Article

Lucidity of Space and Gendered Performativity in Arabic Digital Literature

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Abstract: This article seeks to examine a new trend in Arabic women's literature that not only aims to forge women's communities but also creates resistance. Digital media is the mechanism that some Arab women authors employ to implement and foster a self-authority that acknowledges flexible identities in an age of revolutions and search for freedom. As a case study, I examine Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Nessayne com* and Rajaa Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh*, which originally appearing as compendiums, and Ibrahim Alsaqir's novel *Girls of Riyadh: The Complete Picture* that comes as a literary response to the resistance of cultural and gender establishments. I suggest that the digital realm provides an arena for women to resist oppressing social establishments and that literary works and digital practices like Alsanea's create spaces of and for resistance. Moreover, Alsanea's and Mosteghanemi's works are committed to promoting change in Arab societies, bridging the public and the private sphere by means of digital content. Arab women writers' sites and blogs address subjects that challenge prevalent gendered structures in the Arab world, deconstruct cultural norms, give visibility and focus on the implications of gender on memory, love, masculinity and femininity, and sexuality. They do so by employing chats as a narrative technique that engages readers and women's communities in the characters' experiences and thereby inviting them to participate in making their work a site of challenge to gender and cultural establishments. As Alsanea's representations of women subjectivities are uncommon and her characters defy the notion of the universality of woman as a shared gender, they are prohibited, criticized, and challenged. Those who defy gender performativity, such as Alsanea and Mosteghanemi, enact feminist resistance. The study engages with MENA gender and masculinity literature. It is also informed by Judith Butler's notion of performativity, the construction of gender, and the demystification of the universalistic notion of "woman".

Keywords: gendered performativity; masculinity and femininity; digital literature; feminism; Saudi culture

1. Introduction: Digital Media and Blogging

This study examines the currents in contemporary literary works that deconstruct and challenge repressive authority regardless of its source. This essay proposes that there is a new trend in women's writing in Arabic literature that not only aims to forge women's communities but also creates resistance to social establishments and rigid binary oppositions. Digital media is the mechanism that these authors utilize to implement and foster self-authority that acknowledges women within their culture and society along with their flexible identities. These women's search for new spaces within their cultures is a hallmark of this new age in the Arab world, an age of revolutions and search for freedom, the age of emerging subjectivities that put their dignity at the forefront. Internet connectivity and digital media are some of the markers of modernity in the Arab world that influenced people's lives and brought about cultural change. Samira Aghacy comments on this influence: "This amalgamation of certainty and uncertainty, a past fixity and a modern inconstancy, destabilized notions of manhood and brought about changes in gender relations as well as inducements to preserve and safeguard traditional gender differences"

([Aghacy 2009](#), p. 7). This explains how the works under this study both question the notion of fixed gender roles as in Rajaa Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh* and Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Nessayne com* and while stabilizing them as the case in Ibrahim Alsaqir's novel *Girls of Riyadh: The Complete Picture*.

The texts examined in this study were selected deliberately. One prominent work is an Internet site, Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (*Banat al-Riyad*) and Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Nessayne com*, compendiums of which have also been published as books of the same name. I also examine the literary response to electronic sites, specifically Ibrahim [Alsaqir](#)'s ([2011](#)) novel *Girls of Riyadh: The Complete Picture*, as a response to the feminist resistance that appears in the form of digital media. While Alsaqir's *Girls of Riyadh: The Complete Picture* strives to show that masculine and feminine identities are conventional; the novel asserts that they are clearly flexible and transformable. In the time that Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* and Alsaqir's *Girls of Riyadh: The Complete Picture* belong to the novel genre, Mosteghanemi's *Nessayne com* is a sociological work. Thus, these three primary texts are influential works for their depiction of the construction of masculinity and femininity in contemporary Arabic literature. The three works address the resulting anxieties of dominant masculinity and femininity performances in the Arab world. Yet, it is of paramount importance to keep in mind how the characters' performativity of gender is contested by conventional gender norms.

The digital spaces that Alsanea and Mosteghanemi have launched serve as sites of a female agency that calls for change; they are literary productions that demonstrate gendered resistance. Their media discourse not only divulges scandals—"*sirah wa infadihat*"[1], to use Alsanea's words—but also operates as a counter-narrative that calls for transformation and change, a network that appropriates technology in order to rebel against cultural establishments and predominant images of women and how they should be. These writers are vanguard leaders who commit themselves to creating change and formulating feminist resistance that prioritizes women's rights and deepens the value of gendered resistance in Arab society.

Before the introduction of the internet era in Saudi Arabia and some other Arab countries, reflection on the national culture was limited. In her essay, "The Saudi YouTube Phenomenon", Marwa Ehsan Fakih examines the sociocultural significance of the production and propagation of YouTube videos and claims that the history of media in Saudi Arabia is relatively short, which, in turn, impacted the drama industry in the country: "Saudi media production, especially before the internet, was incapable of reflecting the Saudi way of life and did not participate in creating a unified national culture, as was the case in neighboring Egypt and Syria, which have developed an influential drama industry" ([Fakih 2021](#), p. 35). Fakih contends that, by the late nineties, many Saudi people started to express themselves in online forums (p. 37). Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* is one of these works that allowed for self-expression and went viral, cultivating more audience and readers than writings in print.

The impact of digital media is pervasive as these digital sites and blogs travel from the private sphere of women to all continents and reach out to all women and men, challenging predominant expectations of subjectivities. Moreover, the immediacy of digital media and its inclusivity in women's stories representations allow for the emergence of new sensibilities and new realities ([al-Natour 2012](#), p. 59). al-Natour contends that blogs and their immediacy have an impact on societies that could reshape ways of thinking: "a message posted on a blog could bring about new realities that create change and affect the production of new norms. The dynamic and constantly changing system of posted messages establishes new meanings that could not have been predicted in advance; with every message it is possible that iteration could bring new meanings and new knowledge to life" (ibid.). This notion of bringing new meaning and knowledge to life is applicable to the examined work of Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (*Banat al-Riyad*) and Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Nessayne com*.

Blogs by Arab women writers belong to a new genre that has started to flourish. In this regard, Tarek El-Ariss discusses this new trend in writing in his *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals* and claims that its writers are "redefining the meaning of Arab culture" and "affecting the way

stories are told, dissent is expressed, and canons are produced in the new millennium" (El-Ariss 2018, p. 3). This new literary production addresses several subjects that supersede the gendered structures in the Arab world and concerns itself with the subjectivities of women and the implications of gender on their practices, such as memory and love relationships, as in *Nassyne com*, and sometimes more taboo issues such as sexuality, and Saudi gender segregation, as in the case of *Girls of Riyadh*. Blogs, and digital sites in general, have created a way for Saudi women to express their beliefs with relative anonymity and freedom. In Saudi Arabia, women are expected to represent themselves in ways that will honor their families; thus, in many cases, expressing controversial opinions is not an option for Saudi women without the use of digital media (ibid.).

In her article, "Women Bloggers in the Arab World: How New Media Are Shaping Women's New Identity", Samya Ayish claims that blogs allow women to promote common opinions among Saudi women. Although the internet allows those who have been deprived of the freedom to express themselves, "conventional media in the region have failed to appropriately echo genuine Arab women's concerns and have instead sought to reinforce their negative stereotypes" (Ayish 2010, p. 11). These modes of expressing women's voices and opinions that contradict gender norms have become an important tool for promoting women's rights. "Women use blogs to call for some basic rights that make them equal to their male counterparts. These rights included: driving cars and political participation" (ibid., p. 47). Before 2018, women were not allowed to drive cars and although blogs were not the sole reason that women were given the freedom to drive, they did help promote a marginalized public opinion (ibid.).

In their case study, "Veiling and Blogging: Social Media as Sites of Identity Negotiation and Expression among Saudi Women", Hala Guta and Magdalena Karolak state that it is "the blogging activity that numbers of active Arab women equal the numbers of "men" (Guta and Karolak 2015, p. 116). It is also reported that "factors such as communication style of women, attitude to communicating online, fear of social disapproval, educational and family background, type of personality, social desire, awareness about various social network and technology factors influenced the degree of women participation in social media platforms in Saudi Arabia" (Alruwaili et al. 2021). Blogging has created somewhat of a safe space for women in Saudi Arabia in ways that social media could not. Thus, it is likely that women interact with blogs more than social media platforms. "Caution about creating a relationship with anyone they [women] did not know, and the consequences of self-disclosure on social media platforms" have allowed blogging to become popular for women and a way for women to argue against gender norms and laws that have created oppression (Alruwaili et al. 2021). Blogging is an effective tool to promote women's rights and challenge the binary opposition of gender in Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries by offering them a platform to express opinions that they would not have been able to express without being shamed otherwise.

