society that has not only conserved traditions, but is also considered the most conservative in religious terms in the Arab world.

In an Egyptian newspaper, Sarḥān (2006) wrote an article with a similarly interpretive strategy, pointing out to readers that “Alsanea is one of the most famous novelists in the Arab world and her text breaks through all the red lines demarcating the secrets in a conservative society” (Sarḥān, 2006). This article also picks up on Algosaibi's praise, showing ties between this novel's audacity in challenging taboos and censorship in the Saudi literary scene. Thus, it can be clear that this view invokes the controversy sparked in the Saudi press by the novel's themes to shape the debate about this novel in the non-Saudi press and to persuade Arab readers to view the novel within this specific context.

Manṣar (2006) places Alsanea's work within a broader literary context, under the headline “Saudi Arabia witnesses a tsunami of women's novels”. This journalist quickly establishes why the novel *Banāt al-riyāḍ* is ranked among the top fifty Arab novels during 2006, citing that “it sold more than 500,000 copies in more than 20 editions in various Arab countries” (Manṣar, 2006). This success, she argues, owed much to the praise for the book from a great writer like Algosaibi, who is quoted on the cover. Specific phrases such as ‘conservative society’, ‘young Saudi woman’ and ‘taboos’ are used to give the impression that Alsanea's novel is scandalous, describing the book as “written by a young

Saudi woman, who broke taboos in the conservative society. The novel represents sex, relationships and homosexuality, showing how young Saudi women seek freedom” (Maṣṣar, 2006). Hence, such a stance seems to show how existing opinions about the novel have affected the attitudes and shaped the discourse of non-Saudi Arab journalists.

Non-Saudi Arab journalists continued to reproduce ideas similar to those seen in the articles previously described that chose to highlight the contrast between scandal and rebellion with the conservatism of Saudi society. An Algerian newspaper published an editorial article in 2008, that stated “*Banāt al-riyāḍ* has attracted an American director to turn the novel into a film purely because of its bold storyline about four Saudi girls searching for love” (Ennahar al-Jadeed, 2008). Another newspaper, *Emarat alyoum*, adopted a similar strategy to frame *Banāt al-riyāḍ* as a scandal within a conservative society, starting with a reference to al-‘Ashmāwi (2005) who sees this novel as “terribly sinful”, and to Algosaibi’s comments on the novel’s cover. The same sensationalist tone is adopted in the claim that “the novel is seen as being so controversial that some Saudis have taken out a lawsuit against the author, arguing that her novel does not reflect the reality of Saudi society and demanding that she be prosecuted” (*Emarat alyoum*, 2009). This approach allows journalists to persuade their readers to agree with a shared ideology that frames Saudi society as an ultra-religious and closed community as it has been seen by many Arabs and Muslims. This article goes on to point out that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* has a very simple storyline and suffers from sketchily described protagonists, but that its bold themes led to its publicity.

It is clear that the reaction that non-Saudi Arab journalists gave to *Banāt al-riyāḍ* has been influenced by the pre-reading assumptions that can be directly linked to Algosaibi recommendations as well as to the controversy amongst Saudi readers about how the novel ought to be read as a scandalous novel that represents ‘the exciting secrets of Riyadh girls’. The references to the conservative culture in Saudi society and the fact that the novel is presented in non-Saudi Arab media as a bestseller is enough to make any reader question the expectations created in his horizon. This journalistic strategy tried to influence the opinions of the readership about the cruelty of the traditional culture in Saudi society, while readers are also entertained by reading what others say about this novel as a means of forming their opinion. It has been suggested that “those who do buy a book after reading a review are often so prejudiced by what they have read that their

own assessment simply coincides with the pre-given suggestions” (Docherty, 1984, p. 20).

In addition to this strategy, some Arab journalists compare *Banāt al-riyāḍ* with other Arabic novels such as *‘Imārat Ya‘qūbiyān*<sup>35</sup> (2002) (The Yacoubian Building) by Egyptian author Alaa al-Aswany, which is one of the most popular bestseller novels in the Arab world. For example, al-Lūbānī (2006) claims that these two Arab novels are similar in terms of their central sexual themes, publicity, rebellious protagonists and the aggressive reactions their respective novelists faced within their own society. To strengthen the parallels between these novels, the article continues to use this comparative strategy, stating that

these two novels have made significant impacts on various groups of Arab readers. Both al-Aswani and Alsanea represent the reality of social issues in unflinching terms that have shocked their societies. Despite some differences existing in these two novels, they have proven that Arab readers wait for something exceptionally unusual to get their attention. (al-Lūbānī, 2006)

By creating the impression that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* is connected with this novel, the notion of scandal becomes more believable later, meaning that readers might then shape their reading according to these pre-given assumptions. This reading shows how non-Saudi Arab journalists have chosen to interpret the novel within the context of their own social and cultural environment. The journalists have as part of their role to act as arbiters of public taste, imposing standards that relate to what is judged as good or bad literature. Thus, they try to persuade their audience by highlighting the novel’s representation of important social and cultural issues, creating the necessary interactions between them and their society.

Within the same interpretive community, al-Sayyid (2009) adopts a similar approach to reading *Banāt al-riyāḍ* by comparing it with other well-known novels that have been produced in the centre of the Arabic literary scene. The journalist uses a strategy that frames the novel as a social documentary, arguing that it could be compared to *‘Imārat*

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<sup>35</sup> This novel refers to an actual building in Cairo, where the novel’s events take place. The stories of the central characters deal with some sensitive issues, including political corruption, extremist Islam and homosexuality, resulting in significant anger in the Egyptian society against the novel’s themes that are still taboos in the Arabic culture.

*Ya'qūbiyān* as both authors draw upon the political, social, and cultural reality of their respective societies. He then gives a reason for his claim, explaining that

rapid, widespread success for any literary work is based on specific literary and artistic values. These novels became massively popular as a result of two main dimensions: political and social. *Banāt al-riyāḍ* is written by a woman and tells the story of women's emotional and sexual needs in a country like Saudi Arabia, where women's political rights are denied and they are socially repressed. (al-Sayyid, 2009, p. 10)

Linking *Banāt al-riyāḍ* to another popular novel that Arab readers would already be likely to have shared beliefs about helps to quickly form associations between these texts and to transfer existing beliefs onto the newer novel written by a Saudi woman writer. *Banāt al-riyāḍ* is linked to another best-selling politically oriented novel by using the technique of highlighting similarities between their daring themes and social realism. Journalistic attention of this kind may have contributed to early sales of the novel by drawing the attention of particular groups of readers towards its cultural and social themes.

This attitude is also evident in other Arab journalists' writing about this Saudi novel, where further connections between the social and cultural contexts in Saudi Arabia and women's issues are made by using the terms 'emotional', 'sexual', and 'socially repressed'. Some begin to discuss the women's issues within Saudi society represented in *Banāt al-riyāḍ*. Journalists' prior knowledge about Saudi society as a conservative patriarchal community shapes their interpretive strategies, which are firmly rooted in feminist perspectives. Female Arab journalists use Alsanea's novel to address women's issues that, in their opinion, are relevant to Arab Muslim women in general. These readers focus most closely on the novel's female characters. For example, at the beginning of her article on *Banāt al-riyāḍ*, Ḍāhir (2005) claims that "its writer was able to convey total sincerity and spontaneity in her representation of a patriarchal society portrayed as corrupt" (Ḍāhir, 2005). In her view, the Saudi society that Alsanea describes in this novel is a closed tribal community, where women continue to be victims of rigid traditions, contradictions and double standards. She concludes her article with the observation that: "*Banāt al-riyāḍ* is the first work by Alsanea but it reflects the writer's maturity and sensitivity and we expect she has a promising future, as previously noted by the poet and novelist Ghazi Algosaibi" (Ḍāhir, 2005). As previously mentioned, the effects of pre-reading and extraneous influences on reception are clearly reflected in references to

Algozaibi's opinions and quotes from him duly reproduced by the journalists. This type of interpretation offers a way of reading this novel that is circulated to influence public attitudes towards the novel.

Along the same lines, al-Shā'ir (2005) insists that Alsanea's story of four girls causes male readers to empathize with their struggles within a conservative society. Then, she claims that the aggressive criticism that the novel received from some Saudi journalists was due solely to its openness about the realities of life in Saudi Arabia, stating that "*Banāt al-riyād* can be considered a realist text and the secret that makes this novel outstanding is its simplicity, making it impossible to put down once you begin reading" (al-Shā'ir, 2005, p. 3). One of the key aspects in this article is al-Shā'ir's references to the controversy in the Saudi press, meaning that the discourse about this novel is affected by a conservative ideology perspective. Another important element is the journalist's defence of the writer as one of the new young generation of writers who is initiating a new era of contemporary Saudi literature.

Similarly, al-Baḥr (2005) criticises the Saudi media's responses to Alsanea's novel, and comments: "if Alsanea had represented girls who were models of conservatism in her novel, how would Saudi society have reacted? Or if she had given her novel another title rather than *Banāt al-riyād*, would they be dealing with this literary work differently?" (al-Baḥr, 2005 ). By broaching these questions, the article reminds readers about the controversy surrounding this novel in the Saudi media, which does, undoubtedly, play a part in this reading. The journalist then argues that the reason for this anger in Saudi society is the fact that *Banāt al-riyād* exposes what really goes on by telling the previously untold story. In her opinion, the reality documented in this novel is not only confined to Riyadh or Saudi Arabia, but "exists in all Arab and Gulf societies, albeit to varying degrees" (al-Baḥr, 2005 ). She concludes that this novel "may have told a daring story, but it sent out a powerful cry that was echoed in different corners of Saudi society, and has influenced it, and it will be remembered for a long time" (al-Baḥr, 2005 ). This article seems well suited to the interested layman, since readers will be persuaded that the novel is worth reading, partly because of its broader appeal to all Arab and Gulf societies as highlighted in the article.

The same point is made, but given a more feminist slant, by Abū 'Ain (2006), who states that

Alsanea has perfectly captured Arab reality focusing specifically on Saudi social customs and traditions. She has also demonstrated that when Arab women want to revolt, they do so with courage and self-confidence, without hesitation or paying heed to negative criticism. She wrote a non-conventional novel in a patriarchal society where women's right to drive is still denied. (Abū 'Ain, 2006)

As can be noted from this quotation, the journalist shifts the focus from reading the novel as a literary text, instead using it as a platform for raising Arab women's issues. The article begins by referring to the aggressive reactions this novel faced on the Saudi cultural scene, and then presents a strong defence of Alsanea as an Arab woman writer facing the same reactions as all those who write to oppose patriarchal injustice. By highlighting 'women's right to drive', which is the most controversial issue in Saudi society, she raises a significant issue that is of central interest to readers. This also demonstrates how the pre-knowledge of the Saudi socio-cultural context orients reader interpretation. The journalist continues to stress that the aggressive rejection of this novel is due to the writer's gender. She is one of many journalists who argue that if the novel had been written by a man, it would not face the same negative responses. This strategy allows the journalist to frame this novel as a bold and controversial exposé of traditional customs in an ultraconservative Arab society.

This approach continues to shape the discourse around *Banāt al-riyāḍ* in Arabic newspapers, as seen in two other articles by al-Zain (2006) and al-Qāsim (2008). In her article, al-Zain (2006) begins by stating that "this novel sold thousands of copies and, once published, quickly reached its third edition" (al-Zain, 2006). The reason for its great popularity is explained in the introduction to her article, where she describes it as a bold novel that exposed the secrets of Alsanea's friends, who belong to the wealthy class in Saudi society. By referring also to Algosaibi's praise for the novel, the article explains how the novel succeeded in reflecting women's issues in a conservative society and women's search for love despite their lives being controlled by traditional customs. Focusing on feminist issues, the journalist points out that

the young Saudi writer tells us the story of a society in which women still suffer from injustice and marginalisation. Despite women's outstanding success at work and in education, they appear to be forbidden to control their own destiny due to the influence of patriarchy. (al-Zain, 2006)

Interestingly, al-Qāsim (2008) uses similar terms in her discussion of the story of the four Riyadh girls, highlighting "the painful reality of Saudi women, the dignity of women, the

anxiety and sorrow throughout Saudi society in general” (al-Qāsim, 2008). Thus, women’s issues become the main theme in this article. Such a stance seems to reproduce the same discourse that has been used to promote the interpretation of this novel as autobiographical fiction. Similar to those of the previous journalists, this article also mentions Algosabi’s praise, stressing the novelist’s boldness and courage “since the novelist is a Saudi woman, who has been praised for her brave criticism of Saudi society, noted for its extreme conservatism” (al-Qāsim, 2008).

In these examples, it is clear that the journalists interpret the text from their personal experiences of living in Arab Islamic societies where they have culturally been trained how to deal with novels of this type. Their background knowledge of socio-cultural contexts in the Arab world leads them to predict those themes that will be understood by their Arab Islamic readership. Thus, they link the novel to women’s issues in the Arab world, using words such as ‘injustice’, ‘marginalisation’, ‘dignity’ and ‘patriarchal society’, a discourse that influences the popular reception of this novel.

### 5.3 Award-winning Saudi novels and Arab press discourse

As mentioned in chapter four, literary prizes have undoubtedly influenced the reception of the award-winning Saudi novels and the publicity surrounding them. This section focuses on how Arab journalists have dealt with these Saudi novels in terms of their interpretive assumptions. Arab journalists belong to a community that has its own set of values and norms with respect to their function and within the Arab socio-cultural contexts. As indicated in chapter four, it can be argued that Saudi novels have benefited from winning prestigious literary prizes since this has helped to resituate them, moving them from peripheral to central status within the Arab literary scene. The dynamics of this periphery-centre transition form a major strand of the Arab journalistic discourse about these award-winning Saudi novels. The perceptions of Arab journalists are heavily influenced by the notions of the cultural centre and periphery in the Arab worldview (see section 4.6.1).

Typically, when the longlists and shortlists for IPAF are announced, there is usually a heated debate surrounding the merits of the nominees until the winner is announced. Thus, coverage of these events has become part of an often-heated debate in the Saudi

and non-Saudi Arab press about Saudi novels and whether they were deserving winners of literary prizes.

### 5.3.1 Saudi press responses: challenging the boundaries between periphery and centre

Saudi journalists are embedded in the centre vs. periphery conflicts and their attitudes towards the prize-winning Saudi novels have been shaped and defined within their own region. Saudi writers and critics have claimed that the Saudi novel remained on the margins of Arabic literature for a long time as it was not seen as being deserving of critical attention, since peripheral literature is usually perceived as lacking literary quality. Thus, when Saudi novels began to win international literary prizes, Saudi journalists tended to take these events more seriously than their counterparts from elsewhere in the Arab world, highlighting their merits as award-winning novels. The Saudi press celebrated these award-winning novels in an attempt to challenge the boundaries between centre and periphery.

When three Saudi novels were placed on the longlist of nominations for IPAF in 2010, this was viewed as an opportunity for Saudi literature to reach wide audiences in the Arab world and beyond through translation (see 4.6.2). Some Saudi journalists expressed their expectations that one of the Saudi novelists would be the winner, voicing their hopes of “seeing Khal standing on the stage to receive the first IPAF to be awarded to a Gulf novelist” (al-Şirāmī, 2009). This quotation can reveal how the general lack of interest in reading Gulf literature in the Arab world has been culturally constructed as a result of the centre vs. periphery notion.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Saudi newspapers extensively celebrated Khal’s novel *Tarmī bi-sharar...* when it won the IPAF, placing it at the centre of the public debate reflecting on the changing stature of Saudi novels on the Arabic literary scene. For example, Faqīhī (2010) points out that “Khal’s win made its mark on the history of the Saudi literary scene” (Faqīhī, 2010, p. 27). This journalist then quoted some critical opinions of Khal’s novel from professional critics, observing that some Saudi critics praise Khal’s win because it “allows Saudi literature to compete with other world literature” (Faqīhī, 2010). The shared discourse that Saudi journalists produced around Khal’s novel is in many

ways representative of the notion of centre vs. periphery, since they limited their discussion of this novel to the idea that this win was an extraordinary achievement without commenting on the ‘literariness’ of the text itself. In this context, Khal’s novel has been seen as a key event since it “ended the isolation of the Gulf novel” (Zain, 2010, p. 18). In his article, Zain (2010) claims that

no Arab reader thought Khal would be the winner of the award, not because he did not deserve the prize but because the controversies raised in the Arab press might influence the decision from the jury committee. The expectation was that the committee would likely award the prize to one of the other Arab novelists from the cultural centre, i.e. an Arab country with a great novelistic heritage. (Zain, 2010, p. 18)

If we take into account the historical cultural tension between centre and periphery in the Arab world, the conventional attitude of Arab readers towards peripheral literature has been echoed consciously and unconsciously in the Arab journalists’ responses to this Saudi novel. This example has clearly been formed by this conflict as the journalist specifically celebrated Khal’s win against those novels ‘belonging to the centre’. Moreover, in order to persuade the Arab public to think of Khal’s merits as the winner, the journalist includes some professional critical opinions which are considered important evidence to validate the reception of this text as their praise can nevertheless be seen in many ways as respectable views. For instance, al-Ghadhāmī (2010) stresses that some Saudi critics “considered Khal’s win to be a personal award for [themselves]” (cited in Zain, 2010, p.18), claiming that

Khal’s importance lies primarily in the nature of the issues that he usually touches upon in his novels, and the range of skills and narrative techniques that are displayed in his works. Khal is the first, or one of the first, Saudi novelists to have represented marginalised characters in Saudi society and their issues. I think the other novelists, those who came after him, have benefited from his experience in dealing with the problematic issues of social and political life. (al-Bāzi‘ī, 2010, cited in Zain, 2010, p.18)

The journalist celebrates Khal’s win by referring to these well-known Saudi critics and their opinions about Khal’s literary merits, concluding that these literary skills are “what makes Khal the worthy winner of not only IPAF but also many other awards” (Zain, 2010, p. 18).

Within this celebratory attitude, various Saudi newspapers continued to reproduce similar discourse around this award-winning novel. For example, some journalists focused on the length of Khal's literary experience, from his first published novel to his latest award-winning attempt, confirming that he deserves to win the IPAF. These Saudi journalists express their pride at the award-winning novel, commenting that "Khal is now a Saudi hero right across the cultural and literary scene, for having won the prize that every Arab novelist hopes for" (al-Sumairī, 2010). The same point is made by Ba-wazīr (2010), who sees Khal's win as "the most important cultural event on the Saudi literary scene" (Ba-wazīr, 2010). The journalist also refers to some critical opinions confirming that Khal's win "reflects the effective contribution of the contemporary Saudi novel in the progress of the Arab novel, proving that there are now no centres or peripheries in the Arab world: everyone writes and everyone reads and we are all Arabs" (al-Hājirī, 2010, cited in Ba-wazīr, 2010).

Khal's award-winning novel was not reviewed as a literary text by Saudi journalists; instead, they framed it in their discourse as a key cultural event that accrued 'symbolic capital' for contemporary Saudi literature. From the specific point of view of this interpretive community, Khal's win was seen as "an important message for Arab readers, showcasing Saudi creativity" (al-Ṣaq'abī, 2010). The underlying assumption in these articles is that this award-winning novel brought Saudi literature from the margins of the Arab literary scene to the centre of the Arab world.

Articles on Alem's novel *Ṭawq al-ḥamām*, 2011 IPAF winner, are written in a similar vein. The Saudi press continues to celebrate this as a success not as evidence of the author's literary merits alone but also of the shift in Saudi literary status, highlighting the cultural and historical importance of this win. One Saudi newspaper starts its article off by stating "Alem's win confirms the existence of the Saudi novel, and changes the negative view of the narrative in the Kingdom, proving that there is now serious fiction coming from the Arabian Peninsula" (Alyaum, 2011), emphasising that this represents a win for all Saudi writers. As with the case of Khal, journalistic discourse does not feature details about the text or even attempt to explain the literary merits that led to this win. Most frequently Saudi journalists view Alem's win as "another accolade heaped on the Saudi novel after Khal's win last year, stressing that this award is not simply a personal

success but represents an achievement for Saudi literature in general” (al-Muzainī, 2011, cited in *Alyaum*, 2011).

This apparent shift in the historical centre vs. periphery divide that had long dominated the Arab literary scene prompts reaction from Saudi newspapers. Saudi journalists all share the same opinion of Alem’s award-winning novel, confirming that “winning the Arabic Booker Prize [IPAF] is real proof of the fact that the Saudi novel now occupies a good position on the Arabic cultural scene” (al-Ṣaq‘abī, 2011).

The main positive quality of Alem’s novel *Ṭawq al-ḥamām* is the fact that it is seen as being capable of pulling Saudi fiction in towards the centre, stressing that her novel is

not a media phenomenon, as some Arab writers have claimed, for its roots are firmly planted in Arabic literature. The latest Arabic Booker Prize [IPAF] confirms this position for the second time. When Raja Alem won this award, it represented a major triumph for the effort, perseverance and determination of all Saudi women novelists, reflecting their creative, artistic and aesthetic literature. (Sa‘īd, 2011)

This attitude can be linked to the cultural conflict between centre and periphery, which underpins the tendency to represent this award-winning novel as another attempt at redrawing the borders between centres and peripheries in the Arab world.

Some Saudi journalists regard the award to Alem’s novel as evidence that the peripheral status that Saudi novels held within Arabic literature for decades has finally disappeared. In his article, Karīrī (2011) states that “winning the Arabic Booker Prize for the second time firmly established the literary merits of the Saudi novel, as it has begun to pull the rug from under the Arabic novel from elsewhere”. In addition to being regarded as having placed Saudi literature at centre stage, Alem’s novel is also described as being culturally significant on the grounds that it proved that “novels written by women could compete with those by men, and that the Saudi novel was deserving of this award for Arabic literature” (Maḥjūb, 2011). One Saudi journalist argues that the objections raised to some award-winning Saudi novels by Arab writers were due to their over-inflated egos: “perhaps because creativity and artistic excellence have been seen as the sole domain of the centre for many years, it is difficult for someone who has enjoyed this privilege to see his monopoly brought to an end” (Maḥjūb, 2011). Once again, despite its literary significance, the qualities of Alem’s novel are not touched upon by these journalists for

whom the novel's chief significance remains its challenge to the domination of what was perceived as the cultural centre.

This attitude is also evident in Saudi journalists' responses to al-Mohaimed's win of Abu al-Qasim Ashabbi Prize, confirming that the objections to his win by some Arab writers "had happened before with Khal because Arab intellectuals have a tendency to limit Gulf civilization to oil or barren desert with camels and tents, denying any cultural achievements for Gulf novelists" ('Ubayyān, 2011). Saudi journalists consider the recognition of these Saudi novels as exciting cultural events to be celebrated for having drawn attention to the significance of Saudi literature. They ignore the fact that these texts should be read as literary works, thus, they reveal their lack of awareness concerning the function of the novel.

Similarly, articles in some of the Gulf newspapers reveal that the high literary reputation that these Saudi novels enjoy with the public does not depend on positive critical reviews of the literary merits of the texts but is based purely on the fact that they are award-winning novels. Some journalists writing in the Gulf press appear to be favourably disposed towards Khal's success, and argue that Saudi novels deserved to win the prize, stating that

It is strange that Lebanese and Egyptian writers are resentful about their exclusion from the Arabic Booker Prize [IPAF] and are so critical of the committee's performance. On the other hand, no one is affected by the exclusion of some Saudi novels even if they deserved to win the prize. This is because there is no cultural mafia backing the Arabian Gulf novelists. (al-'Anazī, 2009, p. 44)

It can be argued that some Arabian Gulf journalists share the feeling of being culturally marginalised expressed by the Saudi journalists and tend to celebrate Khal's award-winning novel for having helped to draw Gulf novels towards the literary centre. As previously noted, this discourse, exemplified by the above quotation, expresses a particular attitude towards this event that reflects the historical conflict between central and marginalised Arabic literature, the former group in this instance being represented by writers from Lebanon and Egypt in particular, as al-'Anazī (2009) argues.

A similar attitude is also evident in an article written by Thābit (2010) in an Arabian Gulf newspaper, confirming that Khal's win gave the Saudi novelists a significant boost after they had been excluded from Arabic literary prizes for a long time. His win was also particularly important since it represented the third award of this kind for Saudi writers. Thus, a Gulf novel clearly needed to win the Arabic Booker Prize because "it is a step towards the consecration of the Saudi novel, in particular, and it is also a recognition that there is a Saudi novel in the Arab literary scene" (Thābit, 2010, p. 30).

It is clear from this quotation that these journalists are heavily influenced by the ideology of centre vs. periphery and, consequently, their views reflect this notion and are not based on any analysis of the literary qualities of the text itself. However, other Arab journalists proved to be more critical of the award-winning Saudi novels, arguing that these prizes were not deserved precisely because of the short history of their literary experience, as will be discussed in the next section.

### 5.3.2 Non-Saudi Arabic press responses: Dynamics of mobilising 'symbolic capital' in the centre-periphery conflict

As discussed in the first part of this chapter, journalistic articles were not shaped by the literary merits of these Saudi novels, but rather they reflected how the ideological socio-cultural environment restricts the readings of these Saudi novels and conditions how they were presented to readers. Given this underpinning ideology, it is not surprising that Arab journalistic discourse in relation to Khal's *Tarmī bi-sharar...*, the 2010 IPAF winner, reflects this tension between centre and periphery issues in the Arab world. Discourse about the novel sees the unqualified IPAF committee as playing a major role in a conspiracy aimed at excluding the centre. For example, some Arab writers alleged that their novels had been excluded from the shortlist on geographical rather than literary criteria (al-Raya, 2010). Similarly, when the Egyptian author Gamal al-Ghitani was nominated for IPAF, he withdrew, arguing that the award did not have a clear philosophy (Addustour, 2010). This controversy deepened when one of the IPAF 2010 judges, Dr. Shereen Abu el-Naga, resigned from the committee because she objected to the voting mechanism for the award. Moreover, when the 2011 prize was jointly awarded to Achaari's *al-Qaws wa-l-farāshah* (The Arch and the Butterfly) and Alem's *Ṭawq al-ḥamām* (The Dove's Necklace), this prompted a great deal of debate amongst writers and

intellectuals concerning the reasons for this decision, with some arguing that a joint award was not possible given the differences between the novels in terms of their form and content (Addustour, 2011).

The controversy began as soon as the longlist of novels competing for the 2010 IPAF was announced. Arab newspapers featured stories about the prize that focused on controversial issues as a means of increasing reader interest and improving circulation figures. Since relatively few Arab readers are likely to be experts in literature, they usually look to what has been said about the novel to shape their own opinions. Thus, in order to persuade their readers of the relative merits of a particular novel, journalists tend to interview large numbers of Arab critics and novelists identified as experts in Arabic literature. These Arab critics have been seen as opinion makers sympathetic to Arab readers, asking them for their opinions about the IPAF prize and trying to link their responses to broader socio-cultural issues. This approach stimulates a great deal of debate about the deliberations of the committee awarding the prize and about the eventual winner.

Hence, stories about the IPAF committee become a regular part of coverage about the novel itself or the event. For instance, Bin Ḥamza (2010) wrote an article in a Lebanese newspaper, stating that this award for Khal's novel opens the door to new clashes between the literature of the centre and that of the periphery. The rest of his discussion of Khal's novel is shaped by the conflict between centre and periphery, and he asks:

Are some readers going to point to the short history of the novel in Saudi Arabia, compared with the time-honoured, multifaceted heritage of the other contenders? Perhaps the committee was swayed more by the social concerns that this novel represents as opposed to the skill and technique that a novel should demonstrate. (Bin Ḥamza, 2010, p.16)

In this article, the journalist tends to discredit the novel's entitlement to winning the prize by raising doubts about the IPAF committee members, arguing that having a Kuwaiti, Ṭālib al-Rifā'ī, as the head of the jury, and an Omani member, Saif al-Raḥbī, may have boosted Khal's chances of winning. He then justifies his attitude by stating that there had been similar objections raised about the first and second novels to win the prize "but the fact that the winners, Bahaa Taher and Youssef Ziedan, were Egyptians and the Egyptian novel has a long, distinctive history contributed to silencing objections" (Bin Ḥamza, 2010, p.16). This view reveals how the concept of periphery and centre in Arab culture

shapes attitudes towards Khal's novel as a product of the margins, meaning that Arab journalists and writers fail to accept that it deserved to win the prize. In this case, the novel's credentials are questioned by raising doubts about the objectivity of the IPAF committee members.

Ṣādiq (2010), a Palestinian writer, also expresses doubt about whether Khal's novel deserved to win since, in his opinion, it is "littered with linguistic errors and has an uninteresting plot" (Ṣādiq, 2010, p. 18). This journalist argues that *Tarmī bi-sharar...* won the prize due to its bold socio-political themes that reveal the hidden secrets of the rich palaces in Saudi Arabia but then blames the IPAF committee for nominating such an undeserving novel. Awarding the prize to Khal's novel can be viewed as the most crucial event in the history of this award due to the long-standing conflict between centre and periphery. Hence, many articles in the Arab press concerning *Tarmī bi-sharar...* focused on this controversy rather than the novel's literary merit, meaning that some journalists were aggressive in their articles.

Arab newspapers often publish rumours that there has been prior agreement about what the prize-winning novel will be. This rumour-mongering can lead to angry outbursts, as happened when Egyptian writers and critics argued that given the composition of the jury, the result was a foregone conclusion (Ṣāliḥ, 2009). In an Egyptian newspaper, the Egyptian novelist Mohammad Qandīl openly criticised what he believed to be the bias reflected in the composition of the IPAF jury:

Like any literary award, the Arabic Booker Prize has its own politics, and for that reason I expected to lose, especially since the committee includes two members from the Arabian Gulf, one Tunisian writer and one western Orientalist, who wants to learn more about Saudi society. Thus, Khal was the winner. (Qandīl, 2010)

This view concerning the credentials of the IPAF committee leads to the award being viewed as untrustworthy in the eyes of those from the literary establishment in the countries of the cultural centre. Thus, another Egyptian writer, Ibrahim Abdel Meguid (2010), advised Egyptian novelists not to accept nominating their works for the IPAF, claiming that "it is no longer a worthwhile award; therefore, Egyptian writers should not put themselves at the mercy of those committee members, who have demonstrated the lack of credibility of this prize right from the outset" (Abdel Meguid, 2010). Discourse

of this type shows how the ideological perspective of centre vs. periphery can frame reader expectations and interpretations. Individuals from within the same culture and community share common understandings about a cultural hierarchy that influences their attitudes towards literature in general which are reflected in the discourse about Khal's novel and this cultural event.

Accordingly, the Egyptian press continued to question the validity of the award of IPAF to Khal's novel. One headline in an Egyptian newspaper proclaimed, "The Arabic Booker Prize is a worthless award and should be ignored" (*al-Youm al-sabi'*, 2010), whilst the report evaluated the broader impact of this decision on the status of the contemporary Egyptian novel and its position on the Arab literary scene. In this report, some Egyptian writers openly express their anger that the prize had been awarded to Khal as a Saudi novelist, claiming that there had been "a tacit agreement that Egypt would be excluded from winning the prize this year after two consecutive wins by Egyptian novelists" (*al-Youm al-sabi'*, 2010).

This type of press coverage led to a particular surge of interest in this conflict that continued well beyond the initial announcement concerning the identity of the IPAF winner. It is likely that few of the journalists who provoked this interest had actually read Khal's novel but their writing helped to fuel the conflict between periphery and centre by circulating the conspiracy theory that there was a deliberate attempt to exclude certain novels from the prize lists. These journalists saw this event not only as a good source of news copy but also as a cultural controversy of interest to their readers, capable of stirring up strong emotions. The journalists then framed that interpretation in acceptable discourse within their interpretive community.