These two digital sites, Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (*Banat al-Riyad*) and Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Nessayne com* are emerging discourses that help to deconstruct cultural norms. Interestingly, the protagonists' and writers' images and experiences fluctuate as they emerge in different contexts and paradigms. They challenge the social domains that presume men's and women's subjectivities and shared commonality, demanding the visibility of Arab women. The authors of these blogs employ chat as a narrative technique in order to engage readers in their experience and thereby invite them to participate in making their digital spaces sites of resistance that challenge cultural norms about both women and men.

In the few years since these blogs and social media appeared many cultural and political taboos have begun to become more relaxed. Perhaps people in the Arab world have more room to talk about new issues that were taboo before, and bloggers or what have come to be known as citizen journalists discuss these issues on their sites. Satire about governments and their tyrannical regimes, and cultural establishments is more visible. In her book, *Blogging from Egypt*, Teresa Pepe claims that "the personal blog shares a number

of diaristic genre, as its content is mainly autobiographical and consists of dates entries, arranged chronologically in reverse order. However, besides recording one's life, personal blogs allow users to play with their identity, to reveal aspects of their personality while inventing new ones". (Teresa Pepe 2020, p. 1). Pepe's perspective on personal blogs applies to Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* e-mailing list and her approach of criticizing gender performativity and through which Alsanea exposes some of her friends' personal accounts and plays with their identity.

2. Traditional Gender Norms in Saudi Arabia

Traditional gender norms in Saudi Arabia stem from the country's religious beliefs, which are influenced by Salafism. Traditional gender norms are still prevalent but the gap of freedoms between men and women is slowly closing. In his article *Post-Salafism: Religious Revisionism in Contemporary Saudi Arabia*, Bensik Sinani explains that "Salafism claims to represent an understanding of Islam based on how the foundational texts were understood by generations of early Muslims" (Sinani 2022, p. 2). Post-Salafism has allowed the Saudi government to "shift towards nationalism", push the *infitah* policy, which has offered to "ease certain social restrictions and make space for what is considered liberal" and challenge Wahhabi social norms (ibid., p. 7). Women have traditionally had different responsibilities than men within Salafism, so they have been given different legal rights and societal norms than men.

In "*Only for Women*", Amelia Le Renard posits that "state policies [have influenced] women out of the domestic sphere and into a public female sphere, but only on condition of the approval of their families" (Le Renard 2008, p. 617). Societal norms control the types of clothes appropriate for women to wear in public, the places women are allowed to enter, the jobs they can hold, and the places women are allowed to go. These restrictions are changing because of "discourse aimed at targeted groups affected by problems in Saudi Society... Saudi women are among them" (ibid.) Le Renard adds that women could not own businesses that were marketed towards men and the entrances to their businesses legally had to be placed at a distance from those designated exclusively for men (ibid.).

In her review of *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* by Amelie Le Renard, Neha Vora claims that Saudi women are viewed as the most oppressed group of people in the eyes of Westerners. The topic of Saudi women is commonly appealing to Westerner feminists, but no one seems to really have an understanding of how Saudi women truly live (Neha Vora 2015, p. 340). Le Renard's work provides a complex look into, and a counter portrayal to, the submissive image of Saudi women: "The production of homosocial spaces and the limitations placed on Saudi women's mobility are entirely modern conventions tied to rapid urbanization, oil wealth, and the presence of a large foreign resident population" (Le Renard 2014, p. 340). With the advent of technology and Internet connectivity, Saudi women started to encounter "competing expectations of femininity, including reform/state, Islamist, and consumer, that they combined with the norms of their own families to produce a sense of being "Saudi" while also creating hierarchies of national belonging" (Le Renard 2014, p. 341).

In her introduction to *A Society of Young Women*, Amelia Le Renard, goes more in depth into traditional gender norms presented in Saudi Arabia. She claims that: "Gender segregation forbids women's access to certain spaces and homogenizes their way of dressing in mixed spaces. It produces two social worlds, of which one is subordinate to the other" (Le Renard 2014, p. 6). It is possible for women to have access to higher education, jobs, shopping, and other things that men have access to, but they are not given the same freedoms as men. Le Renard emphasizes that women must have permission from their legal guardian to participate within the same opportunities as men. For example, women used to have to wait for men to drive them to the places they needed to be because they did not have the legal right to drive. In the same way, they also had to ask permission to go to school or to have a job. It is also evident that traditional gender norms are evolving

as "women aged from 20 to 29 are twice as likely as men to hold a university diploma, whereas the generation of their mothers is largely illiterate" (ibid., p. 17).

The driving ban is one of the main issues to discuss when it comes to Saudi women's rights. In her "The "Right" to Drive for Women in Saudi Villages", Al-Khamri states that 2018 was the year the driving ban was lifted for women in Saudi Arabia. It was a historic day, but it did not have a major effect on all Saudi women. Some grew up in villages where driving was a daily task in which they were involved. There was never an explicit law that prevented women from driving in Saudi Arabia—it was a cultural understanding that women should not drive. The pressure that prevented women from driving was by the "traffic police and the Ministry of Interior and morally supported by the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice" (Al-Khamri 2019, p. 256). Article 32 of Traffic Law states that "no person shall be permitted to drive any vehicle before obtaining the necessary driving license", and activists used the argument that gender-neutral terms were used, which insinuated that women cannot be prevented from driving. Later, some knowledgeable and respected individuals sent letters to the royal family to alter that law (ibid.).

Al-Khamri noticed that bedouin women had no other possible form of transportation to provide for their families as their husbands would be working in neighboring towns all day. They did not have enough money to hire drivers; hiring drivers came with the issue of *khalwa* (seclusion). Women in rural areas understood driving to be normal because their ancestors were able to travel on camels and horses, so they concluded that cars are the current day 'horses'. Police more heavily enforced the driving ban in 2011 (the beginning of the Arab Spring) in rural villages following the Women2Drive campaign. Although Bedouin women never protested the driving ban, police arrested some women in small villages (Al-Khamri 2019, pp. 256–58).

Gender norms in Saudi Arabia have created a world where women can only have access to the same liberties as men only in jobs and public spheres and with the permission of their guardians. Traditional gender norms and sex segregation control the lives of women in Saudi Arabia, but they are gaining new freedoms. Saudi women have been successful in traversing what Gillian Rose (1993, p. 150) refers to as the "territoriality of masculinism" and restructuring it to be a public sphere that is inhabited by both men and women. Despite some of the improvements that Saudi society witnessed in regard to women's rights, the divorce between what is permissible Islamically and forbidden in Saudi culture is highlighted in *Girls of Riyadh*, a book that calls for social change and invites an examination of gender performativity and essentialist models of masculinity in Saudi society, the explanation of which is the premise of this essay.

3. Theoretical Framing

This study benefits from Judith Butler's notion of performativity and engages with MENA gender and masculinity literature. Butler (1999, p. 33) postulates that "gender proves to be performative—that constitutes the identity which is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed" (Butler 1999, p. xv). According to Butler, the perception of gender is regulated through its performativity, which relies heavily on the social anticipation of the subject and its identity. By the same token, Maurice Berger posits that masculinity is ambivalent: "Masculinity, the asymmetrical pendant to the more critically investigated femininity, is a vexed term, variously inflected, multiply defined, not limited to straight-forward descriptions of maleness" (Berger et al. 1995, p. 2). Thus, gender and masculinity are fluid, dynamic, and eventually ingrained in their own performativity. Butler claims that gender is produced in two main ways—the form that it is anticipated to be in, and its performativity—through the repetition of specific practices that naturalize and normalize its assumed practice, and accordingly, how these practices make of the person who enacts them a subject that is accepted socially and culturally (Butler 1999, p. xv). She criticizes this anticipation of gender, claiming that it does not allow for representations of the subject to extend to a wider sphere where more possibilities could occur:

In the first instance, then, the performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of a gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. Secondly, performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration. (Butler 1999, p. xv)

Gender is constructed through its performativity and the way it is anticipated; this very repetition is dangerous because it may bring death to the performances as "deadening clichés" (ibid., p. xxi). And this, in turn, creates a concern for "what will qualify as the 'human' and the 'livable'" (ibid., p. xxii). Moreover, the danger of gender performativity extends to feminism, as there is a socially presumed "existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued" (ibid., p. 3). Therefore, Butler calls upon opening the field, considering what is in the margins—what is unthinkable or not assumed to happen instead of foreclosing the dimensions and deciding what is right and what is wrong for the subject to be, thinking about the possible ways, including minority practices, before foreclosing them and excluding them from "accountability and recognizability" (ibid., p. viii). Thus, her aim in *Gender Trouble* is to shed light on "the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions" (ibid., p. viii).