These journalistic examples reflect the unconscious ideology of cultural hegemony that governs their attitudes towards this novel as Arab journalists are part of their society and have been trained how to read and respond to literature in a way that is specific to their culture. Thus, coverage by Egyptian journalists that frames a novel written by a writer from the periphery as lacking sufficient literary merits to be a worthy winner of IPAF represents a fairly predictable response. It illustrates that analysis of specific instances such as Khal's award can reveal the types of deep-rooted centre-periphery conflicts and regionalist dynamics that continue to impact upon various kinds of socio-cultural issues within the Arab world.

However, analysis of articles and reviews that were written about awards presented to works by the Saudi novelists al-Mohaimed and Alem reveals evidence of a shift from the formerly rigid centre-periphery cultural dichotomy, possibly marking a more nuanced approach to this issue. Thus, an Egyptian newspaper celebrated al-Mohaimed's win of the Italian Alziator International Literary Prize 2011, noting that "This is the second win for an Arab novelist, as it was first awarded to the well-known Egyptian novelist Bahaa Taher for his novel *Love in Exile* in 2008" (al-Shorouk, 2011). This newspaper reported that al-Mohaimed's award-winning novel was described by the committee for this prize as a distinctive novel that makes innovative use of three different narratorial perspectives. However, it still unconsciously frames his work in terms of the centre vs. the margin, by noting the nationality of the first Arab writer to win this prize.

Non-Saudi Arab journalists appeared to accept Alem's IPAF win much more willingly than they had in the case of Khal, and they characterise her win as representing "not only a special achievement for Saudi literature, but also the first triumph in the Arabic Booker Prize for a novel by an Arab woman" (Muṣṭafa, 2012). Following her 2011 IPAF, Alem's groundbreaking achievement was celebrated by Arab journalists, and it was noted that "she had succeeded in breaking the male writers' monopoly of the Arabic Booker Prize" (Ismaeel, 2011). This attitude continued to shape the discourse around Alem's novel in the Arab press, with journalists repeatedly praising this novel as a deserved IPAF winner, pointing out that Alem is:

not a new Saudi novelist, but has won her place in the Arab literary arena. Saudi women continue to struggle to gain more freedom; therefore, this award should open a window of opportunity for Saudi women to have the same degree of freedom as their counterparts elsewhere in the Arab world. (al-Jizāwī, 2011)

What stands out in this discourse concerning Alem's novel is the shift from the centre vs. periphery argument regarding literary hegemony to the issue of gender and male- vs. female-authored literature. The journalists' praise for Alem's win reflects broader concerns about gender inequality in the Arab world, reflected in the relatively low numbers of women writers whose works are even nominated for literary prizes, let alone winning them.

In sharp contrast to their rejection of Khal's win, Egyptian writers and critics praised Alem's novel, acknowledging her to be a great Arab novelist and there was no

questioning of the result of the IPAF for 2011. In fact, journalists criticised the committee for jointly awarding the prize to Alem and the Moroccan novelist Achaari, arguing that she should have been the sole winner. Among those opposed to the joint award was the Egyptian critic ‘Asfour, who stated that “the Saudi novelist Raja Alem deserved to be sole recipient of the award, as she is one of the best writers in the Arab world” (*al-Watan*, 2011). Another Egyptian writer, al-Kafrāwī (2011), praised Alem for writing a distinctive novel that “deserved to win on the basis of its literary value and accomplished composition”, adding “She is the only Arab woman writer whose narrative technique is unique in terms of its poetic and symbolic language” (al-Kafrāwī, 2011).

Interestingly, Abdel Meguid, who had previously criticised the IPAF committee for excluding Egyptian novels from the longlist in 2010, appeared to change his opinion about the merits of Saudi novels, admitting that Alem’s work was “a sign of the strength of the novel in Saudi Arabia”. He continued:

After reading her novels in recent years, I realised that I was in the presence of a writer, who is confident of her ability to choose a different form of novel writing in the Arab world. Alem is a great Saudi writer who had failed to gain the appreciation that she deserved but this changed when she was awarded the IPAF, and her novel has been translated into English, German and other languages, something that points to the rich possibilities for the development of Arabic literature abroad. (Abdel Meguid, 2014)

This shift in perspective in the case of Alem’s win is based partly on the gender issue, as indicated above. However, the discourse also draws on expert opinions about the literary merits of Alem’s work, framing her as one of the best Arab writers (rather than stressing her Saudi origins). Both of these types of discourse serve to illustrate how the members of this interpretive community use their knowledge and ‘pre-reading assumptions’, to evaluate the literary worth that this Saudi novel has, influenced by the cultural context in which they and their discourse are situated.

## 5.4 Conclusion

It can be concluded that Arab journalists within their socio-cultural contexts share some common principles or rules that shape the discourse around these four Saudi novels. As has been noted, the analysis of these journalists’ communities answers the question of how Arab journalists received these novels and highlights the influence of their own

ideologies on the interpretive strategies that shape their attitudes towards literary works. For those journalists as an interpretive community, the pre-reading assumptions have significantly affected their responses to these novels. For instance, Algosaibi's praise of *Banāt al-riyāḍ* has become a 'symbolic capital' that can explain the value added to the novel because of his opinion which seems to come up in almost all critical comments on the novel.

Arab journalists' responses are built around three basic issues: the novel's reputation for dealing with controversial or taboo elements, the extent to which the text acts as social documentary and its ability to raise issues relating to the Arab socio-cultural context. This chapter has also highlighted some similarities and differences between subcommunities. For example, Saudi journalists insist that despite the novel's title, Alsanea's story about four Riyadh girls is not a true representation of life in the Saudi capital. Non-Saudi Arab journalists, on the other hand, tend to view the novel as a reflection of the reality of women's lives both in Saudi Arabia and to a certain extent elsewhere in the Arab world. This can reflect how Arab journalists situate this Saudi novel within a broader literary framework and pull it towards the centre by emphasising these links.

Within the Arab journalists' community, the discourse in the newspaper articles on these Saudi novels reflects one division into groupings on the basis of geographic location: those from the peripheral regions celebrate awards presented to Saudi novels as well-deserved victories, whilst those from the traditional cultural centres, particularly Egypt, deny the literary merits of these works. The views expressed in these articles focusing on prize-winning Saudi novels use similar discourse strategies in terms of their approaches to presenting coverage of these texts. The main interpretive question asked about these novels is whether the consecration that was conferred by the award of the prize was deserved or not. Logically, such a question can lead to only two possible answers: yes or no. Thus, the discourse about these Saudi novels is by broader ideological attitudes, conditioned by cultural hegemony. As a result, the actual contents of the novels and their literary qualities are ignored. Members of this interpretive community were divided in their responses between these two perspectives.

The following chapter will focus on the professional critical readings of these Saudi novels by Arab literary critics, who focus mainly on the text's literary merits.

## **Chapter Six**

# **The Critical reception of Saudi novels by Arab Literary Critics**

### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the reception of Saudi novels by Arab literary critics. It examines critics' responses to these novels, using the concept of the 'interpretive community' to examine their responses and to address the extent to which their readings of Saudi novels have been influenced by their membership of that community. This analysis considers the specific themes that emerge in these readings. Interpretive communities are viewed here as groups of critics who have agreed that particular aspects in a text are more significant than others. Fish (1980) argues that members of an interpretive community possess similar reading strategies and have certain shared assumptions prior to the process of reading that will influence how they interpret those texts. In other words, "these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around" (Fish, 1980, p.171).

In this chapter, Arab literary critics' responses to these Saudi novels offer a professional literary evaluation in different forms of academic literary criticism, creating different interpretive communities. In order to reach consensus, critical responses must be based on a common understanding of what the purpose of a novel is and what its message does mean. This certain knowledge is, therefore, a source of the critics' interpretive strategies, and it effectively conditions their understanding of the texts. For example, some members have seen the novel's function as enlightening rather than just entertaining; others have praised the complex expression rather than simple. 'Pre-reading' assumptions have a significant effect on critics' readings. Arab critics are particularly conscious of the literary history of the Arabic novel and its contemporary developments; they are also aware of their own socio-cultural contexts, particularly insofar as they differ from those contexts in Saudi Arabia. They also expect Saudi novels' themes to be different or similar to those novels by other Arab writers with which they are familiar. According to Fish (1980,

p.320), readers “author the text” of a novel based on previous interpretive strategies that they have employed and share with other members of the ‘interpretive community’.

This analysis explores how Arab critics, Saudi and non-Saudi, have received these novels and created different interpretive communities and subcommunities by means of their shared discourse and their interpretations of key features of these Saudi novels. Accordingly, critics of the same interpretive community can agree on the ways they interpret the same novel, not due to the fact that they are reading the same text but due to the interpretive strategies that “are finally not [their] own but have their source in a publicly available system of intelligibility” (Fish, 1980, p.332). Focusing on these communities, readings are not a matter of “correct” or “wrong” interpretation; the approach taken here is to examine the way in which they interpret Saudi novels by identifying the thematic connections that reflect how Arab cultural and intellectual contexts shape the reading act. Thus, the critical responses to these four Saudi novels have been divided into two main groups: Saudi literary critics’ responses and non-Saudi Arab literary critics’ responses. Then, each interpretive community has also been subdivided into smaller groups of critics according to their interpretive approaches.

## 6.2 Critical reception in the Saudi literary context

This section examines the responses to Saudi novels produced by Saudi literary critics. First, these critics are members of the same interpretive community as they are all Saudis and academic critics who have already been trained to be readers of literary texts. This allows them to establish themselves as interpretive authorities and distinguishes them from lay readers. Second, they proceed on the basis of certain pre-reading assumptions, namely, (a) that these texts are novels; and (b) that they are written by Saudi writers representing issues relating to their society and culture. As Fish (1980, p. 168) states, “[o]nce these decisions have been made [they are] immediately predisposed to perform certain acts, to ‘find’, by looking for, themes [...], to mark out ‘formal’ units”. Their disposition, then, to perform these activities constitutes “a set of interpretive strategies, which, when they are put into execution, become the large act of reading” (Fish, 1980, p. 168).

Saudi literary critics seem to be supportive of the new generation of writers, encouraging

them to develop their technical strategies in order to represent the effect of the developments that Saudi society has experienced. Accordingly, this analysis will examine the issues that these Saudi critics tended to focus on, viewing these Saudi novels from different perspectives that depend on the conceptual frameworks or interpretive strategies used by critics in their readings. Thus, the critical articles on these Saudi novels can be divided into two main groups: those that focus on the novel's thematic structure and its relationship with the socio-cultural reality of the Saudi Arabia; and those that focus mainly on the literariness of the text itself.

### 6.2.1 Re-presentation of socio-cultural reality

Some Saudi critics pay significant attention to place these Saudi novels in their social and cultural contexts. They tend to discuss various aspects via the novel's context, reflecting the author's view of political and socio-cultural issues as contributing to society's debates. As an example, there is a widespread interest in reading *Banāt al-riyāḍ*, and the academic work which has been published on this novel has approached the text from a number of different perspectives. Among the many critical readings which this novel has attracted, the most significant are the seven articles written by al-Ghadhāmī, one of the best known critics on the Saudi and Arabic literary scene. These were published in the cultural supplement of *Alriyadh* newspaper. In these articles, al-Ghadhāmī (2005b) has discussed the conflict that this novel caused between the traditionalists and reformists as a socio-cultural phenomenon in the Saudi literary space. He shows his understanding of the strong negative reactions which *Banāt al-riyāḍ* provoked in Saudi society by identifying the details of the cultural discourse of this novel which created such consternation. He then analyses the reasons for its rejection by some Saudi readers, believing that this is due to "the conservative nature of Saudi society, which usually tries to protect its values from anything that challenges the status quo" (al-Ghadhāmī, 2005b). For this reason, in his opinion, the publication of this novel should be viewed as an important social event, primarily because it has highlighted some of the flaws in Saudi society.

It can be clear that Cultural Criticism Theory has exercised a considerable influence on al-Ghadhāmī's analysis. He describes the novel's protagonists as archetypes of women in

a patriarchal society, arguing that “the reflection of women’s rights’ issues can be seen through the eyes of characters such as Gamrah, who suffers as a result of the traditional culture of the arranged marriage” (al-Ghadhāmī, 2005c). He also considers that the success of this novel may have been due to the criticism voiced by its heroines of the traditional ideas that belong to the dominant cultural discourse. Additionally, he links the narrative’s success to the fact that “Gamrah and Sadeem are represented as very active characters, and their thoughts regarding the impact of Saudi cultural customs on their lives are described at great length” (al-Ghadhāmī, 2005d). Al-Ghadhāmī’s reading merits careful consideration because his analysis of the novel offers an in-depth exploration of various socio-cultural phenomena, referring to a new generation of women’s writing on the Saudi literary scene.

However, some Arab and Saudi writers have criticized al-Ghadhāmī for his positive reading of *Banāt al-riyāq*<sup>36</sup>. The reason for this criticism of al-Ghadhāmī’s articles on this novel can be understood in the light of Fish’s argument that “those outside that community will be deploying a different set of interpretive strategies (interpretation cannot be withheld) and will therefore be making different marks” (Fish, 1980, p.173). Al-Ghadhāmī defended his opinion, by stating that he is no longer interested in the theory of literary criticism but in cultural criticism as this concept “is useful for exploring the hidden reasons that made this novel more appreciated than others in Saudi society” (al-Ghadhāmī, 2008). From his perspective, the interpretive strategies that he used fit the paradigm of cultural criticism and explain his decision to interpret this novel as a product of Saudi Arabia’s conservative society, highlighting that this text does not fit the patriarchal paradigm or traditional culture as the novelist resists the masculine oppression in her society. His view focuses on particular aspects of the text that will be recognized only by members of a particular interpretive community who are interested in cultural criticism<sup>37</sup> and in feminist perspectives.

Similarly to al-Ghadhāmī, a number of critics examined the cultural context reflected in

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<sup>36</sup> See for example the article written by a Saudi novelist questioning why al-Ghadhāmī had praised this novel. Available at: [http://daharchives.alhayat.com/issue\\_archive/Hayat%20KSA/2005/10/11/قرأ-هل-الحدث-في-نواعم-كلام-و-الرياض-بنات-أمام-ذاب-النقد-الرواية-الغذامي.html](http://daharchives.alhayat.com/issue_archive/Hayat%20KSA/2005/10/11/قرأ-هل-الحدث-في-نواعم-كلام-و-الرياض-بنات-أمام-ذاب-النقد-الرواية-الغذامي.html). The Egyptian writer Jamal al-Ghitani in a TV interview also criticised al-Ghadhāmī for his positive attitude to this novel. Available at: [http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=19&issueno=11492&article=569761#.Vk4P5YQ\\_Xow](http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=19&issueno=11492&article=569761#.Vk4P5YQ_Xow).

<sup>37</sup> al-Ghadhāmī (2001, pp.83-84) defines the function of cultural criticism as to explore the hidden reasons of the cultural discourse in its formal and informal patterns that made some texts more popular than other.

the text's discourse, interpreting the novel within that context. For instance, al-'Abbās (2008) focused on the love motif in *Banāt al-riyāḍ*, examining the relationship between men and women that is developed through the narratives in this novel: "*Banāt al-riyāḍ* is an attempt to examine how young Saudi men think about love" (al-'Abbās, 2008, p. 103). He also mentions that the dialectical relationship between women and a patriarchal regime is the main issue in this novel, possibly reflecting their desire to reject this traditional concept, as he explains:

This novel uses the issue of searching for love to shift our understanding of moral values and redefine the relationship between men and women, even though its protagonists are unable to obtain their own freedom and to challenge the patriarchal regime, meaning that the pressures of racism and tribal beliefs can destroy women's dreams. (al-'Abbās, 2008, p. 100)

Al-'Abbās (2008, p.105) argues that this issue has negatively impacted on the narrative discourse of the novel, leading some non-expert readers to view the novel as a direct copy of reality without sufficiently understanding its narrative intent. In his opinion, the novel depicts the affluent lifestyle of four girls looking forward to love and freedom, and according to al-'Abbās (2008, p.100) although the protagonists were portrayed as strong, daring women, they ultimately failed to confront the cultural hegemony of the traditional patriarchal regime. This reading by al-'Abbās uses cultural analysis as an interpretive strategy to offer a comprehensive reading of the novel and employs feminist terminology including 'patriarchal regime', women's liberation and 'writing through the body'. It focuses on those elements of the text that support his critical interest in exploring the narrative themes within their socio-cultural context.

Within the same critical community, al-Khālidī's (2006a) article concentrates on the contradictions in *Banāt al-riyāḍ*'s narrative discourse and the literary techniques it employs. He argues that the narrator divides the four friends into evil and good types. In his view, "this technique reveals the didactic tone of the novel, which can be read as a series of parables" (al-Khālidī, 2006a). Moreover, he believes that the protagonists are defeated by patriarchal culture, but that ultimately the omniscient narrator effectively has control over the novel's characters, shaping the narrative discourse according to her perspective, which "may lead readers to question the reality of the novel's events" (al-Khālidī, 2006b). He stresses that the very important and sensitive issue in this novel is the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia. In his view, this issue is the only scandal in

which the religious taboo has been broken, showing similarity with the cultural mainstream in the Saudi reality. The critic acknowledges that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* has become one of the most influential novels on the Saudi cultural scene. The main aim of this article is to offer a detailed analysis of the novel's discourse as a reflection of an external reality, showing how his pre-knowledge of Saudi socio-cultural contexts can produce a common interpretation for the text by analysing its narrative structure to describe the conflict between protagonists and patriarchal society.

Saudi critics also use a sociological approach to read Saudi novels. For instance, Khal's novel *Tarmī bi-sharar...* is read through the context-based criticism reflecting the relationship between the writer and his society. For example, al-Dāmin (2011) observes that in this novel, Khal "used narrative discourse to assert marginalised people's rights in their struggle against the forces of hegemony in all its forms: economic, religious, political and social, and sometimes employs elaborate symbolism, at others, realism" (al-Dāmin, 2011, p.83). She focuses on the impact of power on the powerless characters, who are oppressed by the authorities and relegated to the margins of society. The critic views the text as a product of Saudi society, where

social traditions established on the basis of names and surnames, allow the corrupt and those with money to buy everything, even bodies, souls and destinies. The polarisation of social classes into poor and rich with the decline of the middle class, completely absent from this novel, reflect the reality of Saudi society to some extent. (al-Dāmin, 2011, p.83)

A similar sociological perspective is also adopted to read al-Mohaimeed's novel *Fikhākh al-Rā'ihah*. Some Saudi critics, like al-Safar (2003), have expressed their concerns that the novel's protagonists face social marginalisation as a result of losing their original identity, whether their origins lie in the desert, in a village or in the city:

For example, Nasser's parents were unable to marry as a result of tribal prejudice, meaning that their child grew up in an orphanage without knowing them, and without a family name, a crucial issue in tribal culture. Al-Mohaimeed addresses a very sensitive issue that has never been touched upon previously in Saudi literature. He reflects in his text how people suffer in their lives from the social conventions that operate in orphanages, ministries and outside the home, even though they themselves have committed no sin. This, in turn, raises more complex existential questions, and it would have added a deeper dimension to the novel if al-Mohaimeed had delved further into the complexity of this problem. (al-Safar, 2003, p. 16)

Readings of this kind analyse the novel within the socio-cultural context in which it was written. The underlying assumptions have thus been significantly influenced by the critics' knowledge as Saudis, and they see particular circumstances that arise from the socio-cultural reality being mirrored in the text. This awareness leads them to see the novel in the following terms:

*Fikhākh al-Rā'iha* represents self-possession, lost emotion and how tribal traditions can destroy relationships between men and women, who become displaced exiles. This is the world that is portrayed in this novel. Al-Mohaimeed links lost love with the discrimination that denies the human rights of some individuals, allowing them to be enslaved and banishing them as exiles. (al-Qurashī, 2003)

By creating thematic links between these socio-cultural contexts in the text, it seems clear that these readings are produced by critics who see literature as a product of its environment and believe that novels can serve as an important means of addressing social issues. Therefore, Zayyād (2011a) observes that the content of al-Mohaimeed's novel exceeds its literary form, primarily because

it refers to enlightened thought as a means of reconfiguring of consciousness, leading to freedom from the dependency that results from the absence of individuality, fear or ignorance, and guardianship. Then, an individual is able to deny his miserable reality, using critical, transformed thinking. Thus, the novel's content represents realistic social issues, and al-Mohaimeed's protagonists address deep-rooted issues and aim to transform and renew the culture that will encourage society's progress toward the future. (Zayyād, 2011a)

Similarly, the Saudi critic al-'Aṭawī (2006) analyses the contents of *Banāt al-riyād* by using a sociological interpretation, focusing particularly on its themes. His analysis explores how the protagonists attempt to deal with social issues, such as divorce and marriage. Al-'Aṭawī (2006) defends the novel, saying that it is a realistic social novel, trying to express girls' dreams and needs, and it does not in fact challenge society, as some people think. Thus, his review provides a clear description of the thematic content and engages in an in-depth exploration of the social messages that are represented by its main characters. Al-'Aṭawī's reading prioritises the novel's content at the expense of form and tends to defend it against conservative interpretive practices that usually shape and define the meaning of the novel.

In addition, some Saudi critics engage in discussions regarding the complex relationship between reality and these contemporary Saudi novels. For instance, al-Zahrānī (2005) emphasises that the discourse of the new Saudi novel tends towards realism<sup>38</sup> in order to reflect on social developments, and to describe these transformations from various perspectives.

There are new needs, ambitions and identities for this contemporary generation that traditional culture and its authority in Saudi society are no longer in a position to express. This is due to their inability to perceive these new social transformations, or their unwillingness to recognise them. (al-Zahrānī, 2005)

In his opinion, *Banāt al-riyāḍ* can be considered to be one of these realist novels due to its tendency to discuss a range of social issues from “a new perspective without any desire to reproduce traditional culture” (al-Zahrānī, 2006). In his article, he also explores the gap between readers and the author, criticising the reactions of some Saudi readers to *Banāt al-riyāḍ*. He argues that these types of reading are not informed viewpoints on creativity or literature; rather they represent personal attacks and he views these as being dangerously naïve readings. According to Fish (1980, p. 332), the existing knowledge and culture fill readers’ brains as they “are the products of social and cultural patterns of thought”. Thus, as part of Arab culture and Saudi society, these Saudi critics have used their experiences as Arab academics in their readings and in focusing on the social issues that are represented in these novels. They share interpretive strategies in the sense that they believe that literature plays a significant function in developing society. In their critical opinions, these Saudi novels contribute to addressing some important social issues and to raising public awareness of these phenomena.

Within this context, some Saudi critics placed greater emphasis on the importance of the novel’s discourse, analysing signs, symbols, characters and setting as elements that help to create the novel’s meaning. For example, in their respective articles on al-Mohaimed’s novel, al-Wāṣil (2003), al-Dibīsī (2004) and al-Ḥimīdī (2012) all focus on elements of the novel’s discourse and bring in theoretical knowledge to analyse the major ideas in this text. These critics share some common principles regarding their modernist approach to the novel. They focus on explaining to their readers how the complexities of these texts,

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<sup>38</sup> Baldick (2008, p. 281) states that “realism is not a direct or simple reproduction of reality (a ‘slice of life’) but a system of conventions producing a lifelike illusion of some ‘real’ world outside the text”.

with their elaborate internal structures and overlapping narrative threads in diverse styles, reflect “the chaos existing within the social system and among its members, not only in Saudi society but in the Arab world in general” (al-Ḥimīdī, 2012). In his article on *Fikhākh al-Rā’iḥa*, Al-Wāṣil (2003) explores how the author utilises flashback technique to reveal the inner thoughts of the protagonist and to condemn social morals through his use of different binary oppositions such as the Arab world versus Africa, one tribe versus another, and the desert versus the city. He views the overall theme of the novel as the fact that “the protagonists face social marginalisation as a result of losing their original identity, whether their origins lie in the desert, in a village or in the city” (al-Wāṣil, 2003, p. 18). Within this interpretive community, al-Dibīsī (2004) concentrates on how the author structures the novel to show how setting directly affects the protagonists’ life, seeing their new place of abode (Riyadh) as an alternative to their places of origin. The critic praises al-Mohaimed’s awareness of place that allows him to disclose the strained relationship between human beings and the environment, explaining that

over the course of fourteen chapters, the narrative signifiers work in harmony to create a descriptive style that represents the three main structuring devices in the novel (place, smell, narrative style) together with the final structure: the narrator's vision. Place is the geographical space that conditions their identity and life style; smell increasingly becomes the primary impact on the protagonists' lives; the narrative style represents the expressive power of the novel's events. These structures are distributed throughout the narrative map, creating cohesiveness. (al-Dibīsī, 2004)

This interpretive strategy that involves grouping together these Saudi critics in such an interpretive community can also reflect how these critics interact with their environment by interpreting the novel’s meaning within the culture it belongs to. Al-Dibīsī (2004) concludes that *Fikhākh al-Rā’iḥa* is “an attempt to link the narrative setting to the daily reality of Arab societies” (al-Dibīsī, 2004).

### 6.2.2 Siting the literariness of the novels

Some Saudi critics give attention to the formal features of these Saudi novels to explore how these features work together to create the meaning of the text. Al-Ghāmdī (2005a) focuses on the formal aspects of *Banāt al-riyāḍ*, dividing his reading into four main sections: the novel's title, its structure, introductory sections of the chapters and its genre. Al-Ghāmdī (2005a) considers that the nature of the title, *Banāt al-riyāḍ*, is

problematic for two important reasons: first, the title can cause readers to think that the characters in this novel are true representatives of the Riyadh community. Second, from the outset, the title appears to locate the events of the novel in the city of Riyadh; and therefore, this choice may have been shocking to those readers who are familiar with the indeterminate settings in many of the novels written by Saudi women. Alsanea is completely conscious and aware of the problem of her novel's title as stated at the end of her novel.

Then, al-Ghāmdī (2005b) praises Alsanea for her use of the email technique to structure her novel which, in his opinion, is an important achievement that cannot be underestimated. He then explains how chapters begin with a variety of quotations from *Qur'ān*, *Hadith*, Arab and foreign passages of poetry and prose in order to link the content and themes with these quoted text, showing a good awareness of the importance of this intertextual technique. Moreover, he focuses on what genre this novel belongs to, and emphasises the novel's originality in its contrast between autobiography and fiction. In his view, different levels of autobiographical elements are found in the novel, in particular the use of a first-person narrator which is the main technique in autobiographical writing. Additionally, he points out that "the novel is full of explicit confessions that suggests clear references to the Saudi women's real life, which serve to confirm the involvement of the writer and sometimes her participation in the events of her four friends' stories" (al-Ghāmdī, 2005b).

In this context, some Saudi critics praise *Banāt al-riyāḍ*'s written style, agreeing with al-Ghāmdī (2005b) that the novel offers an innovative style of writing favoured by a new generation. For instance, al-Hājirī (2009, pp. 324-325) examines the author's technique

of using email and message strategies to write the novel, publishing her friends' stories every Friday by using Yahoo group email. He refers to the new generation of Saudi writers and readers, arguing that this intelligent style may encourage large numbers of young people and teenagers to read the novel. Al-'Adwānī (2009, p. 411) also argues that Alsanea's innovative technique takes the Saudi literary scene in a new direction, and poses a challenge to more traditional forms of writing. He also notes that this novel paves the way for a new form of literary genre that represents the impact of globalisation and new technologies on the young generation of Saudi writers.

In contrast, some Saudi critics are at odds with the above views that celebrate these modernist techniques and instead tend to critique this style of writing, claiming that these strategies negatively affected the quality of the language. For example, al-Rifā'ī (2006) indicates that *Banāt al-riyāḍ*'s main weakness is its failure to use literary language, employing instead everyday language which resembles that used in internet chat rooms. Another critic, al-Marrī (2009), agrees, claiming that this stylistic weakness seriously impacted on the quality of the work. In her study on aesthetics in the contemporary Saudi novel, she argues that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* is "just a social document recording the reality of the author's own life and reflects her limited competence in writing sophisticated prose" (al-Marrī, 2009, p.617). Al-Marri does not offer a justification from a critical perspective as to why she does not consider this text to be a novel. These two critics appear to share similar opinions concerning what constitutes a novel, and both focus in their comments on the author's use of language, deeming that the daily dialogues of real and virtual communities do not belong in this genre.

Some Saudi critics use the concept of intertextuality to read these Saudi novels. There have been different critical attitudes towards Alem's use of intertextuality in her novel, with some emphasising her originality and ability to challenge traditional Arabic literary norms. The novel's title *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* is intended to evoke Arab literary heritage as represented by the intertextual relationship between the novel's title and *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma* (The Ring of the Dove), a treatise on love written by Ibn Ḥazm from Al-Andalus. Bā-'ishin (2011) observes that *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* can be viewed as a representation of the history of Mecca, asserting that Alem

is a highly skilled writer, who is able to open up her texts to the fantastic worlds beyond the surface of the narrative. In her novel *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām*,

the existence of ancient history is linked with the future by using the technique of temporal overlaps. The rich heritage themes that she delves into are represented by modernist and post-modernist strategies; and through special knowledge of the intertextuality that can be found in the form of long extracts [are] drawn from well-known traditional Arabic books. But the innovative ways in which Alem uses these are unprecedented, and these exotic myths are brought within the familiar patterns of knowledge that reflect Alem's narrative genius. (Bā-'ishin, 2011, pp. 96-97)

Like Bā-'ishin, al-'Adwānī (2011) characterises Alem's novel as an example of marvellous realism (*al-'Ajā'ibī*) where real and surreal worlds overlap, making it suitable for in-depth critical analyses. From his perspective, al-'Adwānī (2011) argues that Alem's novel

is rich at the level of various signifiers that intersect with many different texts through intertextuality, providing appropriate grounds for applying modernist and postmodernist criticism tools. The novel also contains different levels of meaning in how it deals with current cultural and social issues. It should be noted that Alem's text not only has a magical dimension but also draws on myths, interacting with post-modern writing that appears in the novel's style. (al-'Adwānī, 2011)

This reading also maintains that Alem's approach allows her to raise significant questions that would be difficult to deal with in realist writing. Moreover, by making references to various historical texts in her novel, she enables readers to evoke the original texts and reread them in the light of this new text.

Zayyād (2011b) uses similar interpretive strategies to analyse Alem's novel *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām*. The critic focuses on the narrative signifiers to interpret messages in the novel and gain a deeper understanding of its structure. He argues that

the novel is based on multiple signifiers and symbols, representing the contradictions between the younger generation (who live in a different culture and time, creating alternative interpretations of dreams to make their own vision of the world) and the dominant traditional reality that people used to live in. (Zayyād, 2011b)

This narrative technique, in his opinion, means the novel is constructed of multiple overlapping levels of narrative, creating many stories rather than just one story. According to this critic, Alem's novel represents

a web of conflicting relationships between various opposing stances that protagonists adopt. This conflict creates constantly strained relations and contrasts between poverty and wealth, integrity and depravity, male and female, old and new, clarity and concealment, interior and exterior, narrow and wide, and religion and life. (Zayyād, 2011b)

In another article, Zayyād (2011c) asserts that *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* can “represent the crisis of human existence and reality, which can be understood by analysing [the novel’s] narrative connotations” (Zayyād, 2011c).

These positive interpretations of Alem’s novel are shared by Saudi critics, who praise Alem for her distinctive and varied narrative style and her high levels of linguistic and technical ability. There was general agreement by Saudi critics on her mode of writing’s uniqueness. Thus, Alem has often been described as “a great writer in every sense: her writing style, the characters in her novels, her language that makes her texts different from other Saudi novels” (al-Ghadhāmī, 2009, cited in al-Sumairī, 2009, p.25). However, references to Alem usually demonstrate the belief that the implied readership is limited to elitist readers, rather than other readers, emphasising the difficulties readers face when approaching her texts. Precisely for that reason, some Saudi critics claim that the use of complex intertextuality in her work has influenced Alem’s readership, “creating a kind of agreement on the difficulty of Alem’s writing and leading to the lack of general readership as her novels often need specialist knowledge to grasp the meaning of the text” (al-‘Abbās, 2009, cited in al-Sumairī, 2009, p. 127).

Within this critical framework, al-Qurashī (2009, p. 353) views *Banāt al-riyāḍ* as a juxtaposition of different texts, agreeing that the author’s use of email creates a new literary form by introducing interactivity for readers. He then identifies three types of juxtaposition in this text: firstly, literary texts at the beginning of each chapter; secondly, the narrator’s comments on the weekly emails; and finally, the narrative of her friends’ stories. These critical responses, which use modern and post-modern interpretive strategies, share the idea that the third millennium generation represents a new phase in the development of the Saudi novel in terms of its themes and its influence upon Saudi society.

According to Fish (1980, p. 340), the interpretive disagreement that divides readers depends on their different assumptions about the nature of literature, about the goals of literary reading and about the nature of the literary critics' function. Thus, what is seen by one group of critics as a weakness is seen by the other as a strength. These differences may be due to their different interpretive strategies used in evaluating the text and their cultural intellectual allegiances (e.g., modernist vs. traditionalist) and the interpretive assumptions that they have used to produce their different decisions. Closely related to this is what can be described as the pre-reading assumptions that Saudi critics held before reading the novel. Their prior knowledge of the genre and their conservative or open-minded perspectives can affect the interpretation, especially since the new generation of Saudi writers tends to break some links with previous conventions. These different perspectives create variables and interactions on the Saudi cultural scene, which have themselves contributed towards attracting readers to these novels.

### 6.3 Critical reception by non-Saudi Arab literary critics

Literary critics, as Fish described them, are intended readers “whose education, opinions, concerns, linguistic competences, and so on make [them] capable of having the experience the author wished to provide” (Fish, 1980, pp.160-161). Accordingly, these readers are able to make successful decisions that “are precisely the shape, because they are the content, of the reader’s activities” (Fish, 1980, p.161). Influenced by aspects of Saudi politics, society, history, and culture, the novels in this study address themes that hold a special appeal for critics in the Arab world and beyond, such as love, sexuality, freedom, marginalisation, identity crisis and the dynamics of politics and authority. These themes are then reflected in various sites of meaning-making by interpretive groups. Analysis of the following articles written by non-Saudi Arab literary critics highlight in particular the key themes and issues from these novels that drew most attention from these Arab critics.

#### 6.3.1 Identity crisis

The issue of identity has become one of the main themes in articles written by non-Saudi Arab literary critics. The search for identity in Saudi novels often hinges on the problems faced by protagonists caught up in the clash between opposing world views such as Liberal vs. Conservative or Tradition vs. Modernity. Some Arab critics focus on this

theme when reading Saudi novels such as al-Mohaimed's *Fikhākh al-Rā'iḥah* and Alsanea's *Banāt al-riyād*.

Al-Mohaimed's work discusses important socio-cultural issues including the status of the founding in a society that is dominated by racism, tribalism, slavery and the conflict between nomadic and urban lifestyles. Identity crisis, in particular, seems to have attracted attention from readers who focus on how the search for identity has significantly impacted on the characters' lives throughout the novel. Key phrases from readings of *Fikhākh al-Rā'iḥa* by Arab critics show the extent to which they are drawn to this issue when reading a Saudi novel. For example, Naṣṣār (2003) describes how the characters in al-Mohaimed's novel have completely lost touch with their own society because of the identity crisis they have experienced. In this novel, the critic points out, Saudi society is represented as a tribal society that still follows traditional habits despite modernity and economic development; it is this clash between tradition and modernity that causes the identity crisis that is central to the narrative. Naṣṣār also explains that the protagonists have "become exiled from their tribes due to the cruelty of traditions, which causes them to lose their sense of belonging within this primitive tribal society" (Naṣṣār, 2003).

In this context, the concepts of *identity* and *familiarity* are also associated with the meaning of *belonging* in a way that reveals how the socio-economic developments in Saudi Arabia affect people and social identity. Nūr al-dīn (2005) addresses this issue in his reading of *Fikhākh al-Rā'iḥa*, highlighting that this struggle is reflected in some of the characters in the novel:

when they [the characters] find that their cities are serviced by strangers, mostly from Asia or Egypt, this gives the novel a sense of exoticism, the feeling that they are living outside of their own reality with an identity that is not their true one. (Nūr al-dīn, 2005)

In these readings, critics in this community tend to adopt what might be termed a cultural criticism approach, drawing parallels between the identity crisis suffered by Saudi society due to this clash between modernity and globalisation and the experiences of their own Arab/Islamic societies. These readers appear to be heavily influenced by their shared experiences of Arab/Islamic culture, their backgrounds and their reading experiences, leading to common interpretations. Fish (1980, p.161) argues that "to describe that

experience is therefore to describe the reader's efforts at understanding, and to describe the reader's efforts at understanding is to describe his realization (in two senses) of an author's intention". Thus, literary critics here have identified al-Mohaimed's novel as an example that reflects their assumptions about the themes of Arab novels. Their knowledge of cultural and social issues in the Arab world, including globalisation, modernity, post-colonisation, and the technological revolution affect their interpretation of Saudi novels.

In *Banāt al-riyāḍ*, the issue of identity crisis is also one of the key concerns of Arab critics. The conflict between the female protagonists and the traditions of Saudi society as well as the influence of Western culture and liberalism have attracted some critics. Maṣṣūr (2010) focuses on the gendered identity crisis represented by the novel's female protagonists, and her interest in this issue means that she reads the text in light of the clash between personal values and Western values and how this clash affects Arab women's identity. She argues that:

In her novel, Alsanea raises the issue of Arab female identity from contrasting, but complementary perspectives. The first of these relates to gendered identity, the second to the issues of cultural identity that challenge Arab women, who find themselves caught between their own conservative culture and Western culture. In *Banāt al-riyāḍ*, the author's writing accurately reflects the close relationship between globalisation and Saudi women, and Arab women in general. For example, using online chat, Yahoo, Microsoft tools and ICQ can shape women's thoughts and affect their opinions toward the world. (Maṣṣūr, 2010)

Again, this is also a good example of the critics' tendency to compare Saudi cultural issues with those of other Arab countries, revealing how they interpret the novels' content in terms of the cultural contexts to which they belong.

Both novels have been read as explicit references to and engagement with identity crisis, being one of their key themes. These nuanced analyses examine how the protagonists engage with their society, describing their suffering as a result of identity crisis within the fictional reality of the novel. At the same time, they also represent the contemporary identity crisis occurring throughout the Arab world. As members of the same 'interpretive community', these critics, who are particularly interested in the modernist movement in the Arab world, seem to have shared the same interpretive strategies that were used to analyse the themes that fascinated them prior to the act of reading.

### 6.3.2 Politics and citizenship

Power and authority is another issue in Saudi novels that attracted the interest of Arab critics. A number of Arab literary critics maintain that Khal's novel *Tarmī bi-sharar...* can be read as a political novel reflecting the issue of the complex relationship between citizens and authority. In this novel, Khal challenges a common taboo in the Arab world by discussing how those in authority use their power to humiliate their subordinates, an issue that is repeatedly mentioned in the reviews penned by Arab critics. Some note that the author uses the stark contrast between life inside and outside the Palace (the setting for the novel) to show how the troubled protagonist is subject to the force of power. In this context, 'Abdulhādī (2013) analyses Khal's keen interest in how power and subordination mirrors the duality of good and evil and influences the text's events. In his article, he argues:

The Palace is Paradise, the very antithesis of Hell. Paradise usually means beauty, love and goodness, but here it has become a site of contradictions since evil, pain and cruelty are to be found within its confines, encouraged by the owner of the Palace, the evil ruler. For those who try to enter Paradise, it is the latter elements that have the strongest impact. ('Abdulhādī, 2013)

This reading reflects the fact that this novel can be read as a comment on political issues in those Arab countries that suffered from dictatorial political regimes and experienced familiar struggle in the Arab politics. In his reading, 'Abdulhādī (2013) has repeatedly observed that he felt the sufferings and concerns of the novel's protagonists were likely to be similar to those of its readers. It then becomes evident in this interpretation that readers' prior experiences in multiple social and cultural contexts can be reflected in their readings.

Similarly, al-Mu'inī (2010) discusses the links made in the novel between power and moral corruption and how this leads to the enslavement of the poor: "The main issue in Khal's novel is the fact that corruption leads to slavery, when man makes a deal with the devil in order to enter paradise" (al-Mu'inī, 2010). al-Mu'inī also sees that Khal's novel reveals the social contradictions, the conflict between citizens and authority, whilst also presenting the struggle between slum and palace, hell and paradise, and poverty and wealth. Corruption here is liable to be interpreted by literary critics as reflecting the reality

in many Arab countries, and they often point out that the spread of corruption, poverty and unemployment are the main reasons for Arab revolutions.

This interpretation is also supported by other critics, who allude to this issue in their reviews, stating that Khal's novel is built on the contrast between wealthy politicians and businessmen and those who are marginalised. For example, al-Dādīsī (2013) concentrates on how the poor fisherfolk, who make their monotonous living from the sea, suffer as a result of the hypocrisy and abuse of power that is imposed by the owner of the palace. Al-Dādīsī demonstrates that Khal highlights a vital issue in the Arab world, stating that "power, hegemony and money [are] often used by the dominant class to control various sectors of private and public life" (al-Dādīsī, 2013). A number of Arab critics agree that the palace is the central protagonist in the novel since it participates in all the events. For example, al-Dādīsī (2013), Naṣṣār (2010, p.6) and al-Muḥsin (2010a), to name but a few, state that the palace plays a key role in the novel's narrative discourse as a symbol of authority and power.

According to al-Dulaimī (2013), this novel represents two parallel worlds: "an old slum and a luxurious palace [...] exposes the gap between the upper classes and the lower classes: the differences between wealthy and poor" (al-Dulaimī, 2013, p. 09). al-Muḥsin (2010a) also identifies this political issue as being the main concern of Khal's novel, emphasising that the owner of the palace forced marginalised people to become his subordinates in the power hierarchy. According to al-Muḥsin, *Tarmī bi-sharar...* indicates the significance of socio-political issues rooted in the Arab countries as a result of this power imbalance. Within this context, al-Sāwrī (2013) emphasises how Khal's novel reveals how the corruption of values and morals in all the social classes is the damaging consequences of money and power. He argues that *Tarmī bi-sharar...* addresses "this phenomenon to expose all kinds of corruption, intrigue, revenge and moral decadence in Saudi society" (al-Sāwrī, 2013, p. 20). Hence, we can read between the lines how a shared cultural background for Arab critics shapes their interpretation, as this reading demonstrates that these socio-political issues have both a national and universal dimension, since characters are seen on the one hand to represent the victims of marginalisation in Saudi society whilst on the other, the novel is read as a critique of the political dynamics in the Arab world as a whole.

It seems that the critical focus in this interpretive community has tended to centre on the political themes that Gohar (2012) expresses in his analysis of *Tarmī bi-sharar...*, not just regarding the Saudi society but also in relation to socio-cultural issues in the Gulf States. He maintains that the central matter of this novel is the theme of power and authority, stressing that

the novel exposes the inner world of the palace reflecting the destiny of those who are fated to become its puppets and victims. Khal's explosive novel condemns the corruption and immorality of the dwellers of palaces who turn their backs on the socio-economic problems of the surrounding poor neighbourhoods. Obviously, the grotesque satire of power and authority is the novel's basic motif. (Gohar, 2012, p. 24)<sup>39</sup>

These readings reflect a large measure of agreement on the fact that power and authority is the main theme of this novel. This point of view is also supported by the author himself, who confirms that Arab societies have not been liberated from the kind of dominant authority that causes conflict between citizens and power, and in turn leads those in authority to tend to repress any activities daring to threaten their power (Khal, 2010b). This recurring issue is also reflected in the title of some Arabic newspaper reviews, for example, "*Tarmī bi-sharar...* by Abdo Khal: Condemnation of the World of Absolute Power" (Addustour, 2010).

All of the representative comments in the extracts from the reviews reproduced above illustrate how these critics as an interpretive group attempt to shape the interpretation of the novel by paying close attention to the central dynamic issue that is explored in Khal's novel, creating a single interpretive community that share the same set of strategies to interpret this text. There is agreement in the sense that most of the reviews of the novel focused on its political aspect, identifying the key theme of Khal's text as the corrupting effects of money and power. These critical reactions to this novel can also be linked to the suggestion made by al-Rifā'ī, the Chair of Judges of the IPAF, who described Khal's novel as a political text that "is a brilliant exploration of the relationship between the individual and the state" (al-Rifā'ī, 2010). Thus, this issue stays in readers' minds and they frequently circulate it to each other as a shared interpretation in their readings, reinforcing their position on the novel's main issue that they frequently produce due to

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<sup>39</sup> This article was already written in English.

their shared interest in a cultural criticism approach.

### 6.3.3 Sex and romance

Fish (1980, p.169) notes that “a reader other than myself who, [...] puts into execution a different set of interpretive strategies will perform a different succession of interpretive acts”, and it is clear that a different set of assumptions were used to interpret Khal’s novel in the case of the following reading:

The theme of sex is an important element in *Tarmī bi-sharar*.... The novel criticises sensitive issues in Saudi society, including the exploitation of women, the relationship between virility, sexual prowess and masculinity. In this novel, sex has destroyed the souls of those who fall in love, bringing only death. The narrator thinks that this sex drive is the main reason for the dramatic increase in population in his neighbourhood; men are proud of polygamy. This theme can be considered to be a critique of a society based on a culture of sex, lust, and desire that is often disguised under other names. (Naṣṣār, 2010, p.6)

Although most critics deal with Khal’s text as a political novel, focusing on the conflict between citizens and authority, this reading is an example of another interpretive community that applies different critical perspectives and approaches to produce a different interpretation of the novel. In this case “a new set of questions based on new assumptions must be formulated” (Fish 1980, p.149) and accordingly, this critic’s methods produce a reading that focuses on the theme of sex in Saudi society and how the novel addresses this sensitive issue in such a conservative culture.

According to al-Shāwī (2009), works that sensationalise sex and romance hold the reader’s interest in the Arab world and this seems to be the case in reviews of Saudi novels since the twin issues of love and sexual taboos consistently appear in review articles about Saudi novels in the Arab press. For example, in the case of *Banāt al-riyād*, factors such as daring themes and breaking taboos were one of the main reasons for its popularity because writing on these issues is still prohibited in many Arab countries.

In this context, some Arab critics focus on the erotic nature of *Banāt al-riyād*, emphasising that it was only its bold themes that led to its popularity. Several of the critiques indicated that this issue was the reason for its widespread reception, such as this

one by ‘Asfour:

Why has *Banāt al-riyāḍ* become so well known? The first thing that strikes me is that it was written for a young audience, those who used to read Nizar Qabbani and his ilk in terms of poets and novelists. They usually read for entertainment, and are not looking for a novel that offers an in-depth analysis of social problems. This novel tries to break the silence, and satisfy readers’ curiosity about Saudi society which seems strange, closed, authoritarian and repressive. (‘Asfour, 2010, p.10)

Al-Nābī (2014) agrees with this point of view about *Banāt al-riyāḍ*’s popularity, commenting that “since this novel was published in 2005 it has provoked various reactions due to the taboos that were exposed by its problematic characters” (al-Nābī, 2014). Similarly, another reading claims that the discourse around this novel often focuses on exploration of thematic relevance of Otherness and difference, noting that “*Banāt al-riyāḍ* reveals a world that was a mystery for us [...] represents a tale of a duplicitous society” (Anwar, 2011). These examples reveal that the critics share similar ideas about this novel, explaining that its fame may be due to the nature of its romantic theme, sexual taboo and its daring expression. They also refer to an important issue related to the influence of pre-reading on their interpretation as an interpretive group of Arab literary critics, namely, they clearly share an understanding that writing about such issues is bold in the conservative context of Saudi society. As Fish (1980) indicates, the influence of pre-reading can shape the reading process. This pre-reading can be said to include readers’ assumptions about the writer or the novel, their expectations about the novel’s themes, their knowledge of the contexts surrounding this novel and so on, which will be addressed amongst different interpretive communities.

Other critical reviews of Saudi novels deal with sexual issues and refer to writers’ boldness in addressing such issues within a conservative society; they also bring to mind freedom and censorship issues in that they are related to this context. Sample reviews referring to these social and cultural issues in Saudi novels are presented in the following critical analyses:

*Banāt al-riyāḍ* does not discuss sexual relations in detail, but it deals with this issue with great clarity, reflecting her understanding of the vital importance of addressing this issue whilst not becoming involved in direct description. At the same time, the sensitivity of this topic in a conservative society has led the author to be cautious about addressing

sexual themes in the novel. Despite her boldness in discussing contemporary relationships, she did not have the courage to deal with sexual relations using clear and explicit language. (al-Dulaimī, 2016)

*Banāt al-riyāḍ* highlights some of the major social issues that have often been rejected by Islamic societies, such as homosexuality. Although the writer does not emphasise this issue, she does refer to it in Nuri's story, noting how he was nicknamed Nuwayyer<sup>40</sup> by his neighbours. (al-Dādīsī, 2015)

These critics show awareness of the techniques of self-censorship that Saudi writers usually apply to avoid any conflict with their society. Whilst it is true that censorship is a shared problem in the Arab world, it varies according to the socio-political conditions in each country. These critics as an interpretive community argue that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* tries to address sexual issues as one of the taboos in Saudi society but merely touches the surface of the issue without any in-depth discussion. The influence of their prior knowledge of Saudi society on these readings has clearly shaped the interpretive strategies used by these critics, as has already been discussed in chapters three and four.

As indicated in these critical reviews, issues of love and sex are used by Saudi novelists to criticise the hypocrisy that results from the clash between attempting to behave in a liberated way in a conservative society. Some critics refer to this social conflict between tradition and modernity as well as the effect of globalisation on Saudi society as being the main reasons for the emergence of a new generation of Saudi novelists “who tend to break taboos by presenting explicit descriptions or flaunting sexual scenes (pornography), intended to challenge the censorship, and for some of them this has become the main aim in writing a novel” (Al-Hājirī, 2009, p. 193). Thus, it seems to me that there is clearly an agreement on one point between these readings by non-Saudi Arab critics and those of Saudi critics presented in section 6.2, namely, that the aim of the new generation of Saudi authors is to challenge the traditional cultural hegemony.

Based on Fish's (1980) concept of ‘interpretive community’, these Arab critics are bound by their common experiences of Arab/Islamic culture and critical practices; this situation inherently creates a group of readers who have similar cultural experiences and who are, therefore, going to interpret these texts in a similar way. In their critical responses, they

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<sup>40</sup> This is a reference to the fact that to show their opinion concerning the character's sexual orientation, Nuri's neighbours refer to him using a female name, a common practice amongst conservative Saudis that not only marks their disapproval of homosexuality but also serves to ridicule an individual.

adopt similar strategies, paying particular attention to the author's use of romantic and sexual issues and reading these texts as fairly successful attempts to write against the censorship. According to Yehia, this is a persistent problem in the Middle East "just like many other problems such as domestic violence, poverty, lack of human rights, illiteracy, unemployment, and suppression of freedoms" (Yehia, 2007, p. 4). These critics belong to the Arabic cultural context; their understanding of these social constraints and of taboo subjects in the Arab world, namely sex, religion and politics, affects their interpretation. They represent these cultural issues in Saudi novels as significant features that reveal the contradictions within conservative Islamic societies.

#### 6.3.4 The role of the feminine

The fact that the novel *Banāt al-riyāḍ* was written by a young female author and focuses largely on four girls searching for love, was heavily promoted by the media and accounted at least in part for its popularity and sales. For instance, Wāzin (2006) stresses this point when he argues that Alsanea's novel is a unique text in terms of its "feminine character", not only because its author is a young Saudi woman, but also because it engages with the world of women, revealing their secrets and addressing the social issues they face. He then praises Alsanea, stating that she deserved all her media success and being a best-selling Arab author. Wāzin also argues that her novel opened the door for a new generation of young Saudi novelists who began writing novels that revealed the political dynamics of their conservative culture, as a result of Alsanea's boldness in challenging taboos. He concludes his article by asking "Can we describe this feminist phenomenon in Saudi novels as a 'fleeting fashion' or does this mark the start of a new era in novel writing in Saudi Arabia?" (Wāzin, 2006).

It should be noted that Wāzin first wrote about *Banāt al-riyāḍ* in 2005, being one of the first critics to celebrate the publication of the novel. In that article he expressed his admiration for *Banāt al-riyāḍ* as a beautiful novel, in which characters and events are cleverly drawn using a new technique. He also commented that the novel explored the tragedies faced by four girls who were victims in a conservative society. His reading clearly positively influenced the reception of this novel, promoting its widespread readership since analysis of other critical responses to Alsanea's work contain references

to Wāzin's reading of the novel and reflect multiple perspectives and modes of his influence on their interpretations. This, for example, 'Asfour (2010) points out that Wāzin's article on *Banāt al-riyāḍ* aroused his curiosity and attracted him to read the novel. The same point is made somewhat more critically by another reader who also read this novel as a result of Wāzin's view, but describes his disappointment, claiming that he does "not think that Wāzin had read the novel and cannot understand the reason for celebrating it" (al-Yāsiri, 2005). These examples highlight the fact that the role of the critic is an important one since they are opinion-makers who not only interpret the text but can also influence how it is received. These examples also illustrate how prior assumptions held by readers can create certain expectations of the novel which that affect their interpretation of the work.

Although Wāzin's original article encouraged other readers to read *Banāt al-riyāḍ*, he later changed his view of this work in another article in which he compares Alsanea's novel with that of Alem and notes that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* lacks structure and "needs to be more coherent in order to avoid repetition and some narrative weaknesses" (Wāzin, 2007, p. 17). This change of opinion may be due to his having broadened his knowledge and experience of reading Saudi novels since he states that he has read other Arab critics' views of *Banāt al-riyāḍ* and agrees with their critiques. Wāzin (2007) also notes that the French translation of the novel did not receive favourable reviews from French critics, perhaps because they thought *Banat al-Riyadh* lacked the literary qualities that would make it worth writing about. This gives a clear reason for Wāzin's revision of his earlier opinion of this novel. This suggests that is necessary to take into consideration the effect of the media coverage concerning *Banāt al-riyāḍ*'s publication and the controversy that it created in Saudi society, since these could be said to constitute pre-reading assumptions held by Arab critics writing about this novel.

The issue of gender inequality or women's rights was taken up by some Arab critics in their readings of Saudi novels, creating a different interpretive community. In their articles, they focus on the female characters in order to explore the socio-cultural contexts affecting women's lives in Saudi society. For example, some critical attention in readings has been given to the role of women in Khal's novel *Tarmī bi-sharar...* who are represented as being oppressed and marginalised:

In patriarchal society, the stereotyped image of women must be

presented. While some women in this novel were drawn as colourful female characters, over forty of the women mentioned in the novel were mostly negative personalities, powerless individuals whether they are forced to live either inside or outside the palace. (al-Dādīsī, 2013)

As mentioned earlier in this section, Khal's novel can be interpreted completely differently when readers adopt different reading strategies. Whilst some interpretive communities focus on political and sexual issues in the novel, other readers interpret this novel from a feminist perspective meaning that they are interested in gender inequality within the work and how patriarchal society discriminates against women, as is evident in Naṣṣār's (2010, p. 6) reading:

Although the narrator represents a negative image of exploitation of both women and men, he analyses the nature of this relationship in a way that shows his sympathies lie with the female victims. But there seem to be very few of the novel's characters that deserve his sympathy. Thus, his contempt for women is shown through the various characters that have fallen for the tricks of the palace's owner. Indeed, even his own mother and aunt are not viewed in a positive light.

Some Arab critics claim to have found different kinds of gender inequality appearing in these Saudi novels and they address how this issue influences readers' expectations of these novels. For example, Ṣāliḥ (2006) considers that the image of women and their rights as presented in *Banāt al-riyāḍ* offers a further insight into women's lives in a conservative society. He concentrates on the relationship between men and women in terms of the influence of traditional culture on the new Arabian Gulf generation, who tend to challenge backward-looking traditions. Focusing on this issue, he argues:

The image of Gulf girls, especially in the largest of the Gulf States, presents them as stereotypical victims. In a conservative society, girls do not have the right to leave the house; they have no rights at all, especially with regard to their choice of husband, who is usually chosen by the family; he also has no opportunity to choose his wife, but instead his mother decides on a suitable bride. A mother, who was in turn the victim of another woman who married a man about whom she knew nothing before he became her husband and the father of her children. Despite this, she reproduced the same social injustice against her son and his potential wife. This attitude might be due to a sense of revenge in her unconscious against the social system that discriminated against her. This is not real revenge, but it is still a fittingly accurate description of such behaviour, since in fact the victim in this process is her son and the girl who might become his wife. (Ṣāliḥ, 2006)

In considering how this reader has received this novel, Fish's (1980, p.152) idea that readers come to the text with certain expectations is pertinent and he argues that "context is experiential, and it is within its contours and constraints that significances are established (both in the act of reading and in the analysis of that act)". Arab critics share cultural contexts with Saudis; they have read or heard about the restrictions faced by women in Saudi society either within the context of the family or in the public sphere. Thus, this prior knowledge can create particular expectations of Saudi novels written by women, which are then reflected in their readings. In his reading, for example, Ṣāliḥ focuses on issues that satisfy his horizon of expectations, using a feminist approach to analyse the stereotypical images of women who often seem victims of patriarchal society.

Al-Dādīsī (2015) adopts similar interpretive strategies in his reading, stating that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* in some respects substantiates the notion of Saudi society masculinity. He refers to the limitation of women's freedom that, in his view, "seems to reflect that Saudi girls feel themselves inside one big prison, that deprives them of what girls are allowed to do everywhere else in the rest of the world" (al-Dādīsī, 2015). In his article, al-Dādīsī pays close attention to the women's issues represented in the novel, including the suffering of divorced women living in a conservative society (represented by Gamrah's story), the problematic relationship between men and women (represented by Sadeem's story) and the racist traditions of choosing a partner (reflected in Michelle's story). He believes that these issues represent major social and cultural challenges for youth in all Gulf States, where a new generation tends to rebel against the dominant culture. Again, this critical reading sees Saudi novels as not only representing a narrative that depicts social issues as more national but also as offering a space to discuss issues that are common in other Arab societies.

ʿAsfour (2010) underlines that this novel topped the list of best-selling novels throughout the Arab world, pointing out that:

The alien world of *Banāt al-riyāḍ* seems intended to satisfy the curiosity of Arab readers, of taking into account their desire to know about the hidden world of young women who are repressed and oppressed in Saudi society. And who has not imagined these girls dancing out of the view of men at weddings in Saudi Arabia, or wanted to know what girls in Riyadh get up to when they meet [...] This scene is certain to intrigue thousands of readers. (ʿAsfour, 2010, p. 10)

Although ‘Asfour’s reading does not particularly focus on gender inequality, it can be seen to confirm how readers’ expectations of the novel can shape their reading process. Arab literary critics, who have already read various novels written by Saudi women, have become more familiar with the contexts surrounding these texts as well as the themes that are frequently discussed in their literary works. Hence, this pre-reading assumption can create a specific horizon of expectations that may be shared by members of an interpretive community shaping their readings of the text.

The issue of gender inequality is also discussed in some critical readings of Alem’s novel *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām*, analysing how women’s issues are represented in the text. Al-Khazī (2012) maintains that the novel deals with the gendered issues that women face both in Saudi society and more generally in the Arab world (al-Khazī, 2012). Al-Khazī (2012) argues that as a woman writer, Alem writes about this issue as the result of social and cultural discrimination:

Society plays an influential role in shaping the presence of women in this narrative, and bears the sole responsibility for all the problems and conditions that women often face. The novel’s narrative discourse does not blame men, as might be expected in women’s novels, but instead it accuses society as a whole of being responsible for these women’s issues. In the novel, Abu Alroos alleyway in Mecca [where the murders committed in the novel take place] serves as a symbol of this society since it has been the main cause of these problematic social attitudes towards women. (al-Khazī, 2012)

Similarly, another critic considers that Alem’s novel, particularly its narrative discourse, serves to condemn the patriarchal social discourse that discriminates against women. This reading views the murder in this novel as:

an important symbolic representation of women’s isolation from society, since it ends their presence and makes them into the myth demanded by men. This attitude restricts men and women from expressing their love, preventing communication between them within the city as a space in which they are able to move freely (al-Muḥsin, 2010b).

Al-Muḥsin also indicates that the dove in this novel is frequently presented as symbolising women in the city of Mecca, representing female oppression and lost identity. This interpretation also draws on the feminist perspectives favoured by other critics who focus

on this topic in their textual readings.

Thus, it is clear that even though some of these Saudi novels are considered technically weak by critics from elsewhere in the Arab world. The fact that they have women's issues and social discrimination as significant themes attracts them to these works, and highlights that different interpretive communities will have their expectations shaped by a feminist ideology. In these readings one can find constant references to the lack of equality that Arab women generally face within society, and analysis highlights the common social and cultural issues these writers share in their novels. Al-Khāzin (2006), for example, suggests that the discrimination portrayed in *Banāt al-riyāḍ* occurs not only in Saudi Arabia but against women throughout the Arab world, arguing that

among the four girls in *Banāt al-riyāḍ*, Lamis is the only one who has a happy ending; perhaps Alsanea did not intend this, but I found the ratio one in four is fairly close to the fate of Arab women of all nationalities.

(Al-Khāzin, 2006, p. 23)

Readers who are familiar with Arab culture can find many examples of this form of gender inequality that is the result of misinterpretation of Islamic texts by ultraconservative Muslims, texts that in fact were intended to support justice and equality. Thus, in their feminist readings of Saudi novels, Arab critics draw attention to the effects of patriarchy in Arab societies, Saudi society in particular, and the influence of social injustice on women.

### 6.3.5 Race and class issues

Other critics are interested in the issues of discrimination, alienation and inequality in the discourse of Saudi novels. They point, for example, to the fact that racism is a serious issue in the Arab world. This is often the result of a set of commonly held beliefs and values that govern people's lives without them realising that these can oppress others, who become the victims of these cultural traditions. Various critical readings of Saudi novels discuss different kinds of social issues, including tribal traditions of revenge and honour, discrimination on the grounds of genealogy and contempt for those who work in certain professions and crafts. The influence of racism on the characters in the Saudi novels investigated here is frequently mentioned in reviews by Arab critics. The following

comments found in reader reviews of al-Mohaimed's *Fikhākh al-Rā'iha* are illustrative of such views, beginning with Rafa'iyah:

Al-Mohaimed focuses on the conflict between wolf and human, or rather man's struggle to survive. The most striking aspects of this novel is that marginalised characters become prey for the wolves and are victims of powerful racism, causing them to become helpless slaves. (Rafā'iyah, 2003, p. 18)

This quote confirms that the issue of 'racism' has been raised by al-Mohaimed in his novel, offering more detailed observations of the traditional hegemony in Saudi society. The cultural background of the marginalised characters in this novel is often mentioned in critical readings that refer to the tribal ideology, which underpins many racist issues in Arab societies. This idea is highlighted by Biṭār (2003) in his analysis of *Fikhākh al-Rā'iha*, when he argues

Al-Mohaimed, in his novel, criticises tribal customs that lead to the expulsion of members, that provoke fear of rejection for trivial reasons, and lead them to renounce those who fall in love. In this novel, Al-Mohaimed represents the cruel treatment suffered by characters in two connecting narrative strands as well as the related story of a twenty-year-old stigmatized simply for being a foundling. This tendency reveals a desire to condemn tribal society, which does not allow the individual the right to make certain key decisions. (Biṭār, 2003, p. 20)

In this reading, the assumption is that this novel analyses the social reality of Saudi society, questioning the individual freedom of Saudis, whether they are men or women. In addition, the class struggle is described in detail in this novel, showing that individuals from different social backgrounds cannot be married as a result of tribal custom.