Butler claims, however, that when a person opens up the field and practices what is beyond the assumption of his or her as a subject, he or she fears the lucidity of the space—entering a new space that comes with new practices and roles other than what is known as the norm. Such new changes and practices could result in the loss of one's identity. Most people face this fear if they question the frame that governs sexual and gender practices, and this fear surfaces more clearly in the process of "becoming gay" (ibid., p. xi). This gender trouble appears in language as well—do we describe transgender individuals as women or men, especially when they become mothers or fathers? (ibid., p. xi). However, Butler asserts that the aim of this link between gender and sexuality is not meant to "claim that forms of sexual practice produce certain genders, but only that under conditions of normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality" (ibid., p. xii). Securing heterosexuality is what she calls "sexual harassment", which is exemplified when "a person is 'made' into a certain gender" (ibid., p. xiii). Enforcing the specific normativity of gender is one type of sexual harassment against gay people that appears in the workforce:

[T]he performance of gender subversion can indicate nothing about sexuality or sexual practice. Gender can be rendered ambiguous without disturbing or reorienting normative sexuality at all. Sometimes gender ambiguity can operate precisely to contain or deflect non-normative sexual practice and thereby work to keep normative sexuality intact. (Butler 1999, p. xiv)

This study benefits from Butler's notion of performativity and the making of gender and masculinity. The anticipation of gender and what constitutes the subject explains the reaction of traditionalist writers against women's blogs and digital spaces that seek to destabilize the dynamic of the power structure within gender domains. The "set" criteria of the formulation of the subject linguistically and politically defines what constitutes a subject; thus, in order to recognize a subject within linguistic and political spheres, the subject should be regulated through its meeting of these criteria (Butler 1999, p. 4). The subjects are made through this regulation: "[The] subjects [including the feminist subject] regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures" (ibid.). Butler, in this regard, suggests that although the focus of feminism is on emancipation and visibility, the term "*women* is becoming problematic as it assumes a common identity for women, as women, rather than examining each woman as a special subjectivity of its case" (ibid.). This rigid categorization and essentialized gender roles impact the emancipation of both men and women. The notion

of masculinity, thus, "engages, inflects, and shapes everyone" (Berger et al. 1995, p. 7). This problem appears clearly in Ibrahim Alsaqir's novel, which considers Alsanea's work a representation of all Saudi women. On the other hand, Mosteghanemi's and Alsanea's digital spaces transcend this anxiety, as each woman establishes the formations of her subjectivities through her interaction with the postings online. Also, the blog form does not require specific regulations or impose limitations that control the representation of the subject and his or her interaction. Blogs offer an electronic space that allows for a wide variety of representations of the subject without policing the criteria of its subjects and their perceptions of gender or forms of masculinity and femininity.

Instead of a coercive regularity that resembles the coercive political regime in terms of policing all forms of resistance, blogs and digital spaces allow for a more coherent representation that permits new subjects and identities to flourish outside the set domains of gender. Alsanea's work presents new models of feminist subjects that do not meet the set criteria for the femininity of Arab women in Saudi Arabia. As her representations of women's subjectivities are uncommon, they are prohibited, criticized, and challenged; their characters defy the notion of the universality of woman as a shared gender. This study has focused on these two texts as representative examples of two female authors, Mosteghanemi and Alsanea, who defy gender performativity and enact feminist resistance, using digital media as a platform for their works. Both works allow for more realistic and diverse representations of women and their multifaceted subjectivities. Both works can be classified as feminist works that open space for challenging the masculinist master narrative by engaging digital platforms of writing. Mosteghanemi's blog calls for equality through a feminine performance—the forgetting of male ex-lovers, and Alsanea's work, in the same manner, argues for equality and mutual love among men and women along with mutual respect and responsibilities. Moreover, both works redefine the notion of love: the love of supremacy over one's life and the love of gaining freedom without waging a war on men as a form of liberty from the traditional gender performativity that forces limitations on both men and women as evident in Mosteghanemi's *Nessayne com*.

4. Gendering Romance and Love in Mosteghanemi's *Nessayne com*

Mosteghanemi's *Nessayne com* represents one electronic site of resistance to social confinement and the traditional definitions and radical assumptions of femininity and masculinity in the Arab region. Through *Nessayne com*, Mosteghanemi provides her women readers with strategies for forgetting the male lovers who have abandoned them, contending that women's inability to forget their ex-lovers is one of the main characteristics of Arab femininity that puts women on unequal footing with their men. She thus claims that forgetting men who "flee" from their girlfriends, whom she calls "rabbits", brings about justice between the sexes (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 173). The idea of forgetting emerges as a response to the perception of women as the holders of tradition in the family or the survivors and resisters of social change; this perception appears in some literary works, such as Ibrahim Alsaqir's *Girls of Riyadh: The Complete Picture*. Mosteghanemi's blog creates noise, breaks the silence, and becomes a site of resistance against gendered oppression and for a radical reassessment of femininity and masculinity. The blog format, after all, resists stasis—it depends on constant postings that change and fluctuate. (al-Natour 2012, p. 59). The blog's emphasis on forgetting romance seems to deliberately recall political forgetting. If the woman has been the figure used to anchor "tradition" as something—unchangeable—then the woman who forgets men destroys this fixation and unmoors her society, letting change flood in. (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 33).

Mosteghanemi, as a writer and a sociologist, postulates that a marker of men's essentialized model of masculinity is their ability to forget their lovers easily and quickly. In addition, she says that they tend to initiate the separation, while women remain loyal to their departed lovers and subsequently trapped in their romantic memories. Mosteghanemi sees women's success in forgetting their male lovers as one marker of equality between the sexes, but she also values it as the most important of all other women's rights. In a

simultaneously sarcastic and serious tone, Mosteghanemi (2009, p. 36) claims on behalf of all women that "we, women, are ready to give up all our rights, including equal pay, job opportunities, and even our right to drive cars, in order to forget men the way they forget us". She stresses that her version of equality is "equality with men in oblivion" (ibid.). She adds that scientists, who are busy with "stupid research, should extensively work on finding a solution for the half of the earth's inhabitants by transforming the genetics of women's memory in a way that would enable them to forget their romantic relationships in the same manner men do" (ibid.).

Mosteghanemi believes that the inability of women to forget their male lovers is torture and a disease that leaves its traces on women's lives, psyches, appearance, and mentality as it does not allow for growth and healthy resistance to what is a set of gendered practices. This type of inability to forget confines and traps women in a conventional form of Arab femininity that assumes their loyalty to their departed lovers. According to Mosteghanemi, the inability to forget the ex-lover is a gendered practice that is assigned to women as subject, and therefore forgetting romance will enable women to redefine their gender practices and social assumptions: "Loyalty [to men who abandon their lovers] is a fatal disease that only attacks dogs and stupid women" (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 36); these are stupid women because they do not question the frame that governs the practices of gender—and femininity. Mosteghanemi established the website Nessyane.com to help women overcome this obstacle by providing advice and strategies for forgetting male ex-lovers. This digital platform destabilizes notions of masculinity and femininity and questions social expectations for each. She collects advice and methods for resisting the memory of ex-lovers from her girlfriends and readers. Before deciding to establish the website and publishing its postings in the book *Nessyane.com*, Mosteghanemi found that her previous works, *Memory in the Flesh* and *Chaos of the Senses*, were being sold as treatments for people's ailments and emotional problems in many pharmacies (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 22). Therefore, she dedicates *Nessayne com* to people who, if they resist gendered constructs, will have healthy relationships.