Similarly, al-Maqāliḥ (2005) pays close attention to the novel's character and their circumstances in the desert in which humans are pitted against animals, and sometimes against nature itself. In his article, he describes the protagonist's helplessness, marginalisation and the pain caused by racism (al-Maqāliḥ, 2005).

As Fish (1980, p.152) explains that meaning of the text is derived from "the structure of the reader's experience rather than any structures available on the page"; these critical readings focus on Saudi novels from a cultural criticism perspective that shapes their readings and gives certain meanings to those novels. In their readings, Arab critics use

terminology that clearly points to their academic background and the underpinning knowledge that have shaped their readings including terms such as ‘hegemony’, ‘ideology’, ‘power’, ‘gender’, ‘globalisation’, ‘identity’, ‘feminist’, ‘class conflict’, and so on. These common ideological frameworks influence the succession of decisions that they make in interpreting these novels and help to account for the similarities in their interpretations.

### 6.3.6 Considering the aesthetic elements of Saudi novels

In this section, the critical focus shifts from novels’ themes to other literary aspects involved in the interpretation and evaluation of Saudi novels. According to their interpretive approaches, non-Saudi Arab critics can be subdivided in two main groups: those conservative critics who focus on the role of literature in sustaining the language and Arab identity; and those who focus on the text’s techniques, adopting contemporary literary theories and producing different interpretations within a great diversity of literary texts both from the Arab world and beyond.

For example, Arab critics praise Alem’s boundless imagination and her ability to take readers into the realm of the fantastic. Al-Ḥusain (2009), however, acknowledges that Alem is hard to read, suggesting that it is difficult to imagine the kind of readers who would take up her novels for casual entertainment, since they are likely to get lost in her work. He argues that Alem’s novels are “ambiguous texts that allow multiple readings due to the complex relations among their events, times, places and characters” (al-Ḥusain, 2009, p. 112).

Within this critical view, it can be argued that there is consensus among the Arab literary critics, examined here, that *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* is memorable for its complexity, not only at the level of narrative techniques, but also regarding its language. However, opinions differ sharply concerning the novel’s complex and ambiguous structure and its meaning due to readers applying different interpretive strategies in approaching the text. This was illustrated by the fact that the Committee of the IPAF (2011) was divided into two camps concerning *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām*. One group was mostly highly positive, arguing that the novel was a great literary masterpiece and highlighted what they saw as Alem’s evident

literary merit and creativity. The other group, however, was more dismissive of the novel's complexity and ambiguity<sup>41</sup>, pointing out that some members of the committee "found [the work] difficult to understand, as it would be for the general reader" (Alhayat, 2011, p. 25). This attitude towards the complexity and ambiguity of Alem's novels is also shared by some Arab critics in their analysis of her works, the next of which we will consider in this section.

The element of fantasy genre represented in *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* is commented on by Najm (2011). He agrees with al-Ḥusain (2009) that the complex style of Alem's novels distinguishes her from other Arab writers. He identifies her use of different narrative sources including the use of diaries, letters referring to Mecca's history and the quotations from Lawrence's *Women in Love* in the protagonist's (Aisha) emails and messages. Ultimately, Najm (2011) criticises Alem, as follows:

[S]he has tried to create diversity in her narrative techniques and style but those spectacular techniques and the transition between the real, virtual and historical worlds, especially in the second part of the novel, make it difficult to grasp the relationships among those levels. Alem suddenly loses control of some narrative elements in the second part of the novel.

This shared critical background of Alem's complex style is likely to lead to significant agreement in Arab critical judgements of her writing style.

According to al-Shamālī (2011) "*Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* is a problematic text on more than one level, which makes the reader wonder why a well-known writer tends to write in such a complex style" (al-Shamālī, 2011). He suggests her use of multiple narrators and the lack of cohesion resulting from the multiplicity of contexts lead to confusion in the reader's mind, arguing that many characters that appeared in the first part of the novel disappear in the second part, without any justification for this. He adopts the conventional view of traditional Arab critical discourse that Alem often employs highly literary metaphors producing a difficult postmodernist text and asks whether she writes her novels to be understood only by Arab literary critics and not by general readers. The same point is

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<sup>41</sup> In an interview after winning the award, the writer denied that the structure of her work was complex and responding to those who described her novel as 'elitist', she commented: "My writings just depict the events of our daily life" (Alem, 2011).

made by al-Muḥsin (2010b), who argues that although Alem’s novel “exceeds many Arabic novels in terms of its linguistic nature achievements”, the length of the text (566 pages) and the ambiguity make it challenging for the general reader due to the author’s use of multiple strands of narrative discourses.

Within this interpretive horizon, one of the most notable features of *Banāt al-riyāḍ*’s reception in the Arab world is the controversy about its author’s linguistic skills. While some critics complain about Alsanea’s idiosyncratic grammar and her linguistic shortcomings, others praise her use of the youth culture, mixing *‘āmmiyya* (spoken Arabic), *fuṣḥā* (formal Arabic) and English. For example, some purist Arab critics adopt more negative attitudes to Alsanea’s use of language, viewing this as the author’s lack of awareness of the function of the novel’s language. For instance, Ṣāliḥ (2006) criticises the use of local variants in the Gulf countries in the dialogues, which are incomprehensible to many Arab readers. He then notes that transliterating English words into Arabic script reflects the issue of the globalization experienced by contemporary Arab youth, revealing a general weakness in linguistic skills (Ṣāliḥ, 2006, p. 147). In his article, the critic expresses his concern about the effects of this new style of the novel’s language on Arab cultural identity. The same perspective is voiced by al-’Uṣṭā (2011), who agrees that some words in *Banāt al-riyāḍ* are difficult to understand due to the local dialects used by the author. Focusing on the reason for mixing English and Arabic, the critic suggests that Alsanea is “one of the Arab writers intrigued by both globalisation and the capitalist culture resulting from colonialism” (al-’Uṣṭā, 2011). He then criticises the lack of clarity in the novel’s dialogues, which, in turn, obscure the meaning.

In addition, some responses from Arab critics in this interpretive community have focused on syntax, grammar, lexicon and dialect, using linguistic strategies to interpret and evaluate these Saudi novels. For example, Naṣṣār (2010), criticises the IPAF committee for not paying attention to the significant number of typographical and grammatical errors in *Tarmī bi-sharar...*, which leads him to argue that the work was not sufficiently polished to win the prize. He argues that linguistic analysis of the novel reveals numerous errors in both the characters’ names and the grammatical expression:

On page 11, the full name of the character who protects the narrator from rape in his youth is given as ‘Issa al-Duraini. But when the author mentions him again (page 31 onwards) his name becomes ‘Issa al-

Rudaini. Also, whilst the name of the palace gate guard is originally given as Hamdan Ghubaini (page 33), it then becomes Hamdan al-Ghubaini and in the closing pages of the novel became Hamdan al-Bughaini. (Naṣṣār, 2010, p.6)

In this reading, the critic also gives examples of grammatical errors in Khal's novel, including subject/verb agreement, verb tense, adjective and noun/pronoun. This point is also supported by al-Mu'inī (2010) and al-Dādīsī (2013). Though they did not use linguistic strategies as their primary interpretive strategies, all of them criticized the prevalence of typographical and linguistic errors in the novel. These Arab critics also refer to the controversy concerning *Tarmī bi-sharar...*'s worth to win the IPAF. As with Alem, Arab critics are divided on the novel's literary merit. Some claim that although Khal's work won the prize, it "is not the best Saudi novel; there are other outstanding works written by Saudi writers" ('Asfour, 2011). These critics claim the novel suffers from linguistic problems and believe this raises a question concerning the standards adopted by the IPAF Committee (Naṣṣār, 2010).

It can be argued that Saudi novels that do not meet the standards of linguistic quality as determined by these Arab critics are considered ambiguous and lack of clarity. This may be due to their belief in the special status of Arabic as a language because of its relationship to the *Qur'ān* for most Arabs/Muslims, which gives the language a unique status as a cohesive element in Arab identity. These concerns are reflected in various remarks about linguistic elements and the need for purity. For instance, these Arab critics often criticise these Saudi novels for mixing Arabic with other languages, or they ensure these texts are grammatically correct. They need to keep the language of literature standardised (no use of dialectal variants) because it forms the 'link' that bonds together the Islamic nation or forms Arab (vs Western) identity. These ideas may not be directly voiced but are implied in their critical perspectives to protect the purity of the Arabic language from the 'aggression' of other languages.

However, another interpretive community of Arab critics criticise those purist Arab critics who have denigrated Alsanea's linguistic skills. For example, 'Abd al-Wahhāb (2006) argues that the writer uses different varieties of language, including Classical Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, and Najdi (a variant of Saudi Arabic) together with English and French expressions, to reflect usage by different groups of the Arab young

generation. This critic claims that this is “a new style of writing referred to some media communication methods that are usually used by the younger generation in the postmodernist era” (‘Abd al-Wahhāb, 2006).

Al-‘Ajmi (2008) agrees that Alsanea’s novel *Banāt al-riyāḍ* uses different varieties of language, and according to him, these give the novel an aesthetic value and distinctive style. He states: “This linguistic diversity reveals the cultural context and the social class of the novel’s protagonists; Alsanea has succeeded in reflecting this diversity to some extent by using different dialects in the dialogues” (al-‘Ajmi, 2008, p. 63).

Some Arab critics, as previously mentioned (see section 6.3.3), argue that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* lacks structure and style, suggesting that the novel’s success is not due to its literary merit, but to the daring themes that it represents (al-nābī, 2014; ‘Asfour, 2010). However, many more positive perspectives characterise it as an innovative work. Moḥammad (2005) writes that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* introduces a new way of novel writing in the Arab world, arguing that “it is written by one of a new generation of young Arab writers who have adopted digital techniques to represent a virtual community and to create a revolution against the traditional system of Arabic culture” (Moḥammad, 2005). This view is supported by ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (2006), al-Mas‘ūdī (2010) and al-‘Anazī (2011), all of whom declare that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* is a contemporary novel written by a new generation of Arab writers. Writers in this generation are users of the internet and chat rooms and communicate their new ideas via mass media having been influenced by globalisation and by the rapid transformations in the socio-cultural context in Arab countries. These readings emphasise the importance of the new style of writing that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* represents as Alsanea, in their views, consistently 'breaks the rules' of conventional novel writing.

Considerable comment was made by non-Saudi Arab literary critics on the style of these Saudi novels, adopting contemporary literary theories in their readings. For example, Ḥusain (2011), whose evaluation of Alem’s novel is as positive as that of al-Shamālī (2011) is negative, states that using multiple narrative style including memories, letters and fantasy allows readers to read it in multiple ways. Ḥusain’s reading is one of the critical articles that sees *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* as a great Arabic novel due to its use of mythology and the visual aspects of the narrative. In particular, she uses the *collage*

approach, combining several traditional styles into a single text. Al-Janābī (2014) points out that the novel bears traces of intertextual or generic relations seen in her inclusion of epistolary style, e-mails, references to foreign novels and historical Arabic texts (e.g. from Al-Andalus). This critic focuses on the metaphors and symbols that Alem employs to refer to various historical events and religious duties that are embodied by the novel's protagonists to "represent the overall vision, which is related to existentialist literature" (al-Youm al-sabi', 2010). Within this context, Sālim (2011) expresses his admiration for the diverse cultural elements captured in Alem's work, manifested in her ability to include a diverse range of quotations from literary and historical sources, internet sites, both protagonists Aisha's and Yousef's letters and articles. He concludes that *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām*'s narrative:

takes advantage of both modern and ancient storytelling techniques, employing different forms of narrative discourse, indicating Alem's literary experience of those methods. This ability is manifested in polyphony: the narrator's voice, extracts from historic documents, letters and e-mail, as well as historical, religious, poetic and romantic discourse. (Sālim, 2011)

Along the same lines, 'Idilbī (2011) points out that readers can only understand Alem's narrative visions by reading the whole of her literary works in order to understand her unique writing style at the levels of both the Sufi language and life experience. This Arab critic praises Alem's distinctive form of narrative: one that features descriptions of various traditional customs and folklore indigenous to Mecca.

Although some Arab critics describe Khal's novel as mere 'reporting of news' that relates social realities (Tayyarah, 2010), other Arab critics in a different interpretive community positively praise Khal's novel, confirming its literary merits as a worthy winner (Bakr, 2010). This critical attention to the postmodernist style in Saudi novels is also reflected in the writings about Khal's novel. Naṣīr (2010), for example, suggests that *Tarmī bi-sharar...* is worth reading and deserved to win due to its technical quality (Naṣīr, 2010). In another instance, Yousef (2011) characterises Khal's novel *Tarmī bi-sharar...* as a postmodern text using a number of literary strategies, such as intertextuality. Similarly, Gohar (2012) sees Khal's novel as a postmodern text that adopts intertextuality. The critic argues that

The book is characterised by the appearance of texts drawn from different domains and disciplines. Khal's text is interrelated with other texts, but this is not at random, as the French poststructuralists argue. Every text that appears in the novel is carefully chosen to serve the novelist's vision. (Gohar, 2012, p. 33)

The concept of paratextuality is another key feature in these Arab critics' articles on these Saudi novels. Some Arab critics claim that paratexts (including the author's name, the title of the work, the preface, book cover and illustrations) are important features that merit as much analysis as the narrative itself. Al-Dhahabiyya (2004) focuses on this concept in his analysis of *Fikhākh al-Rā'iha*, arguing that "the use of the compound words in the novel's title indicate that the title was written later, making it play a key role in attracting readers' attention to grasp the meaning during the act of reading" (al-Dhahabiyya, 2004).

Nūr al-dīn (2005) agrees that these liminal mediations and the logic of their relation to the reading public play a vital role in reading *Fikhākh al-Rā'iha*. He argues that the introduction presented in this novel is untitled, despite the fact that the opening plays an important function in summarising the protagonist's story. The critic also observes that the novel's chapters are given nominal sentence titles, some of which are poetic expressions.

Khal's *Tarmī bi-sharar...* has also been approached paratextually by some Arab critics. Al-Dabk (2014) claims that attention should be paid to the paratextual elements of a published text since these significantly influence how it is read by the public (al-Dabk, 2014). His article draws on the work of literary theorist Gérard Genette and his definition of paratext in his reading of Khal's novel. He begins by considering the influence of the implicit paratextual elements in the title of the novel and then examines the poetics of other paratextual elements, including the novel's cover, its title, dedication, chapter titles and appendices. The critic looks for the author's message in both the design of the book cover and the novel's title (see Appendix 2), arguing that the cover functions as an interpretation of this title that conveys the author's message to the reader. Focusing on the novel's cover, al-Dabk (2014, p. 2) notes:

The aesthetic value of the cover's design and colour, which are in perfect harmony, refer to an accurate reading of the novel's title. The painting

looks like a window open onto the world, whilst the large rock is situated between sky and earth, leading us to wonder: Is it falling down from the sky or rising up from the earth? And at the top, a stereoscopic shape that resembles a palace.

Al-Dabk (2014) then focuses on the novel's title, explaining that it is derived from a Qur'anic context and is linked to other meanings reflected in the narrative context of the text. Thus, he argues that the title raises some issues in terms of its interpretation and suggest multiple readings are possible. In this reading, the critic also notes that the author includes an innovative dedication in the text, since it is written as the main protagonist's words. Al-Dabk (2014, p. 3) argues that these elements point to the narrative techniques, themes and problematic characters in Khal's novel and its importance in Arabic literature.

al-Mu'inī (2010) makes a similar point, referring to the role of the paratexts in creating particular expectations in the readers prior to reading. He notes that *Tarmī bi-sharar*'s title is a quote from a well-known Qur'anic verse and explores the various meanings this may suggest:

The image on its cover represents a palace, alluding to the Qur'anic verse. In addition, its dedication confirms that Khal is not the narrator; instead, the one who wrote the dedication is referred to as Tarek, the protagonist whose story features in the novel. (al-Mu'inī, 2010)

A similar focus on the function of the paratext has also been used by some Arab critics in their reading of Alem's novel. For example, al-Muḥsin (2010b), Najm (2011) and al-Janābī (2014) all agree that the novel's title, *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām*, is intended to evoke Arab literary heritage represented by the intertextual relationship between the novel's title and *Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma* (The Ring of the Dove), a treatise on love written by Ibn Hazm from Al-Andalus (see Appendix 2). These critics draw attention to the significant influence of the novel's title on how its meaning is understood. Specifically, they suggest that the poetic title is a reference to the Islamic culture of the historical caliphate of Al-Andalus. Thus, this paratext can be used to suggest an intertextual relationship that would significantly influence the reader's interpretation of Alem's novel and the internal references that reveal its meaning. Thus, it can be argued that these Arab critics have seen this intertextuality as a useful model that might be served to understand the impact of paratexts on the reception of these Saudi novels.

Thus, Arab critics do not come to Saudi novels as blank pages; instead, they bring their prior conceptions based on their personal reading histories, which enable them to compare Saudi novels with other novels written in Arabic and foreign novels. They use intertextual strategies for approaching these Saudi texts. For example, Moḥammad (2005) compares Alsanea's novel *Banāt al-riyāḍ* with *'Imārat Ya'qūbyān* (2002) (The Yacoubian Building) by Egyptian author Alaa al-Aswani. He states:

these two novels deal with the changing conditions in their societies. *'Imārat Ya'qūbyān* addresses the political, social and cultural conditions experienced within Egyptian society in the last decade of the twentieth century. It also discusses sensitive issues, such as homosexuality, the political regime and terrorist organisations. Similarly, *Banāt al-riyāḍ* explains the problems and issues of four girls in Saudi society, using a different language and a new narrative technique. (Moḥammad, 2005)

The critic also explains that both these novels have been well received in the Arab world and beyond, having been translated into various foreign languages, including English and French. Husain (2006) compares the themes of *Banāt al-riyāḍ* to those found in novels written by 'Iḥsān 'Abd al-Quddūs<sup>42</sup>.

Alem's *Ṭawq al-Hamām* invites comparisons with Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980) since both feature historical murder mysteries (al-Muḥsin, 2010b). Some Arab critics have also compared al-Mohaimed's novel *Fikhākh al-Rā'iḥa* with other Arabic novels, such as Sulaimān (2003), who compares al-Mohaimed's novel with *Rā'iḥat al-'unthā* (2000) (The Female's Scent) by Amin Zaoui<sup>43</sup>, and *al-Aslāf* (2001) (The Ancestors) by Fadhil al-Azzawi<sup>44</sup>. Sulaimān (2003) argues that *Fikhākh al-Rā'iḥa* also alludes to Patrick Süskind's *Perfume* (1985), since both feature characters with an extraordinary sense of smell. Within this context, al-'Uṣṭa (2010) points out that Khal's novel *Tarmī bi-sharar...* can be compared to *'Imra'a li-l-Fusūl al-Khamṣa* (1988) (A Woman of Five Seasons) by Laila Al-Atrash<sup>45</sup> since, in his view, they share similar

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<sup>42</sup> 'Iḥsān 'Abd al-Quddūs (1919-1990) was an Egyptian writer, novelist and journalist in *al-Akḥbār* and *al-Ahrām*. He wrote various collections of short stories and many novels that have been adapted in films.

<sup>43</sup> He is a bilingual Algerian novelist, who has published many novels in Arabic and French.

<sup>44</sup> He is an Iraqi poet, novelist, critic and translator. He has published many novels, books and different volumes of poetry. He was the Chairman of the IPAF Committee in 2011.

<sup>45</sup> She is a Jordanian/ Palestinian novelist and journalist. She has published many novels in Arabic and some of them have been translated into English.

themes. It has also been claimed that *Tarmī bi-sharar* is noted for its detailed account of the protagonist's life, describing it as a confessional novel like *The Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (al-'Uṣṭā, 2010).

The fact that these Saudi novels reflect a postmodernist style has also been addressed by Rafā'iyah (2003) and Naṣṣār (2003), who highlight the intersection between the realistic and the miraculous narrative strands in the novel, describing al-Mohaimeed's novel as a "magical realism". They also discuss in depth how it makes use of polyphony that recounts part of the story and then moves to a different part by using a flashback technique. These Arab critics praise al-Mohaimeed's use of this contemporary style, suggesting that it should be considered a good example of writing fiction in the Arabian Gulf.

Similarly, Nūr al-dīn (2005) argues that al-Mohaimeed's *Fikhākh al-Rā'iha* is built on a flashback technique, which overlaps memories and dreams; a confessional style, that draws on the protagonists' autobiographical texts such as diaries and letters; and use of intertextuality, with allusions to traditional folk poetry and myth. Focusing on stylistic aspects, Nūr al-dīn (2005) traces the development of the Saudi novel's literary merit, confirming that al-Mohaimeed's novel represents a shift in the novelist creative experience, producing a distinct vision of what novel writing means in the Saudi literary space. This reading extends the reflection on *Fikhākh al-Rā'iha*'s narrative techniques to the general developments of the novel in Saudi Arabia, and it is dictated by the critic's prior assumption about Saudi novels, which he makes based on knowledge of the novel's genre and its author and this influences his interpretation of the text.

Some Arab critics praise Saudi novelists' skills in describing the setting in their novels, emphasising how they succeed in describing the real-life transition from village to city, which is reflected in Khal's works as an example (Bo Sha'ir, 2009). Bo Sha'ir (2009) also argues that Khal departs from the timeframe used in the classic novel by employing contemporary narrative techniques such as flashbacks and stream of consciousness. Within the same interpretive community, Sulaimān (2003) argues that the literary merit of *Fikhākh al-Rā'iha* lies in its unique setting. Sulaimān (2003) points to how the novel moves spatially between Sudan, Riyadh, and the desert, and employs a flashback

technique to move chronologically from scene to another, signalling this with time expressions, such as ‘one night’, ‘years later’ and ‘during the summer’, to keep the reader oriented and engaged. This view is supported by al-Maḳālīḥ (2005), who notes the novelist’s use of the flashback technique, which gives him enormous scope for breaking the traditional sequential structure to recall a particular event or detail of the past. He highlights that this technique:

is a method of dealing with time employed by a number of Arab novelists, in which only a few of them excel, and I argue that al-Mohaimeed is one of those few who have achieved success in disrupting time and playing on this paradox. (al- Maḳālīḥ, 2005, p.16)

In his analysis, al- Maḳālīḥ (2005) argues that *Fikhākh al-Rā’iḥa* is a model novel of desert life with a setting that stretches from the desert at the heart of the Arabian Peninsula to the desert of Sudan. The critic praises al-Mohaimeed’s literary skills, particularly when he is “describing the things in the desert: the types of sand, trees and animals, and tranquillity that represent the familiar nature of the desert, as well as depicting elements of the city such as palaces, cars, neighbourhoods, parks, roads, etc.” (al-Maḳālīḥ, 2005, p.16). However, some of these critics identify some negative features of the novel’s setting, arguing that some places in the novel seem incomplete in its description of the details of the lives of the protagonist and other characters in the novel (Naṣṣār, 2003).

In addition, some critical readings focus on the attractiveness of Alem’s novel, which uses a metaphor to link plot themes, events and setting. Ḥusain (2011, p. 89) describes Abu Alroos alleyway in Mecca, where the murders committed in *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* take place, as an important element in the narrative discourse of the novel’s plot and how this is structured. The critic indicates that:

The setting plays a semantic and symbolic role in terms of its ability to reveal the connections between the characters and the place, on the one hand, and the nature of social relations that control the reality of Mecca, which is the religious centre for Muslims around the world, on the other. (Ḥusain, 2011, p. 89)

Within this review, the critic focuses predominantly on the novel’s setting, Abu Alroos, as the central protagonist that plays a major role in shaping the novel’s world. Al-Muḥsin (2010b), ’Idilbī (2011) and al-Khazī (2012) all argue that Abu Alroos is the main character of Alem’s novel. These critics also claim that Alem’s novels need to be carefully read in

order to determine how both space and time shape the narrative discourse, as Alem often creates settings in her novels that are in total harmony with her characters and events.

These critics are from different subcommunities because they interpret the novel differently. According to Fish (1980, p. 170), literary critics who share a particular paradigm within the same interpretive community are likely to address texts in a similar way. Those critics who complain about overlapping events and the polyphonic/multi-voiced approach of these Saudi novels share the same interpretive horizon, while others point out what they perceive to be a lack of literary experience in reading postmodernist texts.

#### 6.4 Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter allows us to draw two main conclusions. First, Saudi literary critics who belong to the same intellectual institutions, which may influence their interpretive activities, can present similar interpretations of a novel. Their readings define the thematic significance of these novels in the Saudi literary space, using diverse approaches based on their socio-cultural background knowledge to underline the role of these novels in their society's development. It is therefore to be expected that some studies will celebrate these novels in order to support their critical assumptions. Moreover, within the conflict between conservatives and liberals on the Saudi literary scene, some critics, such as al-Ghadhāmī, have used their views on these novels to make broader points about cultural and intellectual issues in the Saudi context. This attitude leads them to defend the pro-liberal discourse of certain novels. For example, they criticise how “the notorious traditional cultural system was eager to declare a *fatwa* demanding that Alsanea should repent of the sin she committed with her novel” (al-Dibīsī, 2006, p. 3). This also leads some Saudi critics to adopt a positive attitude towards some novels, focusing on the cultural and social dimension of their contents in an attempt to encourage the new generation to challenge the dominant culture. Thus, the majority of Saudi critical readings simply chose to focus solely on the positive elements of these novels and overlooked sometimes the negative judgments of their aesthetic value.

Second, in the Arab critical context, non-Saudi Arab critics seem to have a level of 'sophistication' that diverged from that of those Saudi critics. They focus on particular

textual features from which they construct their final readings. From the shared interpretations of these readings one can gain an insight into how members of this community experience these Saudi literary texts, focusing on the same issues in their analyses and using similar interpretive strategies to identify these novels reflecting those themes that facilitate acceptance of their preferred assumptions. All these Arab readers are literary critics with expertise in various academic disciplines and fields. Moreover, they share a number of similarities in their cultural background as Arabs from Islamic societies and their experiences of particular social issues, that helps to create an interpretive community that is likely to produce similar interpretations. Their critical approaches also encompass either explicitly or implicitly a comparative element that leads them to assess the extent to which the socio-cultural realities of Saudi Arabia represented in these novels are similar to or different from those which they have experienced within their own socio-cultural context and leads them to evaluate in their readings whether Saudi novelists also reflect the hopes, fears and dreams of the wider Arab community.

Fish (1980, p. 169) argues that, if readers brought a different set of pre-reading assumptions to these novels, they would have a different “reading” of them. Chapter seven examines the reception of these Saudi novels in the Western context, focusing on different constituencies of Western readers.

## **Chapter Seven**

### **The reception of Saudi novels in the Anglophone context**

#### 7.1 Introduction

In the previous chapters I have analysed the reception of the Saudi novel by both Arab literary critics as members of the professional interpretive community and Arab journalists as lay readers in a different interpretive community. In this chapter, I examine how the same four Saudi novels have been received by the Western press and academic scholars. Before turning to the reception of these Saudi novels, I briefly trace the history of Arabic literature in the Western literary scene and its translation into English (the dominant global language), explaining how a particular set of factors led to Saudi novels being selected for translation and thus entering the world literary space. I then examine the nature and function of the Western literary market for works by Saudi writers and the role of publishers, translators and media in influencing the reception of these Saudi novels. In the remainder of this chapter I will analyse how Anglophone readers from two different interpretive communities have responded to these novels. First, I will consider a selection of newspaper and magazine articles and reviews that are aimed at a non-specialist audience, and reflect the way Saudi novels have been received and perceived by the general reading public. Second, I will examine articles published in academic journals that are aimed at a specialist audience and focus specifically on the textual aspects and themes found in these Saudi novels, based on their critical views of the function of novel.

#### 7.2 Arabic literature in the Western context: An overview

Contemporary Arabic fiction has been gaining importance in the West since 1988, when the Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. According to Classe (2000, p.65), prior to 1988 interest in Arabic fiction was very limited.

Until then, “except for the [Arabian] Nights and the Qur’ān, none of the [Arabic] works translated into English had ever gained a wide general readership” (ibid, p.64). Altoma (2005, p. 54) argues that it is possible to see three phases in the translation of contemporary Arabic fiction into English: “the initial phase 1947-67; the phase of expanded translation from 1968 to 1988, and 1988 onwards”.

During the initial stage, the interest in English translations of Arabic fiction and critical writing was limited and only a small number of Arabic novels (about 16 in total) was published in English (Altoma, 2005, p. 55). However, there were more positive developments to be seen from 1968 to 1988, when the number of English translations increased to over “50 novels and 35 short story collections” (Classe, 2000, p. 65). After Mahfouz’s Nobel Prize in 1988, Arabic works began to be translated with greater frequency and regularity, and several publishers became involved in bringing out translations as the demand for Arabic fiction increased.

A recent report suggests that nearly 300 literary titles were translated from Arabic to English and published during the period 1990-2010 (Büchler & Guthrie, 2011, p. 23). Allen (2003, pp.1-2) points out that the interest in Arabic literature and its translation was originally confined to academic circles, as some Western universities encouraged specialists in modern literary translation including modern Arabic fiction to translate some Arabic literary works. He notes that:

The award of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Najib Mahfuz in 1988 brought major changes to this translation scenario, [...]. In the United States, commentators and journalist scrambled around to find information about the author, and found surprisingly little. (Allen, 2003, p. 2)

According to Allen (ibid, p. 3), following this event, many Arabic authors have attracted the attention of the Western reading public.

Casanova (2004, p. 146) stresses that being awarded the Nobel Prize is a kind of literary consecration not only for the laureate him/herself but for all those authors who produce literary work in his/her original language. According to Casanova (2004, p. 147), there “is no better measure of the unification of the international literary field than the effectively universal respect commanded by this prize” and this played a major role in

encouraging the translation and publication of contemporary Arabic literature. Since then, various publishing houses in the United States and England have become noted for their interest in publishing translations of works by Arab writers including Abdelrahman Munif, Jamal al-Ghitani, Tayeb Salih, Nawal El Saadawi and Hanan al-Shaykh<sup>46</sup>.

After the events of 9/11, the interest in Arab cultural products, including Saudi works of literature, dramatically increased as there was a desire to learn more about the region and its culture. Nordlinger (2002) claims that

after the 9/11 attacks, the West realized that it knew little about the Arab world—in fact, dangerously little. Why do they hate us so, and did this come out of the blue? It seemed imperative to learn more about the Arabs—to learn, for example, what they were saying to one another, in their media, in their schools, and in their mosques. The Arab world had always been dark this way; it needed to come into the light.

Since then, “foreign publishers have become interested in Arab fiction, especially from Iraq and Saudi Arabia. It's become a window to the Arab world” (Hassan<sup>47</sup>, 2007 interviewed in Hammond, 2007). There have been many studies discussing different views about the influence of the ‘War on Terror’ on the development of translation from Arabic into English, and on the reception of these Arabic literary works. For example, Ware (2010) examines “the mechanism of public diplomacy” in the context of the Anglophone publishing industry and media propaganda to show how the 9/11 events affected the process of translating and understanding Arabic literature. Moreover, Booth (2010, p. 155) points out that the demand for translating Arabic literature “has closely followed the market dominance of books by US foreign policy pundits on ‘Islam’ and Middle East–US politics, juxtaposed with the terminology of the war on terror”.

However, other scholars claim that these political events may have negatively affected the field of English translation of Arabic literature, since novels are now being read as social documentaries by those seeking information about Middle Eastern politics instead

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<sup>46</sup>For more examples of Arabic fiction translated into English, see the online reading club [http://www.goodreads.com/list/show/42335.Arabic\\_Literature\\_in\\_English\\_Translation](http://www.goodreads.com/list/show/42335.Arabic_Literature_in_English_Translation). This website has a section providing information about Arabic novels available in translation for those with an interest in this area.

<sup>47</sup> Abdallah Hassan is a project editor at the American University in Cairo Press.

of as literary works to be admired for their literary merit. Khalifa and Elgindy (2014, p. 54) state that:

During this phase [9/11 onwards] the field of translating Arabic fiction into English was mainly influenced by external factors (the field of power) while internal factors (translators and publishers) played a secondary role. In contrast, during the other three phases the field was mainly influenced by internal factors while external factors played a secondary role.

With regard specifically to Saudi novels, there have been many translations in English of Saudi authors and as Casanova (2004, p. 135) notes it is this “translation into a major literary language” that grants them access to the literary world makes it possible for them to achieve fame in the Western world. The last two decades have seen growing numbers of translations as Western publishers have shown their interest in publishing and marketing work by some Saudi writers. For example, several novels by Abdelrahman Munif have been translated into English, including but not limited to, *al-Tih* (1984) translated as *Cities of Salt* (1987), *al-'Ukhdūd* (1986) translated as *The Trench* (1991), *Tagāsīm al-layl wa-l-nahār* (1989) translated as *Variations on Night and Day* (1993) and *Al-Nihāyāt* (1977) translated as *Endings* (1988). Munif is considered to be the first Saudi writer to be translated into foreign languages and has often been praised for his writing style that is still seen as a “kind of radical departure in novel writing and in terms of both context and technique” ( Allen, 2010a, p. 478). Moreover, three of Ghazi Algozaibi’s novels have been translated into English, namely, *Shaqqaṭ al-Ḥurriyya* (1994) translated as *An Apartment Called Freedom* (1996), *Sab‘a* (1998) translated as *Seven* (2001) and *Ḥikāyat Ḥubb* (2001) translated as *A Love Story* (2002) along with some of his poems and non-fiction works.

Following the events of 9/11, there has been greatly increased interest in translating various Saudi novels in order to make them available to international readers. For example, two novels by Turki al-Hamad ‘*Adāmah* (1997) and *Shumaisī* (1998) have been translated into English as *Adama* (2003) and *Shumaisi* (2004). The second of these novels, *Shumaisi* (2004, trans. Paul Starkey; Saqi) was selected for the long-list of 16 works in The Independent Foreign Fiction Prize 2005 (Independent, 2005). At the same time, Saudi women’s writing began to attract international attention and has been seen worthy of translation and publication in English. As mentioned earlier in chapter two, *Banāt al-*

*riyāḍ* (2005) was translated into English as *Girls of Riyadh* (2007) and went on to be translated into 40 languages (Wagner, 2013). The reason why this has sparked such interest by translators will be discussed later in this chapter.

Additionally, literary prizes that were awarded to Saudi novelists offered a great opportunity to have their novels translated into foreign languages and gain new audiences for their work in translation. Winning IPAF, for example, paves the way for winners to be translated into English and other languages. In many cases, short-listed and long-listed Saudi novels have also been translated (see section 4.6.2). The prestigious IPAF has brought universal recognition for the Saudi novel, with Western publishers showing their interest in translating and publishing selected Saudi novels. This highlights the fact that publishers play a pre-eminent role in the novel's reception. Some well-known publishers in London and other major American publishing houses have published a number of important works of Saudi fiction that have been translated into English.

### 7.3 The mediation of Saudi novels within Western literary space: the agency of publishers and translators

One question that needs to be answered, however, is how these Saudi novels have been received in the West. The reception of Saudi fiction in the West has been mixed with some works receiving great acclaim while others have not, despite the fact that all had been received very enthusiastically in the Arab world. Thus, for example, *Girls of Riyadh* proved very popular and has been translated into many different languages. However, Khal's *Throwing Sparks* (2014), which won the 2010 IPAF, has only been translated into two foreign languages and Alem's *The Dove's Necklace* (2016), winner of the 2011 IPAF, has only been translated into five foreign languages, even though her works have often been praised by Arab critics as literary masterpieces<sup>48</sup>.

Many Western critical writings suggest that though Arabic fiction has made considerable progress, it still faces limitations due to the late start of the novel genre which only emerged in "the mid-19th century, largely as a result of European influence" (Classe,

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<sup>48</sup> I suspect that novels that are very literary in terms of using the Arabic language in innovative ways are probably the ones that prove the hardest to translate well into other languages. Thus, this might be the reason for Alem's *The Dove's Necklace* not to be released in English until 2016 although it won the IPAF prize in 2011.

2000, p. 65). Allen (2001, p. 207) points to the struggle that translated Arabic novels face when they are read in the Western context, leading them “to play a continuous and eventually unsuccessful game of ‘catch-up’ with the various subdivisions of the Western novel”. Thus, some Saudi novels that were successful within the Arab world are unable to gain a broad readership in Anglo-American and European markets.

In addition to the major factor of the socio-cultural setting with which Western readers are not familiar, a secondary factor could be their limited awareness of the history of modern Arabic literature, as Allen (1988) claims. Two particular factors play an important role in the evaluation of Arabic literature by Western readers:

Not only are they presented with works which seem to show a strong reliance on Western models with which they are already familiar; but also the history of the Arabic literary tradition, available to them through their own general education and the more direct avenue of translation of the “classics,” is incomplete and distorted. There is thus an unsettling lack of context. (Allen, 1988, p. 202)

Moreover, this limitation has led to particular stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, as Allen (1988, pp. 201-202) explains:

Many Western readers are exposed to a monument of Arabic literature at a relatively early age in the form of *The Thousand and One Nights*, a work which has for a long time provided a rich source of entertainment for children. I myself can vividly remember being taken to see pantomime versions of both ‘Aladdin’ and ‘Ali Baba’ as a child. [...] The popularity and exoticism of these tales within Western culture seems to have produced two major results. In the first place, it fostered a fantastic view of Middle Eastern culture, something which has been documented by a large number of sources and which finds what is perhaps its extreme representation in such media as the cinema (from the *Sinbad* films of Douglas Fairbanks Sr. to more recent examples such as *The Jewel of the Nile*). Second, the almost automatic selection of tales from this collection for anthologies of ‘world literature’ succeeded to a large degree in blocking any further interest in searching for other examples of literature written in Arabic.

As Allen (1988) makes clear, Western readers are still heavily influenced by Orientalist stereotypes concerning Arabic literature. The process of reception and dissemination of Saudi novels outside Arab literary space is affected by a range of factors including but not limited to, marketing strategies, the role of publishing houses, the themes of the

literary work and stereotypical Orientalist images of the Arab and Muslim world. Thus, two key questions need to be addressed in this context, namely: how do Orientalist stereotypes affect the reception of Saudi novels? and how have these Saudi novels been received by different interpretive communities of Western readers?

One of the many factors that might have a significant influence on the reception of Saudi novels is the global literary market, as this tends to play an important role in the commercial success of a particular work. Thus, those novels which have controversial themes, win prestigious literary prizes, and have become national bestsellers are virtually guaranteed great recognition and worldwide popularity. Accordingly, publishers often lead the hunt for world-fiction bestsellers, as they “have always sold across borders” (Casanova, 2004, p.171). Casanova (2004) points out that the unequal structure of global literary space is similar to that found in the economic sphere, as a small number of the most powerful cities often govern the access to literary recognition on a world scale. For her, translation is a “perpetual contest for legitimacy” (Casanova, 2004, p.118) in order to gain literary recognition. Therefore, the literature of the periphery must be drawn into the centre by translation into the culturally dominant languages in order for it to become universal (this brings to mind Bourdieu’s (1986) phrase “the power of the cultural symbolic capital”, which Casanova (2004, p. 127) also called “the power of the capital of the arts”). For Saudi writers, translation into foreign languages, in particular English, has put them on the road to international recognition. In this context, it is helpful to look first at the marketing strategies that were used to introduce these Saudi novels to Western readers, which conditioned how they then read the texts.

Western publishers know what Western audiences expect from novels from the Arab world as a result of the stereotypical representation that Arabs have had and continue to have in the Western media. Said (2003, p. 2) explains that

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Thus, a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on.

He also notes that in Western media, including films, television and the press “the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences.” (ibid, p. 287). Thus, such generalisations can create stereotypes of Arabs, where the Orient becomes a part of Western culture and “represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse” (ibid, p. 2). Writing in a new preface to his classic work, Said (2003, p. xiii) reflected on how little attitudes had changed since his work was originally published in 1978, noting that he wished he could say “that general understanding of the Middle East, the Arabs and Islam in the United States has improved somewhat, but alas, it really hasn’t”.

Thus, most Western publishers tend to use representations of orientalist themes to market Saudi novels in order to attract the interest of the target audience. In one of the most blatant examples of these marketing strategies, the publisher of the English translation of *Girls of Riyadh*, Penguin Press, in its advertising material made reference to the US TV show *Sex and the City*. The mainly red cover of Penguin’s US edition of the novel features silhouettes of a mosque, a crescent moon, and palm trees together with a pair of high-heeled shoes and a mobile phone (see Appendix 3). Such features alert readers to the content of the novel, setting and genre. The novel’s back-cover blurb reads as follows:

Alsanea boldly chose to open up the hidden world of Saudi women-their private lives and their conflicts with the traditions of their culture-she caused a sensation across the Arab world. Now in English, Alsanea’s tale of the personal struggles of four young upper-class women offers Westerners an unprecedented glimpse into a society often veiled from view. Living in restrictive Riyadh but traveling all over the globe, these modern Saudi women literally and figuratively shed traditional garb as they search for love, fulfilment, and their place somewhere in between Western society and their Islamic home. (Alsanea, 2007)

This quote illustrates how publishers marketed this Saudi novel. While this novel is likened to a window giving a view of a different culture, allowing readers to explore “the hidden world of Saudi women”, it also highlights how the protagonists are caught between two worlds (clash of civilisations): Western society and their Islamic home.

The mainly purple cover of Penguin’s UK edition also features images of a sports car, handbag, earrings, high-heeled shoe, and lipstick, together with a hookah, Arabic coffee pot and hibiscus flowers drawing readers’ attention to its feminist (chick-lit) themes but

with a Saudi flavour (see Appendix 3). It also represents the same theme of being caught between two worlds: Western symbols and Arab symbols. The marketing blurb on the back cover explains:

The girls of Riyadh are young, attractive and living by Saudi Arabia's strict cultural traditions. Well, not quite. In-between sneaking out behind their parents' backs, dating, shopping, watching American TV and having fun, they're still trying to be good little Muslim girls. That is, pleasing their families and their men. But can you be a twenty-first century girl and a Saudi girl? (Alsanea, 2008)

The publisher here suggests to readers that *Girls of Riyadh* offers details about how the western culture has penetrated the Arab world and attracts readers to discover more about Saudi society. By raising the question about a Saudi girl's struggle to balance two cultures: 'Saudi Arabia's strict cultural traditions' and the modern Western culture, it is much more likely that Western readers would read this novel either as the Western Self or the Arab Other, as will be discussed later in this chapter. The novel's cover and the publisher's blurb are even more important in this instance since they are intended to attract the public to a new fiction with which it is less familiar. Paratextual features of this type often enable

a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its readers and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a threshold, or - a word Borges used apropos of a preface - a 'vestibule' that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. (Genette, 1997, pp. 1-2)

Within this context, the cover of Alem's novel *The Dove's Necklace* represents the image of a dead body draped in a white sheet in a dark alley (see Appendix 3), explaining in the inside front cover:

When the body of a young woman is discovered in the Lane of Many Heads, an alley in modern-day Mecca, no one will claim it, as they are all ashamed of her nakedness. As Detective Nasser pursues his investigation of the case, seemingly all of Mecca chimes in—including the Lane of Many Heads itself—in this brilliant, funny, profane, and enigmatic fever dream of a novel by Raja Alem [...] The world she paints embraces everything from crime and religious extremism to the exploitation of foreign workers by a mafia of building contractors, who are destroying the historic areas of the city. (Alem, 2016)

This quote illustrates how publishers draw readers' attention to a murder mystery as does the mention of a detective and to the secret life of the holy city of Mecca, where the crime took place. The Islamic culture theme represented by 'Mecca' and the invitation to explore the hidden 'secret' are necessarily a guarantee of the popularity of the work to be considered in the Western context. Thus, such marketing techniques can create pre-reading assumptions about the novel's themes and genre directing readers to pose some questions before actually reading it, grouping them in a particular interpretive community.

Another frequently used marketing strategy is the inclusion of quotes from some critical reviews on the novel's cover of Penguin's UK edition. These often reflect important themes and invite readers to pick up the novel and find out more. For instance, a quote from the *Daily Telegraph* stresses that *Girls of Riyadh* is "love and lust, men and money. A taboo-breaking, bestselling tale of sex and the city". The *Guardian* confirms that this novel "offers a rare glimpse into the lives of women of 'the velvet class' [...] brave and surprisingly informative", while the *Financial Times* promises the reader that the novel is "a revealing study of one of the world's most secretive societies".

Similarly, quotes from critics on the cover of al-Mohaimed's *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* describe it as "Brave and brilliant [...] a novel that sneaks up on you with its power to make you see, hear, and live the complexities of another world", with Hanan al-Shaykh praising the work as "an authentic voice from Saudi Arabia" (see Appendix 3). Khal's *Throwing Sparks*, carries a statement on its front cover that it is "Winner of the 2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction", while on the back cover a quote from the *Guardian* assures readers that the novel "shines a light on life at the bottom of the heap, in Saudi's often forgotten villages [...] Casts an unflinching eye on those seduced by the glamour of palace politics" (see Appendix 3). Additionally, a review quoted on the back cover of Alem's novel *The Dove's Necklace* draws readers' attention to an Orientalist cliché of the Arab/Muslim world, claiming that:

It is a novel which, in exposing the clichés and preconceptions that are widespread in western society, reveals a more troubling reality, through the relentless evolution of the holy city, of an Arab world torn between an ever more dogmatic conservatism and an aspiration toward modernity which topples and destroys its own roots. (Alem, 2016)

Hence, it is clear that the English translations of these Saudi novels have often been positioned as a rare glimpse into the ‘hidden’ lives of Saudis. This could be due to the limited Western readership for Arabic fiction and to the “long history of producing the Orientalised Other, specifically of what I call Orientalist ethnographicism, and equally [draws] on recent developments in the transnational anglophone popular book trade” (Booth, 2010, p. 150).

These marketing strategies play a key part in promoting the reception of these Saudi novels by claiming that these texts can provide readers with detailed information about Saudi/ Arab culture, traditions and customs. Thus, they have been portrayed as depicting an ‘exotic’ culture, meeting the existing expectations of the target audience, as a number of examples to be discussed in the next section will clarify.

The dynamics of selecting texts for translation and the role of the translator, the author and the publisher have a significant influence on the reception of these translated novels. Translation has been described as “a process of carrying something across a linguistic and cultural divide” ( Allen, 2010a, p. 473). When that divide is a particularly large one, then the translator is involved not only in translation but in “mediating between two cultures besides mediating between two linguistic systems” (Farghal & Almann, 2015, p. 174). The multiple difficulties facing literary translators are not dealt with in detail here; instead the focus is on issues relating to translation that seem to have influenced the way in which some Saudi novels have been received in the Western context.

The controversy surrounding the translation of *Girls of Riyadh* clearly exemplifies some of these issues. Henighan (2007) claims that “[t]he scandal in the English version lies in the translation”, and in his review, he identifies multiple typographical errors and incorrect grammatical usage. In response, Booth (2007), the novel’s translator, sent a letter to the editor of *Times Literary Supplement*, explaining that, after submitting the translation, she had been informed by the publisher that

the author intended to rewrite it, and thereafter [Booth] was kept entirely out of the process. The resulting text, with its clichéd language, erasures of Arabic idioms [she] had translated, and unnecessary footnotes, does

not reflect the care that [she] took to produce a lively, idiomatic translation.

Thus, Alsanea revised the translation, changing and omitting some passages without consulting Booth, and she “was given only the opportunity to read the final text” (Booth, 2008, p. 201), although her name appeared on the title page as a co-translator with the author.

While Booth (2008, pp.200-201) argues that her “preferred translation strategy is ‘foreignizing’”, Alsanea’s and the publisher’s version “favors the ‘high readability’ of chick lit”. Booth (2008, p. 199) justified her chosen translation strategy on the grounds that *Girls of Riyadh* is “a novel from Saudi Arabia, by a female author and wildly popular in the Arab world; a text about Saudi life, one that challenges many Western assumptions about how and what Arabs read and write”. For example, the novel in its Arabic version uses different types of language: Classical Arabic, local Saudi dialect, Lebanese dialect and Arabization of English words but they disappear in the revised translation that was modified by the author. Booth (2008, p. 205) argues that this use of language in the original text is important as it highlights

the invasion and saturation of consumption of European cultural goods and concepts in Saudi Arabia and the cross-continental coming and going of Saudi subjects, in particular women, who are cosmopolitan in their consumption habits, including the consumption-in-use of language, but are not free to enter and leave their locales of residence without the permission of men.

However, in her Author’s Note, Alsanea states that she had to modify the original text, “[a]s none of that would make sense to the non-Arab reader” (Alsanea, 2007, p. vii). The author is aware of the stereotypical images of Saudis, Arabs and Muslims in the Western world, stating that “it would be very hard, maybe impossible, to change this cliché” (ibid, 2007, p. vii). Thus, in her novel, she tends to “reveal another side of Saudi life to the Western world”, confirming that Saudi women “are full of hopes and plans and determination and dreams. And they fall deeply in and out of love just like women anywhere else” (ibid, p. viii). Given this view, it is clear that there is a clash here between the author and the translator regarding how they address the target readers. While Booth is interested in the ‘foreignizing’ approach to translating the political and socio-cultural contexts about Saudi women’s lives to produce a text that would appeal to a particular

Western audience, Alsanea aims to normalize her text and situate it as chick lit in the globalised context. It is likely that this marketing choice created certain assumptions about the novel and shaped its readings. Allen (2009, p. 12) argues that this novel along with other Arabic best-sellers

have found their publics in a world in which globalization is increasingly monolingual, the visual is tending to supplant the (printed) textual, and translations demand domestication, in all cases involving the English language and the cultural and intellectual norms of its readerships.

Another example of the role of the translation process in the novel's reception can be seen in the case of al-Mohaimed's novel known as *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*, in the English version. The original Arabic title *Fikhākh al-Rā'īha* (Traps of Scent) reflects the novel's main theme. The English publisher or the translator decided to change this title to something more attractive to the target audience. As wolves play an important role in the narrative and this animal is a common motif in Western culture, the decision was made to change the title for the English-speaking audience. The wolf is commonly used as a symbol of danger or the devil in some European and American cultures. Rissanen (2014, p. 336) argues that this notion is rooted historically in Ancient Greek and Roman mythology. The wolf is also a common motif in Western fiction and films, which makes this title more recognisable for Western readers and can direct their attention to the magical realism and fantasy genre.

#### **7.4 Saudi novels in the Western press**

Fish (1980, p.171) has argued that an interpretive community is a group of members who share basic assumptions about the nature of literature, about the nature of interpretive acts and about the goals of literary criticism. In that sense, the Anglophone interpretive community in this section is a group of reviewers who share the same strategies for interpreting these Saudi texts. As the discussion in the first two sections of this chapter shows, pre-reading assumptions have a significant effect on readers' interpretation. They come to these novels with certain expectations. They expect them to be very explicit texts as they were all banned in their homeland. They expect them to provide ethnographic details about Saudi culture, traditions and customs. They may also expect them to be similar to other translated Arabic novels and to the stereotypical images of the Arab/

Islamic world with which they are familiar.

Some Anglophone readers know little about Arab socio-cultural contexts or Arabic literature, and therefore they simply tend to interpret these Saudi texts according to the existing knowledge that they have about the country and the region. According to Fish (1980, p. 168), they “author the text” based on those “particular interpretive (pre-reading) decisions” that they employ and share with the other members of the interpretive community. Their interpretations are guided by the setting of the novel, by their familiarity with the Arabic novel, and by their socio-cultural experience. These reviewers in the Western press take into account, to some extent, the views and prejudices of their readers, whenever they inform them about new publications from different cultures. Therefore, they are ‘opinion-makers’ and ‘gatekeepers’ in so far as they reflect the current social, cultural, and ideological perspectives of a community that has trained them to read in a certain way.

Analysis of their interpretive strategies for reading and interpreting these Saudi novels as reflected in the reviews in the subsequent sections shows they can be divided into two main groups: those who focus on these novels as representing the Orientalised Other and those who draw more attention to the universal aspects of these novels and the ‘influence’ of globalised cultural exchange.

#### 7.4.1 Banned Saudi bestsellers

When Saudi-provenance bestsellers are translated by publishers they are likely to be granted a wide readership among Western readers. For example, *Girls of Riyadh*, which sold “three million copies and was translated into 40 languages” (Wagner, 2013), was first introduced to the audience in the Western media as a banned best-selling Saudi novel, even before it was translated into English. It was stressed by some journalists that the novel “was officially banned from distribution in Saudi Arabia” (Khalaf, 2006), but that, at the same time, it was “going into its third printing. [And] pirated editions are circulating in photocopy form” (Abu-Nasr, 2005). Then, the novel became “popular across the Arab world and a bestseller at book fairs all over the Middle East” (Khalaf, 2006). It is worth highlighting that these two journalists, who are bilingual in English and Arabic, were

some of the first to bring *Girls of Riyadh* to Western attention and this may in turn have led to its selection for translation into English. The fact that these bilingual journalists depict and criticise Arabic/Islamic culture from an authentic voice could have had a significant positive effect on the marketing of this novel.

Since then, the novel has continually been marketed as a best-selling “taboo-breaking novel” (Hammond, 2007) which “guaranteed Alsanea a rare book deal in the West” (Aspden, 2007) and “went on sale worldwide in English” (Hammond, 2007). Thus, the notion that Alsanea’s novel was banned and placed on the list of the top best-selling Arabic novels has frequently been noted in the Western reception context, referring to the battle of censorship in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia in particular. Similar descriptions were also applied to the novel *Throwing Sparks* written by Khal “whose books are not sold in Saudi Arabia” (Alison, 2010). Despite this ban, this “terrifying Saudi novel wins Arabic Booker” (Deane, 2010). Similarly, Alem's novel *The Dove's Necklace* was described as being “officially ‘unavailable’ at home, not having been passed by the Saudi censor” (The Economist, 2011, p. 95). The same review notes: “Her publisher is confident it would be refused. Readers buy it under the counter, on the internet, at book fairs or abroad” (ibid, p. 95).

By highlighting the controversy around these banned novel, reviews direct readers’ attention to the crucial censorship issues that still face writers in the Arab world. An article about censorship issues in Saudi Arabia by Wilson (2005), which appeared in *The Washington Post*, explores the complexities of Saudi publishing noting that

Saudi fiction writers turn to foreign publishers with their work, especially ones in Beirut and London. The Saudi government has no influence over books published abroad, except when it comes time to decide whether to allow them to be imported for sale inside the Kingdom.

Wilson (2005) explains that “banned books arrive smuggled in suitcases or from foreign publishing houses with the permission of capricious Saudi censors, whose red lines remain unwritten”. He quotes some Saudi writers who challenge taboos and criticise restrictions on speech freedom in their home, such as al-Mohaimeed “who, like many in a new generation of rising fiction writers here, is taking on some of the most divisive subjects in the Arab world” (Wilson, 2005).

Some Anglophone reviews stress that these Saudi novels were at the centre of controversial debates in the Arab world, leading to lawsuits being filed against them. For example, “Alsanea's book caused a storm when it was published” (Seymenliyska, 2007) and “writers and columnists debated the book’s meaning and Saudi talking heads told the author she should disown it” (Eltahawy, 2008). But Alsanea’s novel did not only face aggressive controversy on home territory: “A group of Saudi citizens filed a lawsuit against its young author, Rajaa Alsanea, alleging that she had slandered Saudi society. [...] But the case was eventually thrown out and the book, although officially banned, was widely available” (Hardy, 2007). Whitaker (2006) points out that this court case also has echoes of the “historic British battle” in 1960, when “Penguin Books was being prosecuted for publishing an unexpurgated version of D H Lawrence's novel, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*”. However, the Saudi court “rejected a complaint brought by two traditional-minded citizens against the hottest novel ever allowed to circulate in the Kingdom”. Such claims invite Anglophone audiences to engage in thinking about the reasons for this ban, leading to the creation of assumptions about the novel’s themes.

When explaining the reasons why these Saudi novels were banned in Saudi society, American reviews provide a wide range of details reflecting Western expectations about Arab/Islamic culture. For instance, a review by Watrous (2007), published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, begins by evoking a number of controversial themes “*Girls of Riyadh* banned in its home country, is chick lit for veiled women, or anyone who wants to know them” and it was banned “because of the ‘scandalous’ behaviour of the young women”. Another review draws attention to the novel’s sexual themes, referring to it as “a sex confessional written as an online blog, set among the closeted female society of modern Saudi Arabia” (Allfree, 2007). In the case of Khal’s novel, political reasons are cited for this work being banned in Saudi Arabia because it depicts

a world of the fundamental struggle between master, or the Master, and slave. [...] Such crude violations and abuse of power are reminiscent of well-known regimes in North Africa and the Middle East, and fueled the protests and movements of the Arab Spring of the last three years. (Long, 2013)

Given these references to Saudi authors' problems with censorship perhaps suggests that these novels provide information about taboo subjects in one of the world's most conservative Islamic societies where "everything is banned [...]: women driving or leaving the house alone or travelling abroad unescorted or working with men. None of that. Nor that" (Buchan, 2007). This set of expectations has perhaps shaped the Anglophone interpretive communities in significant ways, as will be discussed next.

#### 7.4.2 Saudi novels 'orientalised'

For Anglophone readers, Saudi Arabia is perceived as being 'exotic' and 'different' in its culture and its literature, and this creates an interest in reading Saudi novels to find out more information about 'them'. Everyday life, love, marriage, divorce and sex are the simple themes reflected in Anglophone reviews. For example, the central theme explored in these reviews about Saudi novels is "hidden secrets", inviting their readers to explore Saudi society. Reviewers frequently put forward the idea that Saudi Arabia is "one of the most repressive countries on earth", where there is a "little patience for the suffering of others" (Austerlitz, 2008). It is often referred to in Western media as a "closed society" and the "kingdom of silence" (Hardy, 2006). Thus, some Anglophone reviewers state that these Saudi novels "will tell you more about one of the world's oddest and most closed societies than a library of books and articles by supposed western experts" (Hardy, 2007). Reflecting this opinion, Anglophone reviews of these Saudi novels frequently use words like 'mystery', 'secret', 'explore', 'lift the veil', 'take the lid off', 'exposé' and 'uncover'. Titles and key phrases from some of the reviews of these novels reflect the way these Saudi novels have been received and perceived among the Western mass media. For example, some of the reviews inviting readers to enter the world of these novels, reveal particular preconceptions:

Behind the veil. (Freeman, 2007),  
Taboo 'behind the veil' novel tops the Saudi bestseller lists. (Quetteville, 2006)  
The book's own success mirrors that of the girls' secret existence. (Allfree, 2007)  
Saudi author -a UIC dental student- scandalizes and intrigues Muslim world. (Hundley, 2008)  
The book also exposed society. (Khalaf, 2006)

These Saudi novels are often considered to be representative of Saudi modern life, as in the following example, “Alem reveals the holy city of Mecca [...] a fascinating, enchanting metropolis full of secrets” (León, 2016). These examples are only a small sample chosen from among many more that reiterate similar ideas showing a greater or lesser degree of subtlety. Given these examples, the extent to which these reviewers may have converging agendas that dominate the particular shape of the interpretations and responses to these novels in the Western context becomes clear. Accordingly, it appears that many Western reviewers reading these Saudi novels expect them to provide a sociological insight into the lives of Saudis. At the same time, this notion upholds assumptions that Saudi society is conservative, traditional and mysterious, causing it to be considered as ‘Other’.

In some cases, readers have been drawn to *Girls of Riyadh* due to the trope of oppressed Saudi women that the novel seems to represent. There is a widespread notion that women’s status in Arab-Islamic culture is very negative and marginal; therefore, the topic of women has become a central subject in the Western context, where such themes are usually seen by reviewers as being more worthy of comment than textual techniques or strategies employed by authors. Thus, some reviewers stress that Saudi women are often victims, the content of *Girls of Riyadh* being summarised as “bored young women from wealthy Saudi families chronicle their unhappy love lives” (Hardy, 2007). Quetteville (2006), in his review, points out:

The four Girls of Riyadh suffer very different fates [...] Their marriage ends in divorce, and a pregnant Qamrah is left disgraced. Mashaël, who in one storyline dresses up as a man, is rejected by her true love's family because her mother is not Saudi.

He, then, justifies these problems because Saudi women live in “the Islamic world's most conservative society [...] where women are banned from driving, and alcohol is forbidden”. Abu-Nasr (2005) agrees with this statement noting that this “fictional tale of the loves, dreams and disappointments of four young women in the [Saudi] capital has, not surprisingly, drawn criticism in a country where women are not supposed to date or have a love life until married”. Using quotes from Alsanea’s interviews, Abu-Nasr (2005) highlights how “both men and women are victims of society”. This attitude is also evident

in the *Guardian* review, where Aspden (2007) made the following comment on *Girls of Riyadh* after describing Saudi society as

an alien society riddled with hypocrisy, drugged with contradictions. And the trials faced by her [Alsanea's] alternately designer- and burqa-clad heroines are gruesome. Forbidden by law from driving or meeting unrelated men in public, the girls are denied a free choice in education, career or marriage by either overbearing parents or the baroque Saudi obsession with tribe and tradition.

Aspden (2007) is not the only reviewer to interpret the Saudi society as 'Orientalised Other'; almost all the Anglophone reviews in this interpretive community of the Western press have expressed the same assumptions in various ways. In one review, the female protagonists of *Girls of Riyadh* are seen as a social subordinate group, when "two of them dress up as men to get round the restrictions imposed on women" (Whitaker, 2006). This notion reflects a stereotypical image of Saudi/Arab women who often are oppressed and controlled by men. A similar point is made about the nature of life in a traditional conservative society, where women

can't talk to men in public but they're constantly texting them. The 'aunts', the formidable elders who vet girls as marriage candidates, can't police the young women's inboxes. However, the girls can't drive or drink alcohol, and if they want to go to a shopping mall they have to be accompanied by a man. (Ahmed, 2007)

These descriptions of Saudi women's lives also invite the audience to contrast the way of life in the West with that in Saudi Arabia. This tendency is reflected in reviews of these novels. For instance, Freeman (2007) indirectly evokes the comparison between Western and Arabic-Islamic cultures by depicting some details of everyday life in Saudi Arabia. It is worth quoting at length because while it conveys useful details about the customs in Saudi society, it also deals with the Western image of Arab culture. Reviewing *Girls of Riyadh* Freeman (2007) notes:

covered head to toe in public, they [the novel's protagonists] and their friends wear expensive designer clothes in private, get nose jobs abroad (cosmetic surgery is prohibited at home), ride around in chauffeur-driven limos (women are forbidden to drive) and eat takeout from Burger King while cruising the boulevards to check out the guys, who hold up signs bearing their cellphone numbers. Saudi girls are not allowed to meet men in public (the religious police arrest Lamees merely for sitting at a cafe with a man who is not a

relative). Their marriages are arranged, in a culture that disdains romantic love even as its appeal is continually spread by Western movies and Western music. (Valentine's Day, the narrator reports, was outlawed in Saudi Arabia after the idea took hold with a vengeance).