Most importantly, Mosteghanemi links healthy romantic relationships with healthy politics in the Arab world. She connects the success of overcoming unsuccessful romantic relationships with the success of defying the coercive regimes that govern Arab countries. She claims that it is time to establish an Arab Oblivion Party, and she expects that this party will be welcomed and supported by many Arab rulers, as it will help Arabs to forget their political oppression and coercive regimes:

> I expect my book, *Nessyane com*, to exceed its emotional functions and goals and reach legitimate political ones. Thus, it is essential to establish an Arab Oblivion Party. This party will be the largest one [. . .]. I guarantee you that this party will find support from all Arab leaders, as they expect it to help us forget how many years they have been ruling us; how much they have stolen from us, and how many of us they have killed. (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 33)

Mosteghanemi insinuates that Arab leaders are like unfaithful lovers and proposes that unless Arabs recover from their unsuccessful romantic relationships and forget them, they will never be able to restructure the political system in their countries.

> We need to be firm and serious in our battle with them [Arab rulers]. They would have not governed us if we had been strong from inside. The failing romantic relationships have exhausted us, and the situation is getting worse day by day. [. . .] Satellite [television] keeps us occupied and away from serious matters. It sells us the stories of cheap love relationships and the tragedy of romance, and thus we keep grieving our cruel lovers forever and forget all other kinds of oppression in our lives. (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 33)

In the same vein, Mohja Kahf highlights the connection between authoritarianism and gender oppression. Authoritarianism creates pressure that emasculates men who, in turn, dominate women and vent their frustration on them. Kahf writes:

Authoritarian states perpetuate, on the national stage, the authoritarian patriarch but in tricky modern guises, even while they may be sending the opposite message in state propaganda about modernity requiring the equality of women. Whenever new dissident or liberatory movements espouse masculinist methods, they too bode for the reproduction of the master's tools. The study of masculinities is thus profoundly involved in the relationship of gender roles to macro-politics, and to region-wide struggles to move out from under authoritarianism. (Kahf and Sinno 2021, p. 11)

Building on Kahf's and Mosteghanemi's connection between politics and gender oppression in the Arab world, it seems that the oppressive ruler is no better than the oppressive lover, and the tyrannical no better than the oppressive romance, as both of them strip the self of its wholeness. In fact, the authoritarian strips both men and women of their rights and distorts their identities. Interestingly, like Mosteghanemi and Kahf, Butler describes gender performativity as coercive several times in *Gender Trouble*, suggestively linking between political and gendered oppression. Both romantic and political structures are coercive in the Arab region, according to Mosteghanemi—the oppressive political regimes utilize romantic shows and songs to keep people away from politics. Mosteghanemi sees little difference between political prisoners and these women who lock themselves in prisons of the past or in what she calls "expired" love relationships. She says, "I wanted this book to be a gift for women who are still trapped in the cell of memory without going to trial, those women who are charged with accusations that only their prison guards, their male lovers, know" (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 41).

Mosteghanemi's work attempts to deconstruct women's inability to forget romantic relationships, which creates an imagined unity and bond with the lover that resembles the tie between citizens and their nation, a coercive bond for confining women and casting them in an inevitable, unidimensional category: weak women, victims, and scapegoats of romance. Her blog suggests the necessity of generating strategic resolutions to shake the certainty of gender performativity, allowing for more realistic and diverse representations of women and their multifaceted subjectivities. Mosteghanemi speaks of friends who break through the coercive cultural constructions and the social formations that translate femininity and masculinity within fixed schemes. Mosteghanemi calls for defying gender dichotomies in romantic relationships and claims that what unifies these women is a set of characteristics that assert the productive variety of women's subjectivities: "By the way, dignity, pride, and arrogance are the three main characteristics of my girlfriends [who have helped in putting this book together]" (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 39). These women's subjectivities appear not to be constituted within the limited social and cultural formation; women are thus more productive as they interact with their time and place, and through this interaction, they assert their existence. In other words, Mosteghanemi believes that masculinity and femininity are performative and ambivalent. By the same token, Maurice Berger claims that masculinity is fluid and socially made. The same can be claimed about femininity. Berger posits that "the category of masculinity should be seen as always ambivalent, always complicated, always dependent on the exigencies of personal and institutional power. Masculinity is realized here not as a monolithic entity, but as an interplay of emotional and intellectual factors—an interplay that directly implicates women as well as men, and is mediated by other social factors, including race, sexuality, nationality, and class" (Berger et al. 1995, p. 3).

For overcoming the rigid definition of femininity, through her blog, Mosteghanemi spreads some strategies for forgetting male ex-lovers and overcoming the ramifications of past romantic relationships. For Mosteghanemi, forgetting the ex-lover is a trait of masculinity that men enjoy; she, therefore, offers several ways of thinking about the conditions that negotiate its false stabilization. She further contemplates the extent to which women can transcend this presumed thinking and offers them mechanisms to forget and actively overcome the pain of being abandoned. Some examples of these mechanisms are changing the kind of perfume worn during her love relationship because it reminds her of the man who abandoned her; eating dark chocolate to maximize happiness; avoiding

listening to music, except songs that help overcome the experience of being in love; listening to the CD that accompanies Mosteghanemi's book, as it urges valuing dignity more than anything else; becoming more active; managing emotions and frustrations; and getting rid of all the male ex-lover's belongings and gifts. A final, sarcastic suggestion is to pray that God will take revenge on the ex-lover; she recommends using his mother's name in such prayers to get the best results (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 80).

In addition to these strategies, Mosteghanemi suggests other effective strategies for reaching gendered resistance. She articulates how limiting the grace of forgetting the ex-lover to men is a narrative that is far from uncontested. Her blog deconstructs the idea of the presumed common women's identity and affirms the flexibility of women's subjectivities and feminine identities. It further shakes the ground beneath those who claim the narrative of grand masculinity. Mosteghanemi responds to each woman's concerns and collects strategies for dealing with ex-lovers. These women speak from the particular experiences that shape their subjectivities and relationships with men and society. Their strategies intrude into what are presumed to be masculine domains, according to Mosteghanemi. One of these strategies for attaining feminist resistance is to abandon the man who has renounced his responsibility as a partner and abandoned the woman, no matter the cost to the woman. Mosteghanemi invites women not to view romantic relationships through the narrow lens of Arab femininity, which demands, for some, that a woman should stay loyal to her ex-partner even if he abandons her. Further, Mosteghanemi stresses that the women should leave their male partners in a more noble and respectful way than men usually leave their women. For her, when abandoned by men, women should not wrestle with their self-worth and try to take revenge. She recommends that the woman should, unlike men, keep the image of romantic relationships in good shape; she should stay loyal to the concept of love, but not to the man, and thereby not deface the image of romantic relationships or the image of the ex-lover. Mosteghanemi claims that creating peace with oneself enables one to heal and to be able to fall in love again with life, people, and self (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 260): "Enter a love relationship as a very respectable woman and break up like a princess" (ibid., p. 85). She wants her friends, and women in general, to break from unfulfilling love relationships while the image of love is not distorted. This type of break maintains the woman's sense of wholeness; it is a break that redefines the notion of love in a new frame: the love of independence, the love of supremacy over one's life, the love of gaining freedom and maintaining a high ethos. Mosteghanemi asks women to minimize the loss of their romantic relationships and to win themselves by putting dignity and self-respect at the forefront of any relationship. She invites women to "get reborn", recreated, and changed whenever they go through a hardship: "There are some [women] who get recreated from a stab in the back, and there are some who die because of it, and thereby they fail and lose our respect and get out of our lives" (ibid., p. 261). In other words, she invites women to be free from the shadows of the dark yesterdays and to reach the gateways of the bright tomorrows by redefining their gender practices. As the scales of the challenges are always great and the way full of struggles, women should keep their dignity, self-esteem, and independence at the forefront of any quest. When they love, they should always be the noble partner who respects and appreciates humanity and its relationships, and when they end their relationships, they should maintain the same self-authorship. By establishing her blog, she does not launch a war on men; rather, she calls for ending relationships that do not prioritize women's dignity. Mosteghanemi stresses that this gendered resistance to oppression is not a war against men, as some may understand it; it is a resistance whose fruit will benefit society as a whole, including men and women.

The gendered resistance Mosteghanemi calls for is a noble resistance. Her concern lauds all women who hold onto dignity and principle without nostalgia; she looks to the nobility of Arabs in the past, where nobility, self-independence, and pride were some of the core values held by women as well as men. The formation of women's identities that Mosteghanemi evokes here resembles the formation of women's identities in the pre-Islamic era, which might have been more complex than in the present, not only because

women were able to play several roles, such as warriors and nurses on the battlefield and housewives and lovers in the tent, under the harsh circumstances of the desert, but also because they enjoyed chivalry in all its dimensions. Without romanticizing the pre-Islamic era, women had the upper hand in several issues regarding their marriage; women were able to end any love or marriage relationship if it clashed with their dignity and self-esteem. It is well known that in that era, if a woman desired to divorce her husband, all she needed to do was to leave his clothes for him outside her tent. She did not need to go through courts and attorneys' procedures and meetings. The woman at that time did not need to bring evidence of the negative ramifications to her life that her husband caused her. Her dignity was the red line that could not be crossed for whatever reason. More interestingly, such a woman found support and protection in her society, as her action was a human–social norm and cultural trope in her time. Women were not weak creatures in their societies, needing men's protection to survive. There was no crying, no lament, no mourning, and no torture from memories of ex-lovers. They were strong women with a strong will who highly valued their self-respect and dignity. They clearly set the gendered dynamics of their reception within their tribal society. As a way of showing pride of kinship with such women, a man was called the brother of the first name of his sister, for example, the brother of Maha. The desert has produced many iconic names that still ring with the nobility, dignity, chivalry, and femininity of women in the pre-Islamic era. Mosteghanemi's blog calls for a feminine performance—the forgetting of male ex-lovers, which connects with Arab women's gendered resistance in the past.

Mosteghanemi further invites women to be as strong-willed as Mother Earth. She comments, "women should learn from Mother Earth, with whom none can have a peace treaty or even be able to silence its tornados, fires, or floods. Mother Earth knows to whom she should be generous and to whom she should react aggressively" (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 12). This image of Mother Earth is what Mosteghanemi wishes women to enjoy in their character, a strong-willed woman with whom none can sign a treaty of peace, a woman who does not submit to any authority, regardless of her circumstances. Thereby, she postulates that the aim of her literary convention, the blog that she has turned into a book, is to emulate the qualities of dignity and freedom that should extend to all women. This image of Mother Earth and her resistance and madness suggests that the angry woman has been undermined by gender performativity and its restrictions. (Mosteghanemi 2009, p. 12).

The image of Mother Earth resembles the woman who resists oppression and works for social and political change. By the end of her book, she announces that *Nassyane.com* is only the first of three works that aim at fostering women's resistance and challenging gendered struggles, especially romantic ones: it is the first step to preparing women to restructure their lives and positions in their societies. Optimistically, Mosteghanemi claims that her upcoming works, *wafa* (*Loyalty*) and *Liqaa'* (*The Date*), will present women in stronger positions and more competitive social ranks equipped with dignity, carriage, and independence.

5. Contextualizing Religion, Culture, and Gender in *Girls of Riyadh*

Like Mosteghanemi, Rajaa Alsanea launched her electronic site to express thoughts on and narrate individual experiences of women in conservative Saudi Arabia, and more specifically, Najad, Jeddah, and Riyadh. *Girls of Riyadh* comes in an innovative style, originally in the form of e-mails sent to Alsanea's internet subscribers after every Friday prayer. *Girls of Riyadh* challenges the traditional model of masculinity and femininity, utilizing a digital platform. The work tackles modern Saudi society by following the life and love stories of four girlfriends of college age: Lamees, Ghamrah, Sadeem, and Michelle, who embody some aspects of Western culture, such as celebrating Valentine's Day and watching romantic movies. These acts form the content of their media discourse and divulge the scandal—"*sirah wa infadihat*", to use Alsanea's words, or what al-Ghadeer calls "fetishization", of romance and forbidden acts in Saudi society (Al-Ghadeer 2017, p. 5). According to Alsanea, mainstream Saudi conservative culture does not leave room for the love relationships of these girls to flourish; neither women nor men in Saudi Arabia are

allowed to date, and arranged marriages, where the man and the woman can meet only under the surveillance of their parents before they agree or decline to get engaged, are still the most common type of marriage arrangement. Sexuality, the traditional model of masculinity, social status, and the stigma of divorced women are some of the issues that Alsanea treats carefully by unfolding the ramifications of Saudi-style coercive gender performativity. While Lamees is the only girl among her friends who successfully secures a good marriage, Ghamrah, Sadeem, and Michelle fail in their romantic relationships. Ghamrah's arranged marriage with Rashid, a graduate student in New York, ends in divorce. After her marriage and discovery that Rashid does not like her, Ghamrah stops taking birth control pills in order to get pregnant, hoping that the baby will make her win Rashid's heart, a heart that is in love with a Japanese girl called Kari. Rashid sends Ghamrah back to her family and follows up by sending her divorce papers. However, Ghamrah refuses to remarry, insisting on raising her baby as a single parent and a divorced woman.

Sadeem has been raised by her father as a result of her mother's death. Sadeem witnesses the pitfalls of her culture when she has sex with her fiancée Waleed, a handsome young man who loves her dearly and breaks up with her after their first sexual intercourse, which occurs just before their wedding night. In Sadeem's society, and the Arab world in general, the woman and the man are not supposed to have sex before their wedding night despite the fact that, according to Islam, the man and the woman are considered husband and wife once they exchange their vows and sign the martial documents in front of witnesses. Though she has broken no religious law, Sadeem loses her partner because she has violated the gender performativity and femininity norms according to her culture. Waleed disapproves of Sadeem's seemingly unfeminine behavior of crossing the cultural norms by surrendering to her desire and having sexual intercourse with him before their wedding night. For Waleed, Sadeem is a non-marriageable woman. Waleed faces the consequences of internalizing the Saudi masculinist norms and, consequently, he divorces Sadeem. When Sadeem tries to start her life over after her divorce and moves to London, she meets and falls in love with Firas and has another dramatic romantic experience. As Firas belongs to a well-established Saudi, he is under pressure to marry a woman whose family equals his social status. Firas leaves Sadeem and marries another woman, but after Sadeem goes back to Saudi Arabia, he offers to marry her as a second wife. Sadeem refuses his offer because she values her self-esteem more than her emotions, thereby gaining control of her life. She starts her own bridal arrangements company and finally marries her cousin, who has been in love with her for many years. Firas loses his love for complying with gender norms and engaging with the hegemonic performances of masculinity. Belonging to a well-established Saudi, Firas embraces his masculine identity of marrying a woman of a class and with a social status that functions as a marker of her femininity as the ideal partner.

Sadeem is not the only woman whose love life is jeopardized because of dominant masculinity and femininity norms in Saudi society. The fourth girl is Michelle, an Arab–American girl who is more liberal than her girlfriends but still shares with them the same umbrella of Saudi culture. Michelle goes through a love tragedy after she has a romantic relationship with Faisal, who refuses to marry her because her family is not from the top elite in the country like he is. Like Firas, Faisal is confronted with the ramifications of internalizing his Saudi masculine identity and class bias, resulting in losing his love life and causing Michelle emotional damage. Michelle comes to understand how culture imposes specific performance standards on gender and how the imposed limitations lead to the destruction of the romantic relationship. These ramifications of the imposed limitations on gender are also manifested in the circumstances of the publication of *Girls of Riyadh*.

Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* can be classified as a feminist novel for a number of reasons. The first is outside the text, in its circumstances of publication. Even though Alsanea received insulting and threatening e-mails because *Girls of Riyadh* was viewed as a scandalous work that defaced the image of Saudi women and questioned the ideology of masculinity in Saudi society, she went ahead with publication. The book was banned, and the author's life was threatened. The banning of the book, as Tijani explains, is not due to its portrayal

of sexuality rather, "it is because al-Sani voices—through the 'characters' statements and actions, coupled with the authorial commentary—some serious attacks on the Saudi socio-religious system that remains discriminatory against and oppressive to women, despite the recent government-driven changes to the status quo" (Tijani 2019, p. 3). Moreover, in his *Leaks, Hacks, and Scandals*, Tarek El-Ariss discusses the issues revolving around the translation of *Girls of Riyadh*. The translator of *Girls of Riyadh*, Marilyn Booth, focused on the literary aspects of the words rather than the actual stories the author strived to convey. Booth "upheld the literary without reverting to traditional literature as *adab*, but instead was seeking to theorize a new aesthetic that is 'truly literature,' making the book into a "literature masterpiece" by focusing on the form rather than content. (El-Ariss 2018, p. 137). "The act of hacking thus leads to the articulation and production of the canon of Arabic writing in the digital age" (ibid.). The Arabic version of the book highlights the struggles that Saudi women go through, but it was not meant to fit the "[W]estern gaze". The translated text does not reveal information about society in Saudi Arabia as much as the Arabic version of the book does. It "leaked manual if not the production codes of the text itself" it all together created a fictional scandal (ibid., p. 138).

Moreover, *Girls of Riyadh* is a feminist novel because its author is a feminist. Alsanea resisted both her own people who challenged the validation of her book as well as the translator's perspective of her work and its women. Alsanea's self-independence and sense of dignity energized her to write with more determination. Her responses to those e-mails were well-reasoned and colored with sarcasm and cynicism. In one of her responses to her readers, she writes:

> I can't understand why all of you are so surprised! Such tales happen among us every day, and yet no one has an inkling of it except the two people who get scorched at the scene of the fire. Where do you think all of these sad poems and willing, melancholic songs of our heritage came from? And today, poetry pages in newspapers, radio and TV programs, and literary chat rooms on the Internet all draw their nourishment from such tales, such heartbreaks. [. . .] Unfortunately, some people can always be heard over everybody else because they are proud practitioners of the questionable philosophy that the loudest voice beats all. If they are so eager to stir things up, wouldn't it be better use of their time for these vengeful types to wag their tongues against repugnant ideas and outdated traditions like tribal prejudice rather than against people who merely try to get some discussion going about how offensive these practices are? (Alsanea 2007, p. 97)

Alsanea believes that it is best to deal with controversy and scandal rather than claim their nonexistence. She says that the outrageous e-mails people send her employ "the philosophy of the loudest voice beats all", a philosophy that tends to silence attempts to change or negotiate the invalid traditions and hegemonic models of masculinity and femininity. She refuses to be silenced, however, and she announces her commitment to the responsibility that she is taking on her shoulders—social change and breaking out of the confines of feminine and masculine identities. She writes:

> Everyone condemns my bold writing, and perhaps my boldness in writing at all. Everyone is blaming me for the fury I have stirred up around "taboo" topics that in this society we have never been accustomed to discussing so frankly and especially when the opening selves come from a young woman like me. But isn't there a starting point for every drastic social change? (Alsanea 2007, p. 113)

> *Who imagined that Martin Luther King could liberate the blacks in USA from discrimination and lay out the foundation of the equality and justice for all by rejecting the segregation and division between the black and the white in the church?!* (Alsanea 2005, p. 113; translation mine in italics)

Clearly, Alsanea attempts to launch a revolution of social change. Like Mosteghanemi, Alsanea sees that social and political changes are inseparable, and personal freedom stems from political freedom; thus, she identifies herself with Martin Luther King. In the Arabic

original of her book, the word "revolution" (*thwrah*) occurs many times. Eventually, she takes this notion of revolution further and identifies herself with Martin Luther King Jr. She sees herself as a vanguard leader, sacrificing her energies in order to establish change. Alsanea says:

> Who knows? I might face the same troubles that Martin Luther King went through when he was jailed for his rejection to the wrong beliefs and discrimination in his society. He sacrificed his life for the cause but never doubted the possibility of change. And here he is in his death is treated like a hero after he was a criminal in his life. (Alsanea 2005, pp. 113–14, translation mine)

Alsanea thus takes responsibility for change and announces her readiness to bear the consequences. Vron Ware claims that *Girls of Riyadh* received special attention for "its daring portray of contemporary life in the Arabian Peninsula" (Ware 2011, p. 57). El-Ariss defines the group of writers Alsanea belongs to and how they "transcend their condition of spectatorship in order to hack and write, introducing a new way of seeing, showing, and exposing. As the act of hacking turns off the scene, it puts the light at the fingertips of other viewers or browsers who now discover but also activate the scene of scandal online" (El-Ariss 2018, p. 2). Alsanea transcended her role as a spectator and wrote a work that exposes scandals about her society. In fact, in most cases, women who commit themselves to initiate change and tell impermissible stories, especially regarding femininity and what is considered taboo, face challenges when they speak their minds; however, their literature survives in spite of the authorities that strive to ban it. Raja Alsanea is only one example of the many Arab women writers who successfully speak their minds and boldly bring sexuality, religion, and culture into dialogue in their works. A lawsuit was filed against Alsanea by two Saudi citizens who asked for her punishment for distorting the image of Saudi girls by portraying them as girls who do not follow the cultural norms; they wear perfume in public, listen to romantic songs, and secretly drink on special occasions. Those who filed the lawsuit claimed that Alsanea violated Saudi Arabia's publication laws, which prohibit the publication or distribution of books that undermine the country's religious and cultural values (Tijani 2019, p. 3). The censorship law of Saudi Arabia permits only books that do not conflict with the values of religion and culture, as understood by the country's religious authorities (Alsanea 2007, p. 4). As Alsanea reveals, one of her readers asks: "Who authorized you to speak for the girls of Najd? You are nothing but a malevolent and rancorous woman deliberately attempting to sully the image of women in Saudi society" (ibid., p. 28). In fact, she opens her book with a Quranic verse that reads, "Allah doesn't change the condition of those who do not help [change] themselves" (ibid., p. 9). She also opens her second chapter with a quote from Hilton Killer: "Life should be either a challenge or an adventure, or it should not be at all" (ibid, p. 2; translation mine), and thereby, every Friday afternoon before embarking on writing, she applies the bright red lipstick before sitting down to write, as a sign of her adventure to reveal the "the most explosive scandals" and unfolding the Saudi social and gender limitations that she wishes to change (ibid., p. 1).

Although Alsanea's book reveals the limitations of her society and the paradoxes of Saudi feminine and masculine identity, it does not dismiss Saudi culture or religion. Indeed, it calls upon change from within. Tijani observes that Alsanea "is contending for women's rights within the purview of cardinal Islamic injunctions, thereby contributing to the argument that most of the gendered do's and do not's of modern Saudi society are particularly constructed" (Tijani 2019, p. 13). Thus, *Girls of Riyadh* demonstrates the ability to deconstruct and restructure society without throwing off all its values and traditions. It invites Saudi society to rebuild the society from within to help the person to "be a better person" (Alsanea 2007, p. 5). Alsanea's book argues for mutual love among men and women along with mutual respect and responsibilities. Her careful narrative reveals her respect for her religion and place with deep ambitions to bring change that emerges from within Riyadh and the Saudi people. Her book does not subject the East and the West to a drastic comparison; and instead, she successfully surpasses this rigid dichotomy and calls

for a change that emerges from the essence of the person, a change in the subjectivities and its perceptions and practices regardless of its place and region. In fact, her characters have never enjoyed more freedom during their stays in the West than in the East. These characters are fully covered with their traditional Saudi clothes in their country, and on their international flights, they change into or out of them in the plane's bathrooms, but from inside, they are still the same—people who seek more freedom, a better life and satisfying love relationships. We witness Firas, Sadeem's lover, a person who embraces religion and positively influences Sadeem's way of practicing her religion; Firas is the one who wakes her up for *fajr* (down) prayer by calling her cellphone on his way to the mosque to pray *fajr*. Firas is the one who supports her during her grief after the death of her father by calling her and reciting prayers to her and asking her to say "Amen" after him (Alsanea 2007, p. 198). In fact, not only does Firas strengthen her relationship with God, but also with her textbooks, considering "himself responsible for her studies and her superior grades", and tying the good work with worshiping God, as his religion commands him (ibid., p. 210).