This quote gives an insight into social life in Saudi Arabia, highlighting the characters' daily routine in order to show Anglophone readers how the social injustices in terms of gender and class oppress Saudi women. Additionally, with the differences between the rigid conservative Saudi culture "that disdains romantic love" and the liberal Western culture, the review portrays Saudi society from the dominated Orientalised stereotypical viewpoint.

While focusing on the political themes of Khal's novel *Throwing Sparks*, Long (2013) notes:

Though Khal does much to encourage our empathy for the various women of the novel, and though the novel clearly condemns the vile treatment of women and their secondary status in Saudi Arabia, one gets the sense that women are set on a pedestal, which is not necessarily progressive.

In Long's (2013) opinion, the treatment of female characters by the male protagonists in Khal's novel is viewed as an accurate reflection of prejudiced attitudes against women, where the "way of thinking about women is consistent with misogynistic violence" (Long, 2013). Interpretive strategies which reflect Saudi women's otherness are frequently used by these members of the Western media community. These perspectives are clearly influenced by the ideological grounds of East-West relationship. Hartman (2012, p. 18), in her study, justifies that this attitude is "deeply linked to the widespread misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims—in particular Arab, Muslim women—that draw upon all-too-familiar notions of exoticism, misogyny, and oppression in order to understand them as Other".

This Orientalised attitude can also be found in reviews of Alem's novel *The Dove's Necklace*, which has been described as "a work preoccupied with how women are perceived by others and perceive themselves in modern-day Mecca" (Feathers, 2016). Alem's novel here is considered in the context of Arab women writers in which the 'Orientalised Other' has shaped these Anglophone responses. Feathers (2016) presents

stereotypical images of Arabs and Muslims, examining the gendered segregation in Saudi society. She refers to Alem's novel as "sensual, a mirror of the inflamed passions of men and women for whom the other sex remains apart and therefore alluringly mysterious" (Feathers, 2016). Then, the reviewer frames her account through a stereotypical Western critical response that has pervaded the reception of Arab women writers, and focuses mainly on how Alem's main female protagonists (Azza and Aisha) deal with Arab/Muslim cultural customs and particularly with Saudi national politics:

Unlike outsiders for whom restrictions are less severe, local women, even when completely covered, must remain inside their homes and away from doorways and windows so as not to be seen. Books other than the Qur'an and religious tracts are forbidden, as is any form of self-expression, like wearing nail polish, a colored hair ribbon, or a string of beads. Travel requires a male guardian's consent. Taking photographs of women, even with the head and body totally covered, are taboo except when practical considerations, such as passport photos, require it. Women are ghosts to themselves and to others, faceless in life, in death, and even in dreams. (Feathers, 2016)

These Anglophone reviewers in this interpretive community often use the 'Orientalised Other' approach for reading these novels, which enable them to find only what they already expected. This can also be echoed in the historical discourse of the Orientalist relationship between East and West. In his recent study of the representation of Arab/Muslim in American films, Tayyara (2014, p. 1) states that "Arabs and Muslims continue to be perceived as the Other, remaining on the other side of the psychosocial border that has been created over the centuries". As Fish's concept of 'interpretive community' suggests that the readers' interpretive strategies are learned from the community they belong to, and are shared with their audience and their socio-cultural contexts. Hence, the Anglophone reviews are likely to be influenced by the negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims as represented in Western media. These types of stereotypical views can significantly influence Anglophone readers, who form opinions about literary texts translated into English before reading them.

As Booth (2010) points out, the Orientalised version of Arab-Muslim society as the "familiar stranger" produced in the translation process continue to shape readers' responses to fiction written by Arabs in the Western world, particularly in the US. The desire to gaze at the Other seems to be an important reason why Saudi novels, particularly

women's novels, are translated and read by Western audiences, as "sometimes Muslim women attract Western attention less for their literary efforts than for how they can be considered in a larger political debate" (Adams, 2008) about East-West relationship. Massad (2015) highlighted that Orientalism has had a significant impact on the Western responses to the Arab and Muslim fiction, particularly women's writing. For example, Western reviewers still represent the same image of gender-related issues in the Arab world, focusing on certain Saudi women's novels such as *Girls of Riyadh*, which is a direct consequence of this Orientalist gaze.

In addition to the previous interpretive strategies, these Anglophone reviews tend to link gender issues to Islam. Thus, Saudi women appear to be victims of "a society in which Islam suffuses everything, and ruinous scandal lurks around every corner" (Hundley, 2008). Moreover, Saudi women lack freedom "in a society bound by strict Islamic laws" (Seymenliyska, 2007). According to Freeman (2007), the stated aim of *Girls of Riyadh* "is nothing less than to expose the hypocrisy and contradictions inherent in a highly rigid society ruled by Sharia, the law derived from the Koran". Clearly then, this interpretive technique also suggests a generalised view of Arab/Muslim women as victims of Islamic violence, reflected in Nahai's claim that

the great majority of Muslim women have more to fear than a slew of unfaithful husbands and intolerant parents. And the mutual hatred between Sunnis and Shiites, their animosity toward Jews, their distrust of "infidels" -- all this and much more that ails extremist and moderate Muslims alike cannot be dismissed or wished away by facile explanations such as those offered by Alsanea's narrator. (Nahai, 2007)

While Alsanea's novel provides a window into Saudi life for Western readers, it can also be said to reveal a long history of presenting and consuming the Orientalised Other, in which media has played a significant role in shaping western public opinion about Islam and Arabs/Muslims (see section 7.3). Said (1997, p. xx) states that "Islam has become, therefore, a central discussion in many policymaking, as well as media, circles". An element of discrimination against Muslim women has been reflected in numerous reviews. Moreover, some reviewers are disappointed by the female protagonists of *Girls of Riyadh* because they seem not to oppose their conservative culture when readers may be expecting a challenging and rebellious attitude. Aspden (2007) refers to Alsanea's

novel as being “more a love letter to America than a poison pen to the Saudi establishment”. Some scholars point out that the stereotypical image of Muslim women continues to exist in the global marketplace, where they “often navigate between certain Orientalist stereotypes that marketed images sometimes challenge and sometimes reify” (Gökariksel & McLarney, 2010, p. 2).

The attitudes shared by these reviewers are also reflected in the repeated content, highlighting the same themes whenever they read novels by Saudi/Arab women writers. This image of Muslim women as victims is intrinsically linked to the general Arab and Muslim stereotypes represented in the Western media as Said (1997, 2003) argued:

CNNs and Foxs of this world, plus myriad numbers of evangelical and right-wing radio hosts, plus innumerable tabloids and even middle-brow journalists, all of them re-cycling the same unverifiable fictions and vast generalizations [about Arabs/Muslims as Others]. (Said, 2003, p. xv)

The reviews presented in this section suggest that *Girls of Riyadh*'s “perfunctory storytelling attracts greater interest because of its unusual origins” (Kirkus Review, 2007). The phrase “unusual origins” relates to gender (female Saudi author) as it does point to expectations about what they can usually find as Western readers. The novel is framed by these reviewers as an informational text about the reality of a mysterious society, showing their specifically Western horizon of expectations. Amireh (2000, p. 215) argues that the reception of Arab women's novels “to a large extent, ends up rewriting both the writer and her texts according to scripted first world narratives about Arab women's oppression”. As these examples have shown there is evidence that the readings by reviewers of these Saudi novels have been influenced by an Orientalist horizon of expectation and read these novels in order to explore the Arabic culture, explaining that the “prose style is not the reason to read this novel [...] Alsanea takes us on a wide-ranging tour of regional and class stereotypes in the kingdom” (Ahmed, 2007). Another review alerts readers to the fact that this novel can be read “as a scandal-mongering piece of cultural writing, it also, as the 21st-century version of an epistolary novel, reads like a blog between covers” (Freeman, 2007).

There is also evidence that the Anglophone interpretive community pay particular attention to the gender of Saudi novelists, framing female authors from the Kingdom in

specific ways. For instance, reviews of Alem's work often introduce her as "the first Arab woman to win the IPAF". Some reviewers in the Western press then link this to suggestions that her win caused controversy in the Arab world, noting that the prize has been accused of "being too closely allied with governmental powers, discriminating against women and rewarding novels that cater to western interests" (León, 2016). Thus, highlighting such issues firmly brackets Alem as an 'Arab women's writer' in Western reception while the author herself claims that she would "never look at [her] writing in terms of gender. It's just human writing" (Davies, 2011). Alem has made her views on attempts to pigeonhole her as a female Saudi novelist clear. When questioned during an interview at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2014 about her opinion on the status of Saudi women as a female Saudi writer, she replied: "When you say 'a woman, a Saudi writer,' I am shocked. Because I don't belong to anybody or to any country. I belong to the books I write. To this free flow of thinking, of energy" (Alem, 2014). These examples illustrate that in the Western context, novels written by Saudi women are often reviewed in terms of their value as social and ethnographic resources. According to Amireh and Majaj (2000) this is a common feature of Western interpretations of literature written by women from developing countries: "Instead of being received and read as literature, and assessed on literary grounds, Third World women's literary texts have been viewed primarily as sociological treatises granting Western readers a glimpse into the 'oppression' of Third World women" (Amireh & Majaj, 2000, p. 7).

It is noticeable these Anglophone reviews frequently tend to link the events portrayed in these Saudi novels to their authors' own lived experiences, stressing the notion that these works of fiction are based on real stories. This interpretive strategy is worth mentioning here, as this reflects how Western reviewers may be responsible for persuading the Western public to think of Saudi society in particular ways. For instance, *Girls of Riyadh* is seen and marketed as a successful memoir that reads contemporary Saudi society through the lens of a young woman focused on the hidden life of her countrywomen. Hence, this supposed autobiographical element is one of the most important factors that serves "to shape the context for European and American consumption of fictional literature from the region" (Booth, 2010, p.151).

In the case of *Girls of Riyadh*, the novel's first-person narrator, the fact that it is structured as a series of weekly emails, and the act of exposé that it offers, have all encouraged

readers to interpret the text as Alsanea's autobiographical memoir. Thus, some reviewers stress that this novel is based on Alsanea's real experiences as a young Saudi girl who "grew up in the society she writes about" (Hundley, 2008), and "knows her subject well" (ibid). At the same time, some reviewers claim that this novel highlights socio-political issues that Saudi society often tends to deny, but as Alsanea lives in Riyadh "she clearly knew first-hand the velvet class she describes" (Seymenliyska, 2007). Khalaf (2006) points out that although Alsanea "insists that *Girls of Riyadh* is not based on her own life or that of her friends", it is based "on stories that she's heard" (ibid). Beresford (2007) quotes Alsanea's statement that she "wrote about humanity [in Saudi Arabia]" and that all she wanted to do was "to show that both men and women are victims of society". Another reviewer refers to this novel as a kind of "online confession by a smart and feisty 23-year-old woman" (Freeman, 2007).

In addition, some Anglophone reviewers include quotes from Saudi citizens to support their interpretation of Alsanea's novel as a reflection of Saudi reality, a strategy that helps to reinforce this reading of the novel for the Western audience. Thus, for example, Khalaf (2006) points out that "a Saudi man and fan of Rajaa [said]: the book exposed [Saudi] society". Moreover, Abu-Nasr (2005) notes that in an interview, Alsanea "says many supportive readers have e-mailed her at [rajaarajaa.net](http://rajaarajaa.net)". Whitaker (2006) also comments that "the [Saudi] minister of culture, Iyad Madani, said it reflects the way many young people in the kingdom actually live". Another review by Eltahawy (2008) quotes a young male Saudi citizen who explains that some aggressive reactions against *Girls of Riyadh* can be due to the fact that

[those over 40] would probably be shocked to learn about the lives of younger people, like how they have fun and how they manage their relationships with the opposite sex in such a strict society, but for people my age, it didn't carry that big amount of surprise because this is our life, this is how we go about it and how we try to deal with our issues.

Eltahawy (2008) also includes the following opinion from an unnamed Saudi woman who reports that Alsanea's novel "caused chaos because our deep, private secrets became exposed to the outside world. This is an expected reaction—we are ashamed to admit to the world how hypocritical our people can be. I see this slowly changing".

Similar interpretations can also be found in reviews by Anglophone readers of novels by Khal and al-Mohaimed. As an example, Long (2013) refers to Khal's novel as "to some extent both a kind of confessional novel and a profession of faith, [...] written in the first person". Along the same lines, in her review of *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*, Kratka (2008) observes:

Not only does Al-Mohaimed manage to raise awareness and open discussion on, until recently, untouchable subjects, but by his outspokenness he also reaches a large number of readers, Saudi or other, on a personal and human level by depicting the harsh reality of peoples living on the fringes of the Saudi society.

As noted previously at the beginning of this section, some Anglophone reviews emphasise the supposed links between Saudi fiction and the reality of life for those who live in the Kingdom, on the grounds that this is what makes this literature interesting and attractive for Western readers. In this context, Davies (2011) claims that Alem's novel *The Dove's Necklace*

reveals the true face of Mecca: behind the city's holy veil there is another Mecca, where many crimes are committed and there is also corruption, prostitution and mafias of building contractors who are destroying the historic areas of the city, and therefore its soul, for commercial gain.

While these Anglophone reviewers put emphasis on how fictional representations provide insights into Saudi reality, some also draw attention to the courage of their authors, showing them as activists rather than passive victims. In the case of Saudi women authors, this could be linked to seeing Saudi/Muslim women as victims, therefore, anyone who does something that does not conform to that stereotype becomes brave. For example, Ahmed (2007) praises Alsanea for her boldness in situating herself "clearly on the side of romance" and argues that "her exploration of whether it can exist in Saudi Arabia is brave and surprisingly informative". In the Anglophone reception context, Alsanea is also referred to as "a brave and intelligent young woman" (Freeman, 2007) while Khalaf (2006) observes that even though she "insists it is not her intention to change all that [women's issues], she can claim to have made a small contribution to young Saudis' war of liberation". Interestingly, this review frames Alsanea as a part of broader conflict of liberals vs. conservatives in the Saudi society (see section 4.2).

Anglophone critical responses often read these contemporary Saudi novels in terms of their intertextual links to well-known translated Arabic literature such as *The Thousand and One Nights*. Thus, for example, according to Lytal (2007), Al-Mohaimed's *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* “has actual recourse to the desert and its genies, [where] Turad was Ali Baba, marauding on the hajj trails”. The same novel is also described as “a tale with the flavor of a thousand and one nights and the factualness of a U.N. report on the contemporary slave trade” (Cheuse, 2007). Linking this novel to the traditional form of *The Thousand and One Nights* suggests that some Orientalist views have influenced the reviewer, who draws attention to two clichéd ideas about Arab culture: the tales of the *Arabian Nights* and the slave trade. For a Western audience, this emphasis can create specific assumptions about the novel’s plot and themes before they read it for themselves.

In the same vein, the female narrator of *Girls of Riyadh* has been described as “a hectoring Scheherazade, [who] provides her online audience with a harsh assessment of Saudi men” (Henighan, 2007). Overt references of this kind may invite the reader to make specific intertextual comparisons but they also serve to situate Alsanea’s text and other Saudi novels within an Orientalist frame of interpretation. Members of this Anglophone interpretive community read these novels the way they do because they have been culturally trained to read in a certain way and to interpret Saudi novels within a broader literary frame of reference conditioned by Orientalism.

Discussion of these examples indicates that the reception of the selected Saudi novels is heavily influenced by the fact that the horizon of expectations of these Anglophone readers has been shaped to a greater or lesser degree by the East/West dichotomy of Orientalism, simply repeating the familiar readings of Arab/Islamic culture in the dominant Western discourse.

However, not all reviewers in the Western press share these Orientalist attitudes. Some Anglophone reviewers challenge these assumptions by looking for familiar elements in the discourse of these Saudi novels, interpreting them instead as commodities that form part of a globalised cultural exchange. As the following sections show, in this case, the focus completely shifts away from presenting these Saudi novels as ‘exotic’ and ‘different’. Instead, they are interpreted in terms of their familiarity, and are categorised as examples of popular fictional genres, acclaimed for their ‘universality’.

### 7.4.3 Saudi novels universalised

In his study of Arabic literature, Allen (1988, p. 201) notes that “the reception of Arabic literature in the West has thus always been set within a complicated array of cultural attitudes. The intricate questions of “influence” and cultural exchange between the two remain the subject of much controversy”.

Thus, the interest in Saudi fiction, then, may have been prompted in part by the reflection of Western cultural influences on Saudi youth culture that readers seek to find familiar elements in these texts. Amongst this community of Anglophone reviewers, these Saudi novels and their writers are viewed as representatives of a new generation in Saudi Arabia in two respects. Firstly, in the sense that they take advantage of modern Western life and of new technologies to express a different concept of freedom, in the process creating an Arab form of ‘chick lit’. Secondly, their work has been influenced by ‘world literature’ and universalism, representing the extent to which the relationship between Arabic and Western cultures can be considered dynamic and mutually constitutive. These are two distinct forms of cultural capital, creating two communities that use very distinct strategies to interpret these Saudi novels.

Some Anglophone reviewers situate *Girls of Riyadh* within the ‘chick lit’ genre, viewing it as the story of the lives of four young Saudi girls. In these reviews, there are often references to the popular two chick lit novels in the West: Fielding’s (1996) *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and Bushnell’s (1997) *Sex and the City*. A definition of the term ‘chick lit’ is necessary here as it will be frequently used in this section. Chick lit has been identified by various literary critics as a postfeminist fiction written by young female novelists focusing on their love lives, shop, friends and hobbies. It began in the Western world and then becomes a popular fictional form worldwide, and it “brings into focus many of the issues facing contemporary women and contemporary culture—issues of identity, of race and class, of femininity and feminism, of consumerism and self-image” (Ferris & Young, 2006, p. 2). Mazza (2006, p. 18) explains that the term ‘chick lit’ was first coined with ironic intention in her joint book *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, published in the mid-1990s, “not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take

responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype”. Since then, this kind of fiction has become a “commercial tsunami” (Ferris & Young, 2006, p. 2), going global and receiving a massive readership. Thus, when *Girls of Riyadh* was translated into English, some Anglophone readers chose to view it as Arabic chick lit, comparing Alsanea’s story about her friends’ love lives with this popular Western genre that may have influenced Alsanea to write her novel.

The phrase ‘Sex and the City’, for instance, appeared on the novel’s UK cover and was widely quoted in various reviews. Moreover, the words ‘sex’, ‘lust’ and ‘love’ became the central theme of many headlines for reviews in Western newspapers, including *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and *The New York Times*:

Funny and chilling: sex in the Saudi city. (Adil, 2007)

It is chick lit for veiled women. (Watrous, 2007)

Is this *Sex and the City* for Saudi Arabia? (Buchan, 2007)

From Saudi Arabia, Chick Lit Without the Racy Bits. (Zoepf, 2007)

Sex and the Saudi girl: The writer who brought chick-lit to Arabia tells about passion behind the veil. (Thomas, 2007)

These titles and key phrases from some of the Anglophone reviews of Alsanea’s novel clearly demonstrate how this interpretive community positions *Girls of Riyadh* within both a local and familiar global context. For example, Adil (2007) draws readers’ attention to the similarities between the lives of Alsanea’s Saudi protagonists and their American counterparts since just like

their New York sisters, the girls of Riyadh live lives of branded plenitude. They watch Hollywood blockbusters, carry miniature pedigree dogs in designer handbags, go to the gym, console themselves with rhinoplasty and chemical peels, drink daddy's secret stash of Dom Perignon and dance the night away in Badgley Mishka or Roberto Cavalli.

This review represents Alsanea’s protagonists as consumers of globalised commodities, highlighting their cosmopolitan lifestyle and invites the Western audience to read this novel as a Saudi variant of a popular Western genre. As mentioned earlier in this chapter (see section 7.3), the publisher of *Girls of Riyadh* suggests this reading to those purchasing the book, with the blurb on the novel’s cover introducing it as a “bestselling

tale of sex and the city” (Penguin UK, 2008). Watrous (2007) also begins her review by noting that “before one of the characters in *Girls of Riyadh* names *Sex and the City* as her favorite TV show, its influence upon Saudi writer Rajaa Alsanea's first novel is clear”, thus encouraging the reader to make this connection. Thus, this novel is often identified as an example of mainstream chick lit in which

the girls, three of them university students, are so silly: dreaming non-stop of love and marriage, practising astrology, obsessed by the men they never, or hardly ever, are allowed to see but with whom they chirp like crickets throughout the night on their mobile phones. (The Economist, 2007)

These readings clearly emphasise that Saudi girls are “not so different from girls anywhere else” (Watrous, 2007). They have described the influence of Western culture on the Arabic/Saudi youth culture, illustrating how the younger generation has consumed global culture, mixing Arabic and English words in their daily communication and travelling to different metropolitan Western cities. From this reader-response perspective, then, the prior assumptions held by this interpretive community are influenced by both the publisher’s and the author’s aim to domesticate the text when they translate it and market it as a chick lit. Booth (2008, p. 200-201) explains how she tried to foreignise the translation in the way that would bring the reader to Saudi culture, without turning Saudi Arabia into an English readers’ culture (see section 7.3). It is more likely that a text marketed to the reader as a certain style of literature will enter as such in the critical consciousness of its reviewers.

It is important, however, to emphasise that these reviews evoke a sense of familiarity as well as stressing some differences. For example, in reference to *Girls of Riyadh* Beresford (2007) observes that the protagonists “exist within a particularly rigid Islamic tradition” but also points to the fact that “for all the cultural and religious differences, these teenagers are seen to echo educated girls the world over: they giggle, they bitch, and their dreams are often thwarted by social constraints” (Beresford, 2007 ). Another instance can be found in the review by Zoepf (2007), who argues that *Girls of Riyadh* is similar to the Western chick lit genre because its protagonists

spend a great deal of time thinking about fashion and lifestyles—the names of the four girls’ favorite brands, like Cavalli, and favorite

restaurants in places like London and San Francisco, are mentioned constantly—and how to ensnare successful partners.

However, she also comments on the cultural differences noting that Alsanea's conservative Muslim girls have to deal "with the search for cunning ways around the daily frustrations and oppression of Saudi society while basically remaining classic good girls" (Zoepf, 2007). Examples of this kind seem to suggest that these Anglophone reviewers tend to read this novel as though it were popular chick lit fiction as a result of how it was marketed. However, Western stereotypes about Arab women create conflicting themes of familiarity and exoticism, leading to some disappointment during the reading act. This is because readers come to the text with preconceived ideas of what the stories should be about and usually mean in Western eyes as a piece of Arabic chick lit fiction written by a woman. In other words, their horizon of expectations plays a significant role in how they interpret and evaluate the text. If the point of reference for readers is the generic conventions of Western-style chick lit, then they are likely to find *Girls of Riyadh* familiar. Some Anglophone reviewers, such as Thomas (2007), predicted that this lack of exoticism may prove unexpected and therefore disappointing for certain readers expecting to "get a peek at what's going on behind the veils and under the burqas" since "disappointingly, the scenes are not too dissimilar to a western hen party: bitching, belly dancing and gossiping about men. The atmosphere seems far from warm and sisterly. Girls obsess about bodies and eye each other [...] with envy" (ibid).

This example provides a description of how Anglophone readers may choose to read this Saudi novel within their own socio-cultural contexts. Having already learned from the Orientalised discourse of Arab/Islamic culture that women are positioned in a secondary status, oppressed 'behind the veils', they are faced with different scenes in Alsanea's novel. In this novel, the Saudi female protagonists have jobs, shop, travel alone, consume global brands and make use of technologies such as mobile phones and the Internet. These images challenge Western expectations of Saudi/Arab women, resisting Orientalist stereotypes, because "the impossibility of independent lives does not politicise them [Alsanea's protagonists], or alienate them from Islamic fundamentalism. Instead they congratulate one woman for the "bold spiritual step" of deciding to wear the full hijab" (Adil, 2007). Although this interpretive community of Western press categorise *Girls of Riyadh* as chick lit, their expectations are unsatisfied. Booth (2010, p. 167) argues that

readers are disappointed by the “text’s tameness” and this is not only because that “sex remains behind closed doors in the novel” but also “its cosmopolitan, wired young protagonists are not the exotica of Hollywood’s Arabia”. Thus, by positioning *Girls of Riyadh* as chick lit, reviewers evoke a series of generic expectations but, as Nahai (2007) notes:

[t]he women are Sunni Muslim -- obedient, observant, compliant. They know the ways of the West but remain Arab at heart. They push boundaries but never break them. As for sex, they engage in it rarely, surreptitiously and with devastating consequences. (Nahai, 2007)

The novel’s simultaneous conformity with generic expectations is illustrated in the *Publishers Weekly* (2007) review which described it as “timid by American chick lit standards [...], [the protagonists’] world is dominated by prayer, family loyalty and physical modesty. [B]ut the voracious consumption of luxury goods [...] and yearnings for female empowerment are also part of the package”. Hence, it can be argued that the author’s own editing and retranslation efforts, which are mentioned earlier (see section 7.3), help to ease the novel’s acceptance by Anglophone readers. In the author’s note, Alsanea (2007, p. vii) states that she aimed to challenge Western clichés about Saudi/Arab women, claiming that after reading her novel she wanted Western readers to realise that “these women are beginning to carve out their own way – not the Western way, but one that keeps what is good about the values of our religion and culture, while allowing for reform” (Alsanea, 2007, p. viii). By doing so, Alsanea reinforces certain modern images and creates a particular readers’ community that has been directed by such pre-reading assumptions that market the novel as Arabic chick lit genre. This decision not only fuelled interest in reading this novel, but also sparked a campaign to translate and publish it in different foreign languages. Thus, the reception of Alsanea’s novel as a chick lit seems to reveal a potential double disappointment. First, the characters do not conform to stereotypes of Arab/Muslim victims. Second, the text does not include the same levels of explicitness that would be found in Western chick lit.

Thus, it can be argued that some Western press reviews may aim to target a group of readers within their interpretive community whose interest lies in the chick lit genre and are already familiar with this. Thus, they describe *Girls of Riyadh* as “an irresistible [...and] an entertaining read: revealing, hilarious and chilling in turn” (Adil, 2007). The

novel is usually seen by these reviewers as “predictable entertainment” (Nahai, 2007), but the “main satisfaction of Alsanea's novel is not literary” (Watrous, 2007). It can be clear that the chick lit genre is the main focus of this press reviewers’ interpretive community. They tend to position Alsanea's novel as a popular fiction that will capture the interest of a specific Western readership. Casanova (2004, p. 171) argues that popular fiction often sells more than other novels, because “what is new today is the manufacture and promotion of a certain type of novel aimed at an international market”. This tendency can be due to the commercial forces, where “a growing share of the books published today are commissioned by the publisher” (ibid). These are important points, which merit detailed discussion when considering Western attitudes towards other Saudi novels.

There is an agreement by members of this Anglophone interpretive community that these Saudi novels have been categorised as popular fictional genres such as crime and fantasy. The ability to classify a novel can put readers at ease by giving them a familiar point of literary reference. Interestingly, Alem’s novel *The Dove’s Necklace* was described by *Publishers Weekly* (2016) as crime fiction, a blend of “surrealism and mystery”. As mentioned earlier in section 6.3, the novel’s cover certainly situates it as crime. Thus, the reviewer explained that “the discovery of the nude corpse of a woman named Azza in the lane leads detective Nasser al-Qahtani to investigate [...] but fans of traditional whodunits should be prepared for a meandering plot” (*Publishers Weekly*, 2016).

This quote informs readers about a key element of the novel’s plot, creating a particular horizon of expectations before they read the novel. However, it also evokes a sense of ironic view through adventurous experience that can be different from “traditional whodunits”, as ‘a meandering plot’ could be interpreted negatively.

León (2016) also takes a similar view of *The Dove’s Necklace*, praising the novel as “a fascinating, enchanting metropolis full of secrets”. She draws readers’ attention to the major themes of the crime that is committed in the novel:

As Detective Nassir grapples with the mystery of the dead woman, the alley of Abu Al Roos offers hints, but the answers are buried in memory, imagination, and emails [...] Like a David Lynch film, the novel demands your full attention, asking more questions than it answers. Yet

also like a Lynch film, it's masterly crafted and perfectly paced. (León, 2016)

This review also alludes to “the murder mystery in a distant setting”, leading to many questions that may attract readers to find their answers, and thus links the content of Alem's novel with a recognised American well-known filmmaker. This referencing can draw readers to predict the novel's themes when comparing with Lynch's films, creating certain assumptions that can influence public opinions. This intertextual strategy will give readers points of reference they can then agree with it or not.

Similarly, Wright (2016) draws parallels between Alem's novel and a diverse group of well-known Western novelists:

To make comparisons between Arab authors and Euro-American literature is usually pointless and misleading. But with Alem's book, my mind kept wandering to scenes in Joyce's *Ulysses*, to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and, most bizarrely of all, to William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, though without much sex or drugs.

Wright (2016) then criticises Western readers, who use sociological insights or feminist approaches to interpret *The Dove's Necklace*, arguing that anyone seeking an “Orientalist setting is likely to come away disappointed”, primarily because, in his opinion, the novel is “about the oddness of being human, transcending place and time”.

While on the one hand, comparisons to well-respected Western works may guide readers approach to reading a particular text, these comparisons may also be carefully chosen by publishers as a skilful marketing device designed to promote sales of the novel. Thus, the inside cover of *The Dove's Necklace* claims that “Alem's reputation in contemporary Arabic literature is similar to Nabokov's in ours: masterful, erudite, witty, and somewhat dangerous” (Alem, 2016). This type of attempt to create familiarity can be called ‘universalization’, and for Casanova (2004, p. 154) this process can be viewed as part of the creation of symbolic literary capital and “involves two things that are inseparably linked: celebration and annexation”. Linking Alem's novel to prestigious, well-known or canonical Western fiction, “is a way of systematically imposing the categories of the centre upon works from the periphery, even of unilaterally deciding the meaning of such

works” (ibid). In this case, Anglophone readers are encouraged to understand the meaning of the translated text and evaluate it in terms of the symbolic literary capital accrued by the other works of literature (often of Western origin) to which it has been compared.

This strategy of universality is exemplified in reviews of al-Mohameed’s novel *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* that draw comparisons between the narrative style of his text and the elements that constitute magical realism. Austerlitz (2008) claims that al-Mohameed has been influenced by Latin American literature but “seems unable to steer the splendid vehicle once driven by Borges and García Márquez”. This reviewer analyses al-Mohameed’s technique in terms of its magical and the fantastic elements critiquing his magical realism as being “of a tempered, partial sort, seeking to invest contemporary Saudi society with a patina of age and inscrutability” (ibid). Austerlitz (2008) criticises the novel further on the grounds that

it is also an incomplete portrait, whose disparate pieces do not properly add up. Magical realism thrives on disjunction - on the intersection between reality and fantasy - but without a solid grounding in a familiar society, any magic will undoubtedly sink beneath the waves.

This review attempts to give Western readers new to al-Mohameed’s work a literary point of reference in magical realism (a literary style of the periphery that became part of the prestigious centre largely thanks to translation). However, having categorised al-Mohameed’s style as magical realism, the reviewer then evaluates it using this yardstick and finds it wanting.