Alsanea's portrayals of gender norms reveal that the reasons behind social confines that limit gender performativity are cultural rather than religious in her country. In *Girls of Riyadh*, Michelle, the Arab American girl who constantly complains about the limitations and restrictions that her society imposes on her life, never thinks that religion is the reason behind her disconnect. Alsanea relates an account of Michelle's reaction when her father gets upset at her after he heard her praising her American cousin, Matti, saying, "Michelle did not believe that religion was the reason behind this blow up--her dad had never been one of those strict or extremist Islamists nor her mother who converted to Islam after she gave birth to her and never cared to follow her religion's restrictions" ((Alsanea 2005, p. 207) translation mine).

Alsanea's depiction of the mainstream Saudi gender establishment shows that these gender practices are sometimes carried out by their people even when they travel to a different place. In a fascinating narrative that pairs the closed, conservative Riyadh and the open, metropolitan New York, Alsanea demonstrates that New York is not that different from Riyadh in terms of freedom and influence when people pack with them their outdated traditions along with their personal luggage. Instead, she sheds light on the character and on a social change that reveals his or her complexity and intricate subjectivities. In turn, she neither glorifies nor attaches blame to either of the cities. One of the girl friends in the novel, Ghamrah Al-Qusmanji, who marries Rashid Al-Tanbal, a Saudi graduate student in the US, does not find more freedom in New York than in Riyadh. Ghamrah, who belongs to a well-established, upper-class family in Riyadh, is abused at the hands of her educated husband, who unwillingly marries her and takes her to New York. Rashid is never attached to Ghamrah physically or emotionally; he is unable to satisfy her sexually. He divorces her after she confronts him over his affair with a Japanese girl, Kari, when she finds pictures of them together on her husband's computer (Alsanea 2007, p. 78). Although Alsanea portrays Ghamrah as enjoying security, luxury, enjoyable limited freedom, friendship, and family unity in Riyadh and suffering loneliness, fear, loss, and finally divorce in New York, she does not attach blame to a location. However, Alsanea's narrative blames Ghamrah's husband for his wife's suffering and implies that it is the person himself or herself who is to blame or praise; it is the person who should resist the gender practices that can confine mobility and progress in life.

Ghamrah's story offers the reader scenes in which the rigid categories of defining the masculine and feminine Saudi identities do not change with time and place, or even education, without any attempts to open them up to new interpretations and negotiations. Despite his high level of education and his metropolitan place of living, Rashid deals with his wife within the well-defined dictates of gender performativity—what socially makes a good husband and what defines a woman as a wife. He demands that his wife play the role of the traditional woman and accustom herself to the new ways of life in her marriage, including the heavy housework that she has never done before, as she belongs to the 'velvet' Riyadh upper class" (Alsanea 2007, p. 43). He punishes her if his clothes are not washed and ironed the night before (ibid., p. 45).

Ghamrah does not suffer from the discrepancies between the two cities but from the same perception that confines her within a monolithic definition of femininity and what makes a good wife. Rashid does not show an understanding of Ghamrah's class and regional culture; he strips her of her credentials as a classy "velvet" girl of Riyadh, imposing a hegemonic male superiority, nor does he credit her as a woman of her own—as Ghamrah and not any other woman. Butler points out the danger of "the assumption that the term *women* denote a common identity" (Butler 1999, p. 6). She adds:

> If one "is" a woman, that is surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, not because a pregendered "person" transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender, but because gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, *and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual,* and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result it becomes impossible to separate "gender" from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (Butler 1999, p. 6; emphasis mine)

Butler contends that a women's identity should be read alongside her class, ethnicity, region, and race in order to comprehend her unique subjectivities as a woman who is different from other women. "Decontextualiz[ing]" reading women's identity may result in casting all women in the category of women (ibid., p.7). Rashid's treatment of his wife is a case where gender is read in isolation from the components that make a completely coherent meaning of its cultural attachment to a woman; he is a man who does not comprehend the implications of Ghamrah's class and urban background on her identity and subjectivities as a woman who belongs to Riyadh and to a well-known family. Consequently, Ghamrah is caught up in feelings of loneliness and estrangement from the woman she became and the man who misreads her (her husband). She finds herself with an arrogant husband joining the common international housewives in New York, and her emotions are aroused when she remembers how much she misses the luxury of having a servant who takes care of the cooking, bedding, cleaning, and housekeeping that she used to have in her life before her marriage in Riyadh (Alsanea 2007, p. 53). Ghamrah tries to embody her feminine identity and role as a wife to please her husband in every way she can. When Ghamrah discovers that her husband feels emotionally detached from her she tries to attract him physically and emotionally. "This young wife took up arms, intent on fighting to defend her marriage and struggle for the sake of its survival" (Alsanea 2007, p. 79). When he criticizes her behavior and out-of-date fashion, she takes off her scarf in the theater to please him; however, he commands her to immediately put it back and tells her to cover up her ugliness.

Although she wrestles with feelings of insecurity, Ghamrah does not give up and consults her mother for advice on how to better embody her role as a woman who successfully and diplomatically copes with male domination. Her mother suggests that bearing Rashid a child will change his life and heart towards Ghamrah and make him forget Kari. Ghamrah stops the birth control without consulting Rashid and gets pregnant; however, when Rashid learns about her pregnancy, he takes her action as crossing the boundaries of her femininity and violating his masculinity as a husband (Alsanea 2007, p. 80). For Rashid, Ghamrah's pregnancy is an attempt to twist his arm as a man: "What Pregnant? You are pregnant! How did that happen? Who gave you the permission to get pregnant? You mean you're not taking the pills? Did not we agree there would be no pregnancy until I finish my PhD and we go back to Saudi? You figured you could twist my arm with these filthy tricks!" (ibid., p. 85). For her disregard for cultural norms and disrespect of his masculinity, he sends her back to Saudi Arabia and files divorce papers. Ghamrah stays in her family's house after her divorce, giving in to the pressure of the social norms that urge her to lie in order to avoid being the subject of women's gossip in the community. She pretends that she is a happy wife and that her husband has sent her to her family for a visit. As the community learns her story, Ghamrah's divorce secret unfolds rapidly. Still, she clings to the hope that she belongs to the "successful wife" category, and she names her baby after Rashid's father's first name, thinking this will win Rashid back. This move does not impress Rashid, and he never considers remarrying her.

Although Ghamrah's friends form a network that helps her survive her loss and hardships, blogging and online chat and e-mails become the medium that allows Ghamrah to live in a new feminine sphere that is free of restrictions and social confinements and paradoxes. For Ghamrah, digital media is a means of travel from the complexities of Saudi society to a world where she can live freely as a woman without the anxiety of squeezing her subjectivities to fit mainstream Saudi gender norms.

Ghamrah realizes the value of her self-authority and formulates a new view of her life after divorce. She challenges the ready-made Saudi woman image that dominates society. Still confused and perplexed about the gender matrix in her society, she refuses to remarry and decides to nurture her child with love and care as an independent single parent. Ghamrah finds herself again encountering the unjust hegemonic male perception towards women, and this time towards female divorcees in her society. In her society, divorce leaves indelible traces on women's lives. The man who proposed to her and wanted to take her as a second wife because his first wife did not give birth finds himself in a powerful position where he can lay out rules for this marriage, confirming that his condition is that Ghamrah's son will not live with him in his house and he "will remain in his grandmother's house" (Alsanea 2007, pp. 213–14). In this regard, Tijani claims that "Sadeem and Gamrah's post-divorce experiences symbolize the prevalent apathy often encountered by female divorcees in Saudi Arabic where they risk being single until the end of their lives" (Tijani 2019, p. 12). Ghamrah refuses to conform to the binary gender differences and declines his offer that entails her confinement in the feminine conventional sphere. She rejects his traditional masculine way of thinking and that he has the upper hand in this marriage and decides to raise her child as a resilient single mother. This strong sense of responsibility towards her child and her self-wholeness charges her with hope and affirms her existence as a mother, a woman, and a member of a cyber-community that allows her to survive socially through networks that intersect with others who are coping with pain and loss.