Lytal (2007) also points to similarities and differences between al-Mohameed and the magical realist novelist, Gabriel García Márquez: “al-Mohameed does not have Mr. García Márquez’s depth or his high degree of flair”, but he does share “the Colombian’s tact, disclosing about his peoples only what is genuinely mysterious and powerful, eschewing the merely exotic” (ibid.). However, according to Lytal (2007), al-Mohameed claims that his influences come from “Balzac and Dickens along with Dostoevsky” and “wants to distinguish himself from those exoticizing Saudi writers who are writing with the aim only of exciting the reader” (Lytal, 2007). Thus, this influence of those critically acclaimed writers, reflects the consecration of symbolic literary capital and represents al-Mohameed’s novel as a universal text. This statement also illustrates the connection

between al-Mohaimeed's literary merit and the cultural capital of other literary works that is stressed by putting himself on the same level as Balzac, Dickens and Dostoevsky. Within the same interpretive community, Tonkin (2010), in his review of Khal's novel, claims that the translation process and the strategy of universality can "help to make [novels'] themes and people more familiar to readers in the wider world, and less dependent for their impact on predigested clichés".

These reviewers are members of the same interpretive community, reading these Saudi novels as universal and international literature. According to Casanova (2004, p. 163), this interpretation help writers from the periphery "to obtain recognition in the leading capitals only at the cost of seeing their works appropriated by the literary establishment for its own purposes". It can be argued that the interpretive strategies used by these Anglophone readers aim to emphasise the universality of these Saudi novels at the expense of difference, categorising them as 'world literature' which can help to promote them in a challenging market. However, this interpretation does not seem to guarantee mass readership as some Arabic novels have gained great recognition in the Western press whereas others remain limited to a small number of reviews. In addition, while these Anglophone reviews highlight some similarities in terms of literary genre and consuming of pop culture, they also provide evidence of the complex hierarchical relation between the Western centre and the Arabic periphery. Thus, this symbolic cultural capital led these Saudi novels to be interpreted by looking at the dominant criteria of English literary works, as explained by Casanova (2004, p. 163).

## 7.5 Saudi novels in the Anglophone academic context

This section examines articles published in academic journals that are aimed at a specialist audience and which offer detailed analyses of the content, themes and style of the novels. The readings suggested in these articles focus mainly on gender politics as well as the concerns of Arab/Saudi women's lives, and their search for freedom. Though there are few articles by Western academics focusing entirely on Alsanea's and Alem's novels, some at least exist, whereas for Khal's and al-Mohaimeed's works I could find none. The English articles focusing entirely or partly on those Saudi novelists are mostly articles not by Western academics but by Arab academics, who work or study in Western

academia. In this case, these articles can be representatives of the Western academic reception of these Saudi novels because of the fact that they have been allowed to be published in a Western academic journal means that they are in line with Western academic horizons of expectations. It can be argued that the lack of interest in writing about these four Saudi novels in Western academic articles, may be due to the hierarchical relation between centre and periphery in the world literary space. As Allen (2010b), in an interview, states that “most academics in the Anglophone countries are interested in what was published in Egypt and Lebanon. In fact, we had little interest in what was published in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf”. This means that Saudi literature is still new for Western academics as well as some ‘world literature’. Casanova (2004, p. 115) describes this lack of interest by the Anglophone academics in the literature of periphery in the following terms:

In the literary world, domination is not exerted in an unequivocal way. Because hierarchical structure is not linear, it cannot be described in terms of a simple model of a single centralized dominant power. If literary space is relatively autonomous, it is also by the same token relatively dependent on political space. This fundamental dependency assumes a variety of forms, particularly political ones, and operates in a variety of ways, most notably through language.

Accordingly, it can be assumed that the academic interest in these Saudi novels has been influenced by the consecration of central literature as a model and literary resource for Western academia, which may lead to overlooking peripheral literature as a low-brow literature.

Most of the academic articles on Alsanea’s novel analyse the text for its feminist issues and representation of gendered space in relation to Arab/Muslim women. For instance, Ommundsen (2011) compares the chick lit themes that are represented in *Girls of Riyadh* with those found in other novels written by young non-Western writers. Her article explores how these chick lit texts deal with “the clash between the norms of a global (largely Western) consumer culture and those of the alternative modernities in which authors and protagonists negotiate their daily lives” (Ommundsen, 2011, p. 108). She stresses the similarities between *Girls of Riyadh* with its four young female protagonists who seek love, consume globalised goods, express their desire for fashion and “dream of meeting the right man” (ibid, p. 114) and Bushnell’s novel *Sex and the City*. However,

these Saudi girls are different to the extent that

the sexual freedom enjoyed by their Manhattan counterparts is a distant dream: their partners are chosen by their families according to strict tribal and religious rules; their husbands rule over their lives and can divorce them at whim if they step out of their pre-ordained roles [...] Their reaction is a curious mixture of protest and compliance. They experiment in secret with forbidden pleasures: champagne, cigarettes, clandestine online affairs. (Ommundsen, 2011, p. 114)

This article focuses on the concept of chick lit as a postfeminist approach to writing about young Saudi women's struggle in a contemporary era, where they live "with considerable force of cultural dilemmas Bridget Jones and Carrie Bradshaw never had to face" (ibid, p. 115). The author considers *Girls of Riyadh* to be "the best-known and most influential" of the non-Western chick lit she discusses, on the grounds that it "brings to light the starkest contrast between women's dreams and their reality, between a modern way of life and the most traditional and restricted gender roles" (ibid, p. 120).

Similarly, Gwynne (2013, p. 47) discusses gender roles, maintaining that "the relationship between feminist consciousness and romance is a central theme of [*Girls of Riyadh*]" . At the same time, the article examines the protagonists' movement within both physical and virtual space, exploring the gender-liberating possibilities offered by internet technology. While the younger generation in Saudi Arabia face various cultural, social and political constraints, they find alternative solutions to overcome them, particularly within the online space of the internet. Gwynne (2013, p. 48) notes that "[r]eacting against these constraints, *Girls of Riyadh* demonstrates the ways in which the limitations of the male-dominated home are negotiated through female friendships that offer opportunities for a retreat into female-governed physical spaces". The critic then addresses how Alsanea's protagonists are aware of these socio-cultural restrictions and try to find freedom in 'transnational spaces'. He gives examples of their experiences of escaping to friends' houses or Western metropolitan cities, physical spaces that allow them some freedom. In addition, Gwynne (2013, pp. 49-50) indicates that the "cyberspatial interaction appears to offer a similar form of liberation when physical departure is not possible". The article explains that in online space, communication with the opposite sex becomes possible as an alternative space where Saudi girls can express themselves. However, the article concludes that this virtual space cannot free Saudi young women from the socio-cultural

limitations, revealing that “it remains impossible to deny that the advent of new forums for communication does not automatically liberate women from the cultural vestiges that make every region particular” (ibid, p. 51). These feminist interpretations view Alsanea’s novel as an expression of the feminist opinions of Saudi Arabia’s younger generation and a critique of Saudi social restrictions means that her text is seen in the context of postfeminist literature by contemporary women writers.

Within the context of the feminist interpretive strategies used by this academic community, Laachir (2013, p. 33) reads Alem’s novel *The Dove’s Necklace* as a feminist discourse against “the dominant perception of the concealment and control of women bodies in the public spaces”. The critic then addresses Alem’s feminist critique of her Saudi culture, claiming that the author’s novel “provides a counternarrative that undermines the dominant discourse on the ‘necessity’ of strict gender segregation in the country, which is presented to the Saudis as a symbol of ‘modernity’” (Laachir, 2013, p. 39). Thus, Alem’s female characters have become a central focus in Laachir’s feminist reading, exploring how themes of love and sexual oppression are addressed in Alem’s narrative discourse in order to challenge the social restrictions on women’s freedom. Laachir (2013, p. 37) describes how the female protagonists in Alem’s novel “are faced with prohibitions imposed on love. Aisha and Azza, for example, both present the act of loving as an act of political rebellion”. This feminist interpretation leads the critic to claim that the internet offers freedom, “particularly for Saudi women whose freedom of movement is limited by the patriarchal and strict religious norms” (ibid.). As Laachir (2013, p. 37) explains, the protagonist’s email messages to her beloved have provided a degree of freedom for “her body and mind from fear, and to reconcile herself with her bodily desire”. In the critic’s view, this fear is caused by the gender segregation that isolates Saudi women from the outside world.

Perhaps the most important point she makes in her reading of Alem’s novel is that young Saudi women play a key role as intellectuals and writers, rebelling against their social constraints and speaking about “the silenced in society [... to] challenge dominant discourses on gender relations, sexuality and political and religious authority” (Laachir, 2013, p. 42). The feminist ideology underpinning this reading of Alem’s work highlights the notion of the Orientalist stereotypical depiction of Saudi/Arab women as victims of oppression, since Alem’s female protagonists challenge this assumption and provide

alternative images of well-educated Saudi women who “are becoming increasingly aware of [their rights] and have found their voice through literature and they will not be silenced” (ibid, p. 43).

Another view of these novels offered by some critics from a different academic perspective focuses on *Girls of Riyadh* as a scandalous fiction, explaining “how digital technology can appropriate reality through the staging of its infinite symbolic effects” (al-Ghadeer, 2006, p. 300). This critic claims that *Girls of Riyadh* attracted the attention of readers because of its new structure as email messages, which “calls attention to the rendition of an electronic text” (ibid, p. 298). In her view, this narrative approach had not been used for writing a novel on the Arab literary scene before Alsanea used it, and the critic argues that the “e-narrator mischievously promises, in the form of address, to reveal and expose the stories of her girlfriends. The e-narrator, moi, inhabits the machine like an oral narrator” (ibid). However, she does, paradoxically, not think this is an innovative novel claiming that “it is the coming together between the new technology of writing and the world of traditions and immutable social taboos” (al-Ghadeer, 2006, p. 300). According to this critical perspective, any attempt to read *Girls of Riyadh* as an innovative novel will show that “the text is limited in terms of its aesthetic experimentation and rejection of figurative language [...], including its glaring lack of characterisation and its shallow views on gender and on the writing of modernity” (ibid, p. 301). Although some critics references to digital technology in the novel use of e-mail format, Al-Ghadeer claims that this text cannot be viewed as cyberfiction because it “lacks the non-linear and associative nature of hypertexts” (ibid.). Al-Ghadeer (2006, p. 300) sees Alsanea’s novel as a traditional mode of narration that includes the email format, allowing

the narrator to establish a resemblance between her story and Shahrazad in *One Thousand and One Nights*. The affinity between oral forms of narration and this new media writing—emails, style of chat rooms, etc.,— is emphasized by the narrator who imagines herself sitting among her audiences and narrating.

In this interpretation, Alsanea’s text tries to depict romantic relations in Saudi society by using traditional narration technique. Then, Al-Ghadeer explains how Alsanea uses the verb ‘*infadaḥa*’ in the beginning of her novel which means, “a story got exposed. [and] the verb ‘*faḍaḥa*’ is to disclose, to expose, or to disgrace” (al-Ghadeer, 2006, p. 297).

Thus, the popularity of this work is not due to the literary innovation that it brings to the Arabic novel, but to the fact that it “is a peephole into what a young woman sees in her society and captures what is inside the hearts and minds of her girlfriends, the younger generation” (ibid, p. 299).

Within this academic community, El-Ariss (2012) agrees with Al-Ghadeer (2006) that Alsanea aims to expose her own conservative society and to redraw the boundary between the private and the public sphere. El-Ariss (2012), in his article on the role of Arabic authors in creating new way of writing, claims that Alsanea’s text has become a scandalous fiction, and he explains how usually “the author emerges in new writing as the *faḍḍāh/ah* [exposer, scandalizer] who exposes and hacks political models and literary tradition only to be hacked and exposed by his/her own hacking and *faḍh*” (El-Ariss, 2012, p. 1). In his reading, he explains that Alsanea’s novel opens with a reference to an email address quoted from a popular Lebanese show “*Sira w-infatahat*”, but the author changed the verb ‘*fataha*’ to ‘*faḍaha*’. Thus, “the author’s play on the word *fataha* [open] and *faḍaha* [expose] is fundamental to the narrative” (ibid, p. 9). El-Ariss (2012, p. 10) points out that “the chronicle of *faḍā’ih* [scandals]” in Alsanea’s novel was the main reason for the numerous media reactions. The critic argues that Alsanea wrote this text with the idea of becoming a celebrity author and with the desire to be considered as “a courageous woman author from Arabia with translations in multiple languages coincides with the desire to expose the social and political context from which the work arises” (ibid). However, he sees the true scandal as being the process of its translation, agreeing with Booth (2008) that the scandal is in the “author’s intervention in the process of translating her work into English sought to minimize if not altogether dismiss the role of the translator” (El-Ariss, 2012, p. 10). Exposing the editorial and publishing process, he argues, can reveal that “the threat to the translator’s role and the attempt to eliminate it operate as an attack, an infiltration, and a hacking of the economy of literary production (writing, reading, translating, and publishing)” (ibid, p. 11). By highlighting this issue, El-Ariss (2012, p.11) sees that the act of *faḍh* (expose) “becomes a kind of dangerous and wild writing, a set of practices that unfold beyond the text in order to shape its circulation, reception, and translation”.

From these academic examples, it can be argued that the Anglophone academic community is a heterogeneous interpretive community, made up of individuals from

diverse cultural backgrounds. However, these academic critics are united by the fact they belong to Western academia and that shapes the ways in which they interpret these Saudi texts. Feminist interpretations view Alsanea's and Alem's novels as an expression of the feminist opinions of Saudi Arabia's women writers and a critique of Saudi social restrictions positioning their texts as feminist literature by contemporary women writers. The academic community has shown more interest in *Girls of Riyadh* than in other texts because it offers a useful case study for exploring the politics of gender in Saudi society, and represents "a considerable achievement for chick lit as a vehicle for social intervention. Its commercial success, [...] points to the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of popular fiction as forum for debate and agent of social change" (Ommundsen, 2011, p. 120). The feminist ideology underpinning these critical readings of the novels by Alsanea and Alem has often been connected to issues of equality, making a larger political statement about women's status in Saudi society.

On the other hand, some critics in Western academia have represented Alsanea's novel as a scandalous fiction in terms of its production, translation and reception process. This interpretive community of academic critics question the artistic value and technical skills found in *Girls of Riyadh*, highlighting the issue of young writers with limited literary talent who produce a novel intended to become a *succès de scandale* purely for the purposes of gaining celebrity status.

## 7.6 Conclusion

This chapter on the Anglophone reception of these four Saudi novels has identified a range of factors that have motivated the reading of these novels in the Western context including the author (gender and nationality), the publisher and the publisher's advertising, best seller lists and reviews. The reviewers' opinions can be seen by the target audience as a source of information that may influence whether or not they decide to read a particular novel. Only one of these novels, *Girls of Riyadh*, received significant coverage in the Western media and critical reviews while the other three novels struggle to gain a wider readership. This difference may be due to the variety of marketing strategies that were used to introduce the novel in the Western context, along with the controversy surrounding the text, which generated increased interest in Alsanea's novel.

The Anglophone reviews examined here represent a wide range of interpretations that suggest strategies for reading these Saudi novels to the target audience. In the case of the Western press community, commercial factors and the evolving cultural contexts of this interpretive community determine whether they chose to read these Saudi novels as exotic representations of the Orientalised Other or as examples of international popular fiction or 'World Literature'. While there was considerable interest in these Saudi novels in the Western press to date relatively little notice has been paid to these texts by the academic community.

## Chapter Eight

### Conclusion

The research undertaken in this thesis has investigated the reception by different groups of Arab and Anglophone readers of these four novels written by Saudi authors: Abdo Khal's *Tarmī bi-sharar...*, Raja Alem's *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām*, Rajaa Alsanea's *Banāt al-riyāḍ* and Yousef al-Mohaimed's *Fikhākh al-Rā'iḥa*. In order to analyse this critical discourse, this study drew on Fish's (1980) concept of 'interpretive communities', combining this with a detailed examination of the socio-cultural and ideological contexts that shaped the reception of these works. This concluding chapter is divided into two sections. The first considers the key findings of this thesis in relation to the research questions that it set out to address. The second section identifies some potential directions for future research in this area.

#### 8.1 Research questions revisited

After exploring the previous literature in this field and considering Fish's (1980) concept of 'interpretive communities', four research questions were formulated in order to achieve the research aim of examining the reception of the selected Saudi novels. The first of these questions was:

*To what extent have political, social and cultural contexts shaped the Saudi literary space?*

A detailed discussion of the political, social and cultural contexts in contemporary Saudi Arabia was undertaken in chapter three, focusing specifically on the ways in which these three key elements have influenced the process of modernisation and social reform that has taken place in the Kingdom. It was noted that the alliance between Ibn Sa'ud and *Sheikh* Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb forged a state in which politics, religion and culture were to remain intrinsically bound together, and would continue to affect every aspect of life and thought for Saudi citizens. The religious authorities have attempted to control social change, and exercising this power has led to ongoing ideological conflicts

between conservative and more liberal voices on the Saudi cultural scene and this, in turn, has impacted significantly on the development of the novel as a literary genre. However, more recently, particularly after the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, increased governmental pressure has brought about noticeable developments in socio-political discourse, paving the way for a more tolerant religious discourse and greater change in Saudi society. The economic impact of the oil industry has also made a major contribution to social reform and the development of Saudi society, since the government has used profits from this to promote the provision of education in the Kingdom.

This thesis has examined how the effects of these political, social and cultural transformations in Saudi Arabia can be seen in a selection of novels that have gained critical recognition in both the Arab and Western worlds. This thesis has demonstrated that these political and socio-cultural contexts have had a significant influence on the dynamics of the Saudi literary space in terms of the publication, distribution and reception process.

The extent to which the dynamics of the Saudi literary space have been influenced by the factors identified in chapter three was the focus of the second research question:

*Which factors have significantly affected the status and reception of the contemporary Saudi novel?*

As demonstrated in chapter four, Saudi writers have faced a number of socio-cultural and political constraints that have had significant effects on the development of Saudi literary space. The conflict between *Ṣaḥwa* (Awakening movement) and *Ḥadātha* (modernist reformation) proved to be a significant influence on ideological attitudes towards Saudi modern literature. It was argued that some *Ṣaḥwa* leaders used their influence on public opinion to attack certain intellectuals and modernist writers in an attempt to prevent the public from reading their works. The power of ultraconservative religious discourse and the issuance of *fatwas* relating to Saudi writers themselves and their works have had a significant effect on shaping public awareness of Saudi literature, particularly the novel and its reception. As a result, publishing activities were regulated in Saudi literary space by means of very strict censorship. Censorship and the lack of freedom of expression became serious problems for journalists, publishers and writers in Saudi Arabia. This

struggle led some Saudi novels to be banned because they were seen as posing a major threat to the dominant conservative Saudi ideology and thereby influenced the ways in which these novels were read and reviewed. While the social controversy around these Saudi writers was raging, other writers applied self-censorship to avoid being attacked by extremists. Evidence of the extent to which that conservative cultural hegemony has shaped readers' attitudes towards Saudi novels was found by analysing the reception of the four Saudi novels that form the focus of this thesis.

Despite this widespread censorship, a new generation of writers and readers has found different ways to overcome these restrictions. As previously noted (section 4.4), the rapid expansion of the internet in the new millennium has contributed to significant changes in Saudi society, and paved the way for a new modern era. This new technology has opened the door to various developments in the educational, cultural and commercial sectors. For Saudi writers, the internet has provided an alternative means of writing and distributing their literary texts, giving them a much broader circulation than they might have previously achieved in print media. This has prompted the rise of a new generation of Saudi writers, who have challenged aspects of their cultural heritage and rejected social restrictions. Their novels made use of new literary techniques, developed to reflect social issues and to strongly critique prevailing ideologies.

The effects of the social changes following the events of 9/11, as discussed in chapter four, were reflected in the fact that Saudi novels, particularly those written by women, became more prominent in society. This new era also witnessed a surge in creative writing (including novels, short stories, and poems) produced by the younger generation.

It was also noted that Saudi literary space in general benefits from the prestige that is conferred by winning literary prizes. The symbolic capital conferred by literary prizes played a significant role in bringing particular Saudi novels to the attention of journalists and academics in both the Arab and Western worlds. Thus, those Saudi novelists who have won international literary prizes, such as Khal, Alem and al-Mohaimed, have gone on to become some of the most popular and highly rated writers in the Arab world. It is argued that this combination of factors has raised the profile of Saudi novels to the level that put them on the road towards becoming works of 'World Literature'.

The work of contemporary Saudi writers has received mixed reviews in the Arab press, and the four Saudi novels studied here have engendered continuing controversy in both the Saudi and non-Saudi Arab press. The third research question, therefore, focuses on this diversity of responses:

*How have these Saudi novels been received by different interpretive communities of Arabic-speaking readers?*

To answer this question, Fish's (1980) concept of 'interpretive communities' was used to examine the reception of these Saudi novels. According to Fish (1980, p. 14), interpretive communities consist of readers who adopt similar strategies when approaching a text and tend to share common viewpoints in their interpretations of it. Thus, Arab readers of these selected Saudi novels have been divided into two main groups: Arab journalists, Saudi and non-Saudi; and Arab literary critics, Saudi and non-Saudi, addressed in chapters five and six respectively. These two interpretive communities of Arab readers differ in the set of interpretive strategies they used to approach these Saudi novels. The larger Arab interpretive community is also made up of different sub-communities, each united by a shared discourse that don the ideology they espouse and subsequently shapes the interpretation they ascribe to.

Analysis of reviews by members of these communities revealed how pre-reading assumptions have significantly affected their responses to this novel. It was noted that the paratextual elements such as author's name on front covers, the title of the novel and the book blurbs that appeared on its cover all served to reinforce certain assumptions underpinning the sample of reviews (section 5.2.1). It was noted, for example, that these pre-reading assumptions are reflected in the references to Alghosaibi's opinion of *Banāt al-riyād* which appeared in the majority of the reviews by Arab interpretive communities. It can be argued that the symbolic capital that Alghosaibi enjoys as a Saudi diplomat and popular writer played a significant role in the marketing and reception process of *Banāt al-riyād*. The bans imposed on these Saudi novels also created certain assumptions, leading Arab readers to anticipate scandal before reading the text.

In the Saudi journalists' interpretive community, analysis of reviews identified two major types of readings of these texts: conservative traditionalist and liberal. Findings reveal

that these Saudi journalists view literature as having a didactic function, and therefore they judged the novel based on non-literary criteria (see section 5.2.1). However, chapter five showed that conservative Saudi journalists predominantly drew on ultraconservative Islamic ideology as their main source of interpretation, viewing Alsanea's work as a source of moral corruption. In their reception of this novel, these Islamic traditionalists focused on the writer herself as a Saudi woman rather than on the literary text. Thus, they interpreted this novel in a literalist fashion, condemning the author for failing to uphold Saudi/Islamic ideals. By echoing the ideology of *Ṣaḥwa* (see 5.2 and 5.2.1) cohesiveness of this conservative interpretive community is maintained and strengthened, including the audience they are writing for. On the other hand, liberal Saudi journalists praised the novel for its boldness in challenging the dominant traditional culture. It is worth highlighting here some of the differences and similarities in these groups of Saudi journalists' responses to *Banāt al-riyāḍ*. These groups of Saudi journalists employed similar criteria to evaluate the novel but arrived at different judgments as a result of their ideological differences.

By examining the ways in which *Banāt al-riyāḍ* was critically 'read' in the Saudi press, it was then possible to establish the extent to which critical discourse about this novel by non-Saudi Arab journalists was informed by this controversy. Analysis of reviews by Arab journalists revealed that their shared ideology frames Saudi society as an ultra-religious and closed community (see section 5.2.2). As discussed in chapter five, for non-Saudi Arab journalists, this stereotype is not related to the themes of *Banāt al-riyāḍ*, and instead they interpret this as a shocking text written by a young Saudi woman.

It has been argued (see sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2) that both Saudi and non-Saudi Arab journalists' responses to Alsanea's novel focus on three principal issues: the inclusion of taboo elements in the work; the extent to which the text acts as social documentary and its courage in raising women's issues in Saudi society. The complex relation between the ideological position expressed in these reviews by Arab journalists and the reality documented in this novel has shaped their interpretations, producing normative judgments of Alsanea's text. Therefore, when comparing Saudi and non-Saudi Arab journalistic responses to this novel, some similarities and differences were noted. In the discourse of conservative Saudi journalists, this novel was viewed as more shocking

because they were unable to accept the way in which its protagonists are portrayed as being representative of Saudi women, appearing to share globalised lives similar to those of girls elsewhere. Some non-Saudi Arab journalists, on the other hand, tended to view the novel's heroines as rebels who were resisting the reality of women's lives both in Saudi Arabia and to a certain extent elsewhere in the Arab world. Both interpretive communities made connections between the novel and religious conservatism in Saudi society. It can be argued that the conservative discourse of both Saudi and non-Saudi Arab journalists was underpinned by a similar attitude towards this novel, promoting the stereotypical image of Saudi/Islamic society.

However, the discourse of the liberal Arab journalists, both Saudi and non-Saudi, tends to challenge the hegemonic traditional culture, praising *Alsanea* for exposing the contradictions in Saudi/Arab societies. They argued that the socio-cultural status quo should be challenged by the new generation of Arab writers.

In addition, analysis of Arab journalistic discourse about these Saudi novels also identified an important debate regarding the cultural status of the Saudi novel within the broader context of the Arab literary scene. It was argued that the dynamics of a periphery-to-centre cultural transition form a major strand of both Saudi and non-Saudi Arab journalistic discourse in relation to the novels by Khal, Alem and al-Mohaimed. Thus, Arab journalistic discourse about these prize-winning Saudi novels reflected a division into two interpretive communities on the basis of nationality: those from the peripheral regions, particularly Gulf countries, celebrated the awards presented to Saudi novels as being well-deserved victories that repositioned these writers, moving them from periphery to centre, while those reviewers from the traditional centres of Arab culture, particularly Egypt, tended to be more negative about some of these award-winning Saudi works.

As discussed in chapter five (5.3.1 and 5.3.2), political and socio-cultural contexts tended to shape the responses of Arab journalists to these novels more than the actual content of the novels themselves. The identification of these influences highlighted the fact that in reality any interpretive community can be heterogeneous, producing different interpretations of the same text. This finding supports Fish's (1980) concept of 'interpretive communities' and the influence that they have on the readers' assumptions

of the text before the reading activities. Fish (1980, p. 166) states that the reader is not an “independent agent” as s/he is a member of a particular ‘interpretive community’ that provides her/him with the interpretive strategies for reading a text.

This thesis has argued that the diversity of responses seen in the reception of these Saudi novels by different interpretive communities is an important finding. Thus, the responses of Arab literary critics to these four Saudi novels diverged from those of Arab journalists. As chapter six sought to explain, this gap between professional literary readings and simplistic journalistic reading resulted from different interpretive communities based on their interpretive strategies and their understanding of the nature and role of literary texts. While Arab journalists largely focused their attention on the writers themselves and on extratextual elements, the focus shifted to the textual literary elements in Arab literary critics’ responses to these novels. Chapter six addressed the way in which Saudi and non-Saudi Arab literary critics have interpreted these Saudi novels, and found that they referred to modernist and postmodernist literary theories while offering an in-depth insight into the technique, style, and themes found in these Saudi texts. It was possible to identify two main groupings in the critical responses to these four Saudi novels: those literary critics who adopted a socio-cultural perspective, focusing on the novels’ thematic structure and their relationship with the socio-cultural reality of Saudi society, and those who concentrated mainly on the literary merit of the texts themselves.

As demonstrated in chapter six, both Saudi and non-Saudi Arab critics share a number of similarities as members of the same interpretive community. For example, their experiences of particular socio-cultural issues in the Arab world helped to create certain pre-reading assumptions and a specific horizon of expectations that served to shape their readings of these Saudi texts. Therefore, they highlighted that the social issues depicted in the narrative of these novels are not only Saudi concerns but are also common to other Arab societies. Moreover, these Arab critics shared some common intertextual literary knowledge, including an awareness of the *Qur’ān*, *Ḥadīth* and other Islamic texts. They also demonstrated a knowledge of the social constraints that are likely to create taboo subjects in the Arab world, namely sex, religion and politics, and an awareness of the Arab literary field. Some were also knowledgeable about Western literary theories. Their pre-reading assumptions affected their interpretation, as they tended to highlight

particular socio-cultural issues as representing significant themes in these Saudi novels. In their critical responses to these particular novels, Saudi and non-Saudi Arab literary critics appeared to apply similar interpretive strategies, paying particular attention to the themes of discrimination, alienation and inequality in these Saudi works as they pertain to race, gender, class, politics and sexuality.

However, there were also some discernible differences between Saudi and non-Saudi Arab literary critics in terms of the ways in which they responded to these Saudi novels. Saudi critics such as al-Ghadhāmī and al-Zahrānī adopted a positive attitude towards these Saudi novels, focusing mostly on the positive elements of their content, and choosing to overlook any aesthetic weaknesses. This can be seen as an attempt to encourage the new generation of Saudi writers to challenge the dominant culture within the conflict between conservatives and liberals on the Saudi literary scene (see section 6.2.1). These Saudi critics share a similar interpretive perspective in the sense that they believe that literature plays a significant function in helping to develop society. However, in the wider Arab critical context, attention shifted to close analysis based on aesthetic judgments, which highlighted the rich texture of these novels and the complexity of their themes, and these critics evaluated these Saudi novels from analytical-perspectives. Analysis of the literary critics' responses to these Saudi novels suggests that the readings by non-Saudi Arab critics have a level of 'sophistication' that distinguishes them from those of Saudi critics (see sections 6.2 and 6.3). This can perhaps be explained by the difference in the level of literary experience between Saudi and non-Saudi Arab critics, given that the novel as a genre only emerged in 1930 in Saudi Arabia.

It was also noted that *Banāt al-riyād* was considered technically weak by both Arab critical communities, Saudi and non-Saudi, and produced a heated debate about the use of *‘āmmiyya* (the dialectal variant of Arabic used in everyday speech) and *fushhā* (classical Arabic) in literary texts. Moreover, while these Arab critical communities considered that Alem's technical experimentation in her fiction made her one of the great Arab writers, their views differ sharply concerning the complex and ambiguous language she employed. Thus, Saudi novels that do not meet the standards of linguistic quality as determined by the conservative (purist) Arab critics are considered lacking in clarity, since they see their function as being to uphold particular standards in the Arabic language. These different views about which language was most appropriate for literary

works indicates that these literary critics applied different interpretive strategies when approaching the text. Liberal Arab critics tended to view the Saudi novels that use *‘āmmiyya* as employing a type of expression that matches that found in everyday reality, while their purist counterparts expect a specific form of language to be used in literature on the basis that Arabic functions not only as a means of expression but also as a cohesive element in Arab/Muslim identity (see section 6.3.6).

The controversial debate about these Saudi novels in the Arab cultural scene helped to pave the way for them to gain widespread recognition in the Arab world and beyond. Moreover, their translation into other languages, particularly English, has led to these novels gaining a degree of recognition in the west. Thus, the fourth research question focused on the Western reception of these four Saudi novels:

*How have these Saudi novels been received by different constituencies of Anglophone readers, and which factors might account for any differences in these readings?*

In chapter seven, the reception of these four Saudi novels in Anglophone journalists’ and academics’ discourse was examined. It was argued that a particular set of factors such as publishers, translators and the media had played a vital role in influencing the Anglophone reception of these Saudi novels. The political events of 9/11 and the literary prizes that were awarded to these Saudi writers played a role in their novels being translated into other languages, particularly English, thus producing new audiences for their works in translation. It can also be argued that the commercial factors imposed by prestigious publishing houses significantly impacted on the translation and reception process of these Saudi novels. As explained in section 7.3, most Western publishers tended to use references to Orientalist themes when marketing the translations of Saudi novels in order to attract the interest of the target audience. Thus, the pre-reading assumptions in the Western context created by the author’s gender and nationality, marketing strategies, paratextual elements and the stereotypical representation of Arabs/Muslims in the Western media all shaped the interpretive strategies of Anglophone reviewers and affected their interpretations of these Saudi novels in translation.

Analysis of the Western press reviews of these translated Saudi novels, as discussed in chapter seven, found that the Western interpretive community shared similar strategies

for interpreting these translated Saudi texts. Thus, reviewers were divided into two main interpretive communities: those who orientalised these translated novels, reading them primarily as sociological treatises on Saudi culture; and those who universalised these translated novels, focusing on globalised fiction elements (see sections 7.4.2 and 7.4.3). Analysis showed that some Anglophone reviewers continued to resort to Orientalist clichés when writing about these translated Saudi novels, and failed to consider the literary and aesthetic elements in these texts. Instead, they were mostly read as a means of providing ethnographical details about Saudi culture. These readings highlight the central theme of the Saudi novels as being “hidden secrets”, inviting their readers to explore the ‘exotic’ Saudi society. One significant finding in this chapter is that these Anglophone reviews show how the members of this interpretive community draw upon existing orientalist discourse based on an imagined East/West dichotomy.

Other Anglophone reviewers preferred to categorise these Saudi novels as popular fictional genres such as crime or chick lit, which can be viewed as evidence of the influence of publishers’ marketing strategies on the reception of these translated novels (see section 7.3). Thus, it can be argued that these Western press reviews may aim to target a group of readers within their interpretive community whose interest lies in particular genres of fiction.

It was noted that the Anglophone academic community has paid relatively little attention to these translated Saudi novels (see section 7.5) while there has been greater interest in these in the Western press to date. It was argued that the lack of academic interest in these Saudi texts is likely to be influenced by the consecration of the centre, which may result in them overlooking peripheral literature. The Anglophone academic responses to these translated Saudi novels have tended to focus predominantly on Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* and Alem’s novel *The Dove’s Necklace*. These critical readings of the novels were often underpinned by feminist ideology and issues of gender inequality, using the text to make broader political statements about women’s status in Saudi society.

The material examined in chapter seven shows that the Anglophone interpretive community is not a homogeneous one as some reviewers are originally non-westerners publishing in Western establishments are originally of non-western origins. However, the

fact that they have been published in the Western press or academic journals means that they conform with expected norms. For example, bilingual Arab reviewers have played a vital role in the reception of these four Saudi novels, acting as gatekeepers, in the sense that they may have been responsible for first bringing these Arabic texts to the attention of a Western audience (see section 7.4.2). Interestingly, they have interpreted these Saudi novels in the same way as their Western counterparts, highlighting particular themes that are more likely to be of interest to readers in the West.

This thesis demonstrated the applicability of the concept of ‘interpretive communities’ in examining the reception of these four Saudi novels. When comparing the two main interpretive communities, Arab and Anglophone, it discovered two very different ways of interpreting the selected texts. The reception of these four Saudi novels has thus been shaped by numerous interpretations in different interpretive communities, and has been influenced by a complex network of ideological, political, socio-cultural and literary contexts (see chapters five, six and seven). As argued in this thesis, the ideological perspectives of an interpretive community serve to influence readers’ attitudes towards these Saudi novels within their interpretive communities in both the Arab and Anglophone contexts. For example, conservative Arab readers see the main function of literature as being to maintain Arab/Islamic identity, and if any Saudi novel represents a threat to this identity this justifies their being banned in their homeland. Western readers chose to read the translations of these Saudi novels as ethnographic texts offering an insight into Arab/Islamic culture. These different responses illustrate how the reading strategies of individuals are shaped by being part of a certain community. Thus, using Fish’s (1980) concept of interpretive communities has helped to account for the similarities and differences in interpreting these Saudi novels between and within groups of Arab and Anglophone readers. It has also emerged that those who share a culture are likely to produce similar interpretation when approaching these Saudi novels, since the power of their interpretive community influences the reader’s pre-understanding. This finding may help to explain the success of Alsanea’s novel, for instance, which was received more positively by Anglophone readers than their Arab counterparts. It gained a much wider readership in contrast to the other three Saudi novels in terms of its sales, media coverage and reviews within both the Arab and Anglophone contexts. It is possible that Alsanea’s novel offers a particular appeal to different segments of the audience, from different interpretive communities. Its popularity does not rest solely on the fact that its

author is a young Saudi woman, but also because it engages with the world of women, revealing their secrets and addressing the social issues they face. Thus, it was predictable that *Banāt al-riyāḍ* should prompt an aggressive response from Arab conservative readers as they considered it a rebellious work in terms of its audacity to challenge the prevailing traditions of Arabic culture. Unsurprisingly, it was read very differently by liberal readers.

However, some limitations need to be acknowledged regarding the boundaries defining these interpretive communities. It was very difficult to find clearly defined boundaries between these interpretive communities as Fish (1980, pp.170-171) did only deal with the academic community, as discussed in chapter two. While there appeared to be two main different groups of readers, Arab and Anglophone, there were also subcommunities within each interpretive community that appeared to hold differing views about these Saudi texts, use different approaches to read them and have different types of literary experiences. Moreover, although some significant differences were noted between Arab and Anglophone interpretive communities, both Arab and Anglophone journalistic discourses, for instance, seemed to share some similarities such as their literalist interpretation of the text as having a particular relationship with reality. It was also found that there can be some boundaries between these interpretive communities: (a) those simplistic readings that view the novel as a text documenting social reality; (b) those professional readings that focus on the text's aesthetic merits and literary concerns. However, Fish (1980, p. 343) has argued that within any community there are subcommunities, and "within any community the boundaries of the acceptable are continually being redrawn". Thus, this thesis has also found evidence of the possibility of disagreement on interpretations between members within any interpretive community, and of movement from subcommunity to another. Given the complexity of identifying the boundaries between the interpretive communities, the aim of my argument was to demonstrate how each interpretive community approaches these Saudi texts due to the implicit influence exerted by the cultural, social and political nature of the community. In this thesis, Fish's concept of 'interpretive communities' has been used to imply that an interpretive community is a group of readers who have the same strategies for interpreting a text and share the same ideological, political and socio-cultural contexts that also shaped their discourse about these Saudi novels. Thus, it can be concluded that the "interpretive community" approach was a useful means of exploring the reception of these Saudi novels, examining how shared interpretive strategies and cultural background have

shaped the way of reading these texts. The results obtained showed the potential of extending this method to examine more Saudi/Arabic novels with different interpretive communities other than English readers that can be done in further research.

## 8.2 Future Research

As with all research, this study has some limitations. As this thesis has focused on four Saudi novels, one cannot assume that the results were representative of the reception of the Saudi novel as a whole but they are directly applicable only to the reception of these novels. As explained in chapter one, the current study set out to examine the reception of four Saudi novels by different groups of Arab and Anglophone readers. While this aim has been largely achieved, a number of issues relating to the reception of the Saudi novel remain to be examined in further studies. Studying the reception of these novels helps to set the agenda for further research, as will be discussed next.

In Saudi literary space, very little attention has been paid to the reception of literary works including poetry, short story, novel, etc. Therefore, reception studies can be useful in exploring the role of different agents (publishers, critics, censors, academic institutions, media and prize committees) in connection with the production and reception of Saudi works.

These four novels were used as an illustrative example of the reception of the Saudi novels in 2000s. Further research could be conducted to examine other Saudi novels published at different times and build up an elaborate picture of readers' attitudes towards the Saudi novel in order to explore changes over time. As mentioned in chapter two, there are limited studies to date on the reception of the Saudi novel, which might need further examination of its critical readings, providing historical information that is important to understanding the interpretive communities.

As briefly discussed in chapter seven, the dynamics of translation politics have influenced the reception of some Saudi novels, and led *Girls of Riyadh*, for example, to become the best-selling Saudi novel in the West to date. Thus, it would be interesting to explore how particular Saudi/Arab texts have been selected for translation and how they have been subjected to a particular process of translation. This would provide useful insights into

how the process of the translation occurs, providing in-depth details of this role in the reception processes of translated Saudi/Arab novels. It has been noted that the role of translator as a significant agent in shaping certain interpretation of a text needs to be mapped, analysed and interpreted in connection with ‘interpretive communities’.

This thesis touched upon the issue of the cultural centre vs. periphery debate in the Arab world, explaining how this concept has influenced literary production and reception in the Arab literary scene. Thus, further study could be carried out to establish a more detailed understanding of the ways in which this complex interplay of periphery-centre transition and political forces shape Arab literary space.

Further studies could also address the reception of these Saudi novels in the virtual community, looking into ‘interpretive communities in cyberspace’. As illustrated in chapter four, a new generation of Saudi and Arab readers has become interested in reading and writing in the virtual world of blogging, social media and online reading clubs. In recent years, the younger generation of Saudi writers have set up their own blogs where they can publish their fiction and interact directly with their readers. Thus, new readers who take an active role in reading fiction use digital techniques and a hybrid language system of Arabic and English, creating an interpretive community and reflecting a complex continuum of the online interactions between readers. It would be a useful means of looking at changing dynamics within interpretive communities and how subcommunities form. More engagement with online reader responses to these Saudi novels and their shared interpretive strategies is needed in future research, drawing on the concept of ‘interpretive communities’. Studies of this kind can help to investigate how these virtual communities sustain an interpretive community and how their members interact to create shared meaning.

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## Appendix 1

### Arab and Western Daily Newspapers and Magazines Covered by the Study

#### 1.1 Saudi National Daily Newspapers and their Location

Periodical's name	Type	Country
<i>Alriyadh</i>	Print + web newspaper	Centre of Saudi Arabia
<i>al-Jazirah</i>	Print + web newspaper	Centre of Saudi Arabia
<i>Okaz</i>	Print + web newspaper	West of Saudi Arabia
<i>al-Madina</i>	Print + web newspaper	West of Saudi Arabia
<i>Alyaum</i>	Print + web newspaper	East of Saudi Arabia
<i>al-Watan</i>	Print + web newspaper	South of Saudi Arabia
<i>al-Eqtessadiah</i>	Print + web newspaper	Centre of Saudi Arabia
<i>Asharq al-awsat</i>	Print + web newspaper	London sponsored by Saudi company
<i>Alhayat</i>	Print + web newspaper	London/Riyadh sponsored by Saudi company
<i>Elaph</i>	Electronic newspaper	London sponsored by Saudi company
<i>Alarabiya.net</i>	Web and broadcasting centre	Dubai a Saudi-owned
<i>Al-Majalla al-'Arabiyya</i>	Print + web magazine	Centre of Saudi Arabia
<i>al-Qafilah</i>	Print + web magazine	Saudi Arabia/ Aramco

## 1.2 Arab National Daily Newspapers and their Location

<b>Periodical's name</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Country</b>
<i>al-Bayan</i>	Print + web newspaper	United Arab Emirates
<i>al-Khaleej</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>al-Ittihad</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>Emarat alyoum</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>al-Rai</i>	Web and broadcasting centre	Kuwait
<i>al-Qabas</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>Annahar</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>Raya</i>	Print + web newspaper	Qatar
<i>al-Jazeera.net</i>	Web and broadcasting centre	
<i>al-Quds al-Arabi</i>	Print + web newspaper	London Qatari-owned
<i>Oman daily</i>	Print + web newspaper	Oman
<i>al-Ahram</i>	Print + web newspaper	Egypt
<i>Elakhbar</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>Shorouk</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>Almasry Alyoum</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>Youm7 (al-Youm al-Sabi')</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>Addustour</i>	Print + web newspaper	Jordan
<i>Alghad</i>	Print + web newspaper	Palestine
<i>al-Ayyam</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>Alhayat Aljadeeda</i>	Print + web newspaper	

<i>Tishreen</i>	Print + web newspaper	Syria
<i>Thawra</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>al-Chourouk</i>	Print + web newspaper	Tunisia
<i>Hespress</i>	Electronic newspaper	Morocco
<i>Ennahar al-Jadeed</i>	Print + web newspaper	Algeria
<i>September 26</i>	Print + web newspaper	Yemen
<i>Annahar</i>	Print + web newspaper	Lebanon
<i>Almustaqbal</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>al-Akhbar</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>al-Mayadeen.net</i>	Web and broadcasting centre	
<i>Rai alyoum</i>	Electronic newspaper	London/ Arabic independent newspaper; its editor-in-chief is Abdel Bari Atwan, a Palestinian journalist.
<i>Azzaman</i>	Print + web newspaper	Iraq
<i>Nizwa</i>	Print + web magazine	Oman
<i>Majallat al-Kuwait</i>	Print + web magazine	Kuwait

### 1.3 Western National Daily Newspapers and their Location

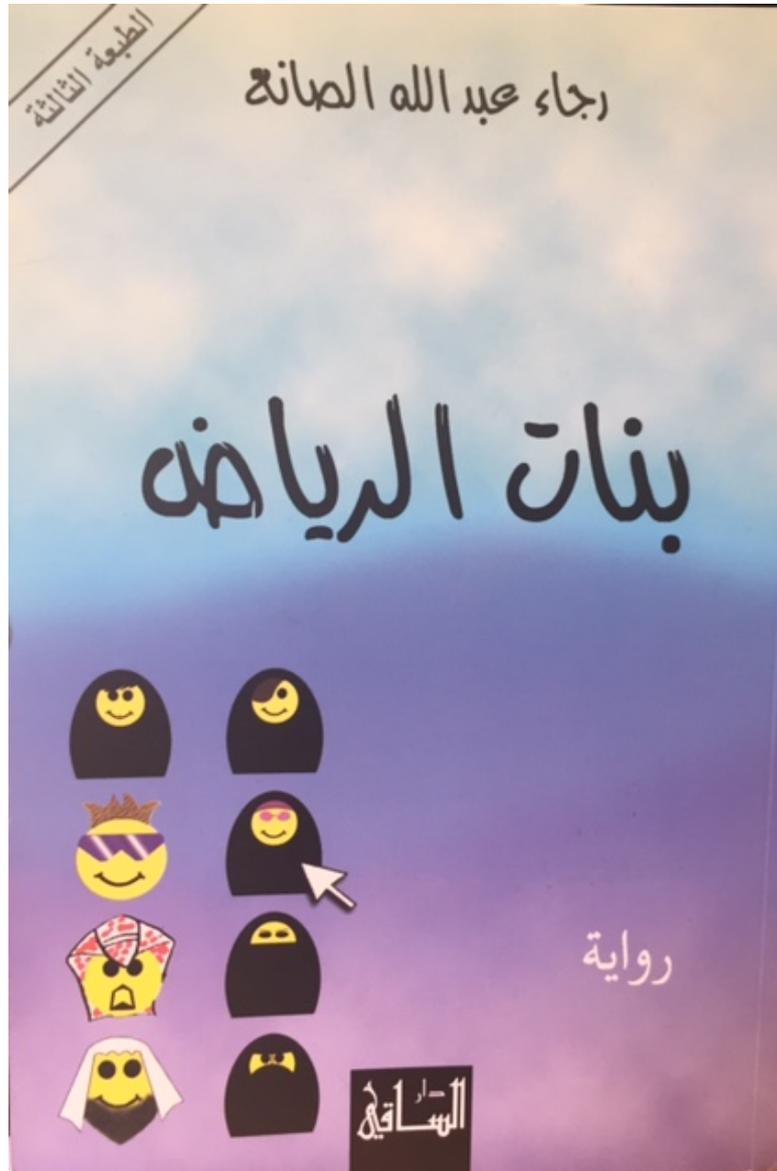
<b>Periodical's name</b>	<b>Type</b>	<b>Country</b>
<i>The Washington Post</i>	Print + web newspaper	United State of America
<i>Chicago Tribune</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>The Boston Globe</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>Los Angeles Times</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>San Francisco Chronicle</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>The New York Sun</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>CNN</i>	Web and broadcasting centre	
<i>The Guardian</i>	Print + web newspaper	United Kingdom
<i>The Economist</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>The Telegraph</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>The Financial Times</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>The Independent</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>The Observer</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>The Sunday Times</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>Metro</i>	Print + web newspaper	
<i>Forbes</i>	Web magazine	United State of America
<i>Belletrista</i>	Web magazine	
<i>Publisher Weekly</i>	Web magazine	
<i>New stateman</i>	Print + web magazine	United Kingdom
<i>The World Today</i>	Print + web magazine	

<i>Banipal</i>	Print + web magazine	United Kingdom
<i>Words without Borders</i>	Web magazine	
<i>Reuters</i>	Web and broadcasting centre	

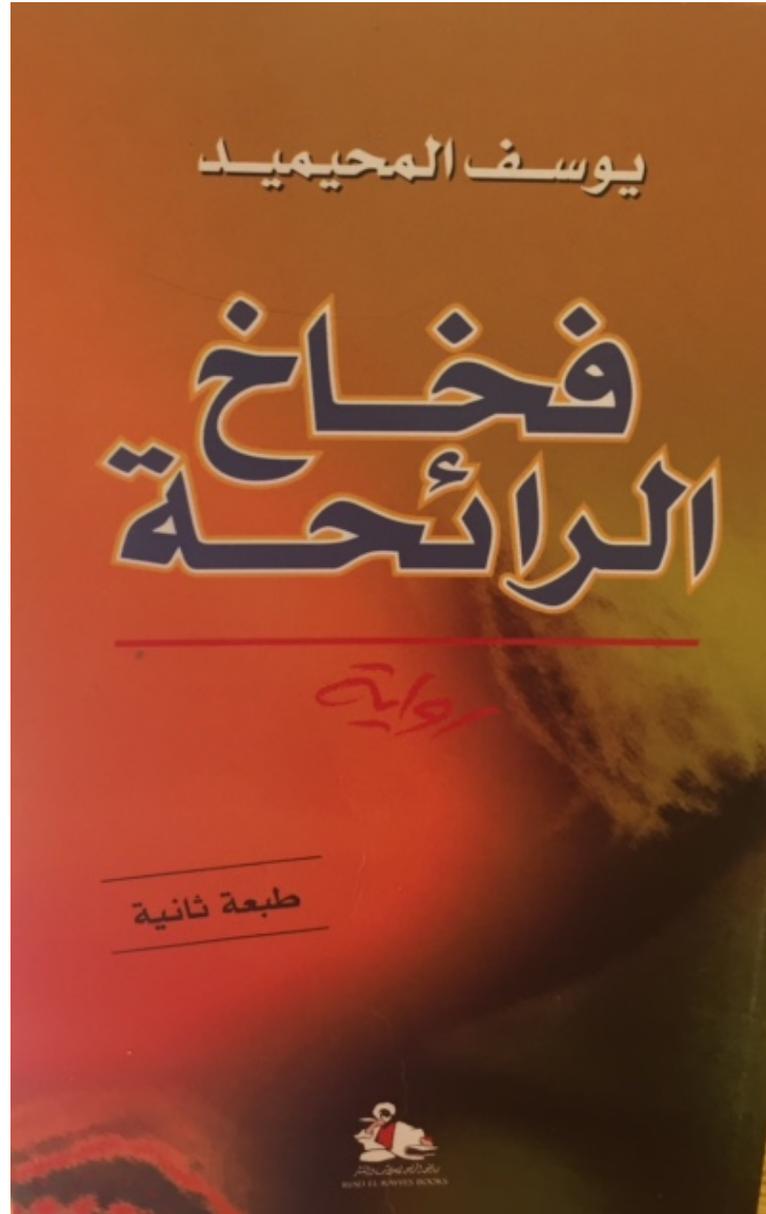
## Appendix 2

### Covers of Saudi novels

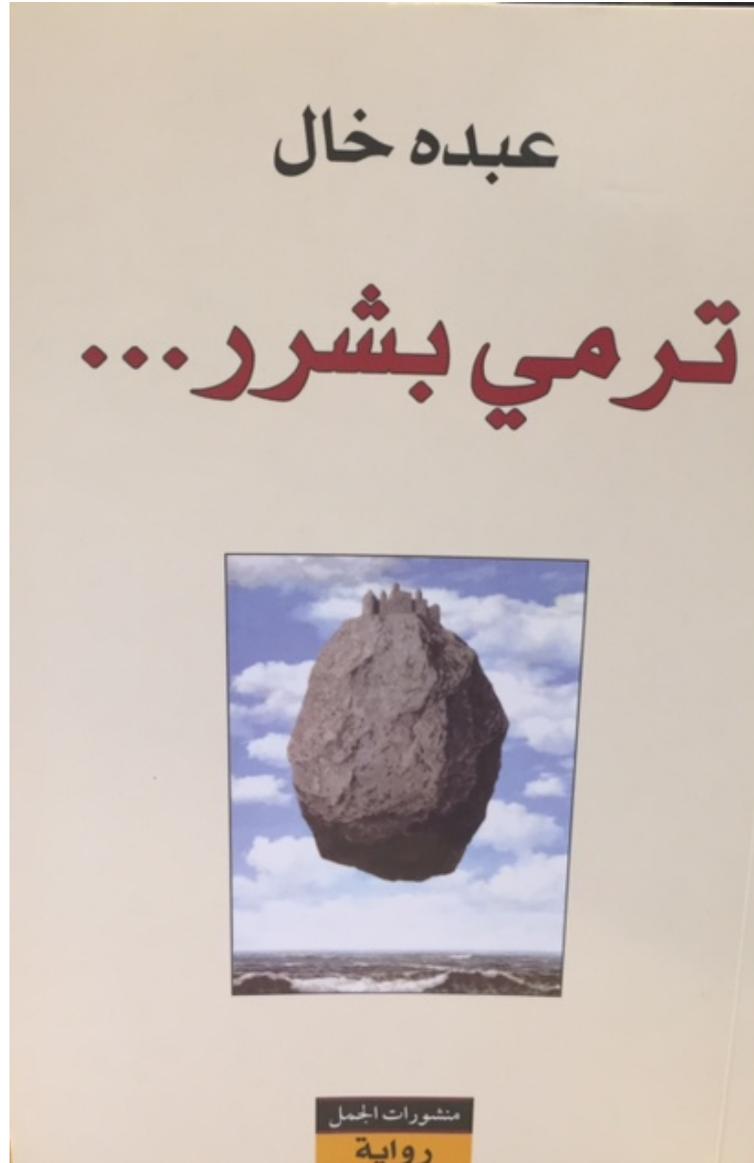
#### 2.1 The cover of *Banāt al-riyāḍ* by Rajaa Alsanea



2.2 The cover of *Fikhākh al-Rā'iha* by Yousef al-Mohaimed



2.3 The cover of *Tarmī bi-sharar...* by Abdo Khal



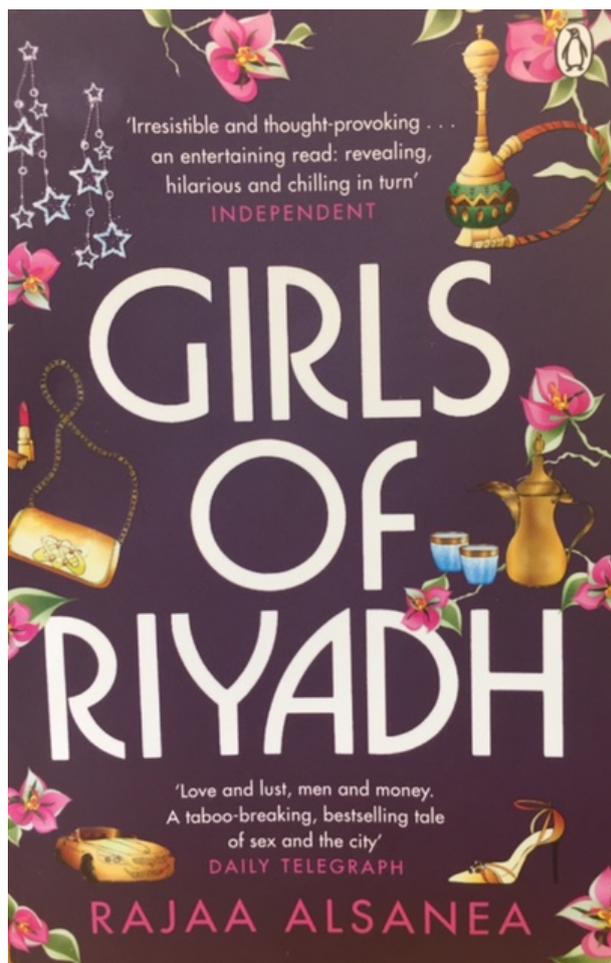
## 2.4 The cover of *Ṭawq al-Ḥamām* by Raja Alem



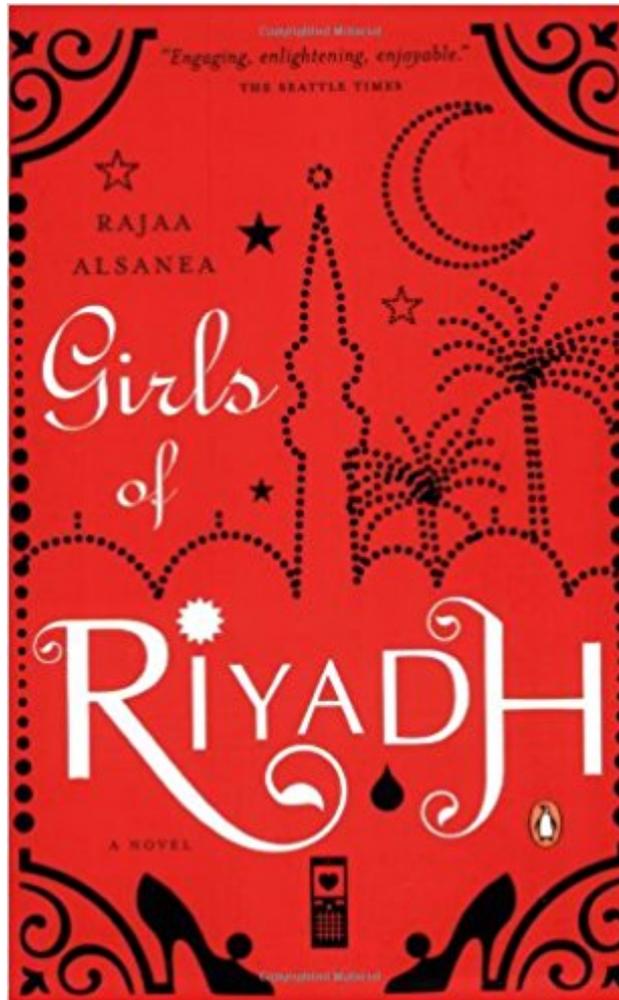
## Appendix 3

### Covers of English translations of Saudi novels

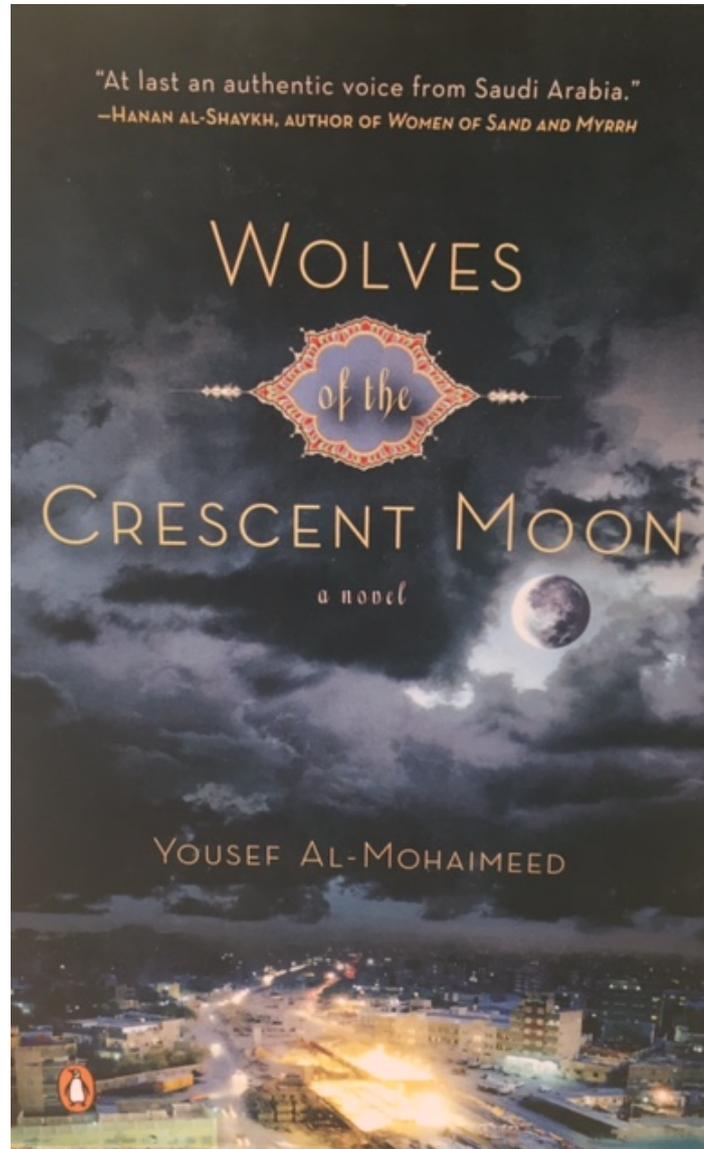
#### 3.1 The cover of *Girls of Riyadh* (UK edition)



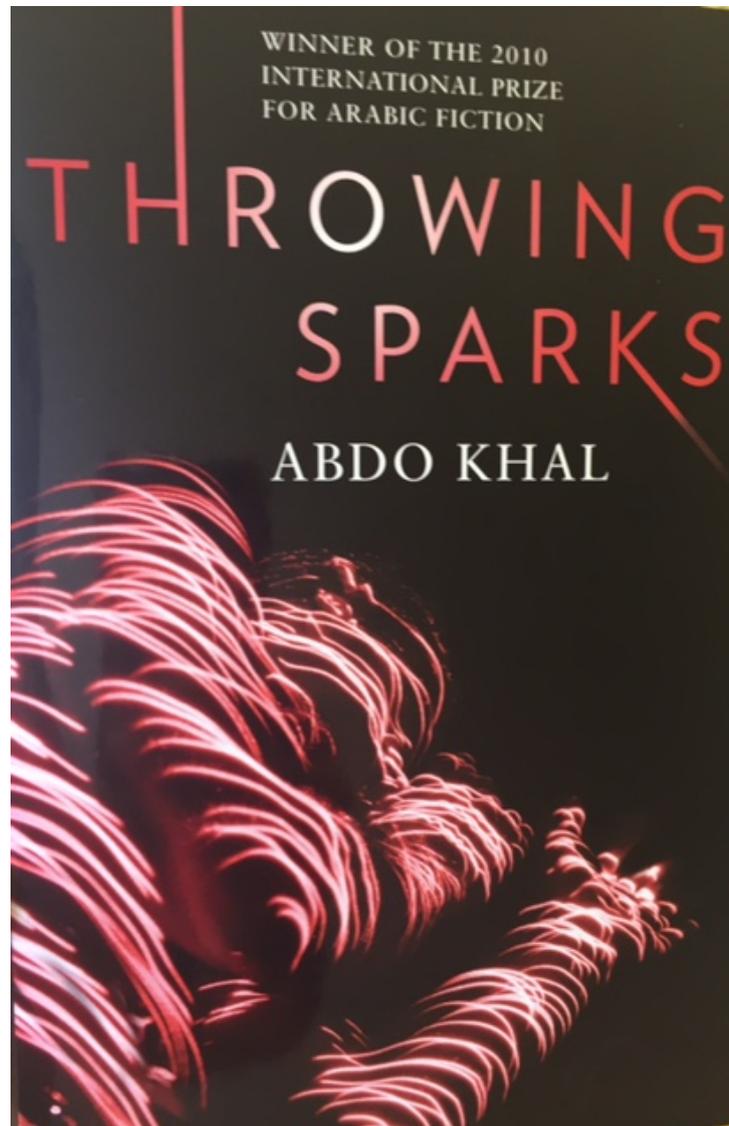
### 3.2 The cover of *Girls of Riyadh* (US edition)



### 3.3 The cover of *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*



### 3.4 The cover of *Throwing Sparks*



3.5 The cover of *The Dove's Necklace*