Ghamrah's friend Sadeem also faces the trouble of gender performativity when she gets divorced. Her fiancée, Waleed, divorces her for giving herself to him before their wedding night. As Sadeem's wedding gets closer and her emotions are aroused, she decides to prepare a special night for the love of her life, Waleed. After the romantic night, in which Sadeem loses her virginity, Waleed breaks the engagement because he thinks that she must be an easy girl who might have had previous sexual relationships. Despite his passionate love of Sadeem, Waleed holds his traditional notions of femininity and masculinity dearly regarding gender performativity and sexuality. For Waleed, Sadeem has violated the traditional performance of femininity. Sadeem gets divorced for facing the predicaments of Waleed's masculinist standards—particularly a man who should be married to a woman who does not honor her emotions and desires. The disparity between what is culturally presumed to be right and wrong and what religiously is marked as *halal* and *haram* confuses Sadeem and causes her emotional collapse. According to Sadeem's culture, it is not right for a man and a woman to have sex before their wedding night; however, according to Islam, it is allowed as long as the man and the woman exchange their marital vows and sign their marital contract in front of witnesses or a court. Sadeem is perplexed and confused about her fiancée's action: "Is she not his legal wife? Did she not press her thumbprint beside his signature on the huge register book? [. . .] Do all of these not meant that she has become his legal wife without any wedding ceremony?" (Alsanea 2007, p. 42). Knowing that their marriage is legally complete[2] and that she is his legal wife, he reminds her that "she has become his wife" after having their *al-milka*[3] and signing the marriage contract makes her more confused (ibid.). She regrets that she believed him and that she was intimate with him. Sadeem receives harsh punishment from her culture and her lover for expressing her motions and being herself as a woman, and her divorce reflects the discrepancy between her culture and religion.

For Waleed, Sadeem does not embody the presumed standards of gender performativity and femininity, and accordingly, she does not qualify to be his wife any longer. She is unable to subdue her emotions and desires and could betray him in the future if she has not already done so in the past. For Waleed, Sadeem's display of sexual pleasure takes away

his confidence in her honor and purity since he believes sexuality is a forbidden sphere that a woman is not allowed to explore before their wedding night. For her deviant behavior of violating her gender role and feminine and cultural norms, she deserves his scorn. Not only does Alsanea's work reflect on the discrepancy between Saudi culture and religion, but it also presents the complexity of gay sexuality in Saudi society.

Alsanea presents the complexity of gay sexuality in Saudi society through Nowayer, the son of Um Nowayer, whose effeminate characteristics were revealed at age fifteen when he started walking in a feminine way, causing people to laugh and call him a feminine name, Nowayer instead of Nouri, his original masculine name. The role Um Nowayer plays in the lives of the previously mentioned four girls intersects with her son's sexuality. Um Nowayer is a divorced middle-aged woman who seems to understand the younger generation's needs more than other characters in the book. She makes her house the communication network for the four girls and their lovers without allowing the crossing of moral and ethical boundaries. She believes that more freedom for men and women to date is neither harmful nor destructive to the social fabric. She is a strong woman who defies her hardships with a strong will; when people discover her son's queerness and start making fun of him or her, calling her Um Nowayer, she initially responds with a smile at the beginning, but later insists on them calling her Um Nowayer. By so doing, she defies gender performativity and washes off the social disgrace of her son. Her insistence on being called Um Nowayer indicates her desire to bring new dimensions and practices to the perspective of gender and its performativity, opening up the sphere for more definitions of masculine and feminine identities. She responds to her son's sexuality impassively; she does not see a scar on her life or her son's honor, as people around her do. Although Nowayer's "in-betweenness" sexual status puts [him] in question", his articulation of non-narrative sexuality questions the idea of normativity, sexuality, and performativity (Butler 1999, p. xi). Nowayer's case is representative of the limitless possibilities that the field of sexuality encompasses, and maybe represents the possibility of changing the way Saudi society condemns any variation in human sexual behavior that does not fit the norm.

Insisting on continuing the work that threatens Alsanea's life is a form of resistance. Her work attempts to create a new space for the person to examine himself or herself through reading other people's experiences. Her work aims at providing the person with a voice to narrate his or her story in the hope that it will benefit others and bring with it more respect for freedom and social justice. Her work makes noise in its positive and negative forms: some proclaim that it is against the social norms and a tool for defacing Saudi society, while others regard it as a mark of change coming at the hands of a young outspoken woman who boldly relays individual experiences outside the master narrative, a narrative that casts all women in one category. Alsanea locates them within new paradigms that assert individual value and offer the person a voice. Alsanea's work is a spark for change and transformation.

While some Arab writers seek to change in their societies, other authors endorse the traditional gendered dimensions that confine women as well as men within a very limited sphere, as in the case of Ibrahim Alsaqir's *Girls of Riyadh: The Complete Picture*.

6. Traditional Gendered Dimensions in Ibrahim Alsaqir's *Girls of Riyadh: The Complete Picture*

Ibrahim Alsaqir is a Saudi writer who advocates traditional categories and dichotomy of masculine and feminine identities and promotes traditional gender practices in Saudi Arabia. Presuming a common identity among all Saudi women, Alsaqir harshly attacks and unfairly criticizes Alsanea, portraying her as one of his women in his *Girls of Riyadh: The Complete Picture*. The novel was released in 2009 as a response to Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*. My intention in this section is to briefly examine the novel's representation of Saudi society and gender performativity that came as a response to Rajaa Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh*. While Alsaqir strives to emphasize the stabilization of the dichotomy of gender, his novel ultimately proves that masculinity and gender are negotiated.

Alsaqir is not an advocate for change that allows for resistance and reassessment of the perceptions of femininity and masculinity in the Arab world. Alsaqir's book, he claims, is a corrective to misrepresentations of Saudi women such as those in Alsanea's novel. He claims that his book is a poignant and supposedly faithful reflection of "the complete picture" of the Saudi women that Alsanea tore apart in her work. Alsaqir harshly criticizes Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* and considers her book to be an assault on Saudi men and women. He contends that she misrepresents and defaces the image of Saudi women who conform to the social and cultural establishment. Butler postulates that the gender identities and subjectivities that defy the norms are always exposed to criticism and, at the same time, raise the "possibility of opening up these foreclosed gender practices". Butler (1999, p. 24) writes:

> Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of "gender identities" fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain. Their persistence and proliferation; however, provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder.

Alsaqir views Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh's* women as failures who are unable to be normal or natural from within the cultural matrix; they are strange, outside the law, disrupters, and hence, they are criticized. The gateway that Alsanea tries to open up for more possibilities and representations of women and their interaction in their society is fought against harshly by other views and works, such as Alsaqir's.

Alsaqir presents three categories of girls of Riyadh: the extremist Islamists, the free, and the confused. While he strives to insult Alsanea, whose real name appears in his novel, Alsaqir depicts the extremist Islamist girls in a utopian fashion that creates a narrative structure more like a fairy tale rather than a realistic novel that claims to respond to real individual experiences and provide "the complete picture" of girls of Riyadh. In his novel, Alsaqir depicts what seems like an extremist girl coming to him at a men's café, holding a novel called *Girls of Vice* by Samer Al-Muqrin, and shouting in Alsaqir's face, demanding that he take action and respond to Alsanea's and Almuqrin's novels. She adds that it is his responsibility to defend the girls of Riyadh and the honor of Saudi girls in general, which has been defaced at the hands of writers such as Alsanea.

This character's action of seeking a man's help in defending her honor and the honor of Saudi girls can be read within the conventional domain of Arab masculinity that inextricably connects nationalism with masculinity and views the Arab man as a hero who protects women and defends the nation (Amireh 2021, p. 50). Amireh discusses this connection in the Palestinian context, but the Arabic culture and the classical Arabic literature are rich in depicting such a trope. The character's plea in the above scene in Alsaqir's work echoes the very famous cry of "*Wa'ma'tasimah, wa'ma'tasimah*". "*Wa'ma'tasimah, wa'ma'tasimah*", launched by a respectful woman in the city of Amuriyah in Turkey, during the Amorian battle between the Abbasid armies and the Roman army. The story says that a man came to the famous Abbasid caliph, Al-Amu'tasim Billah, and told him that he saw a respectful woman in Amoriyah being dragged to prison and crying out for help: "*Wa'ma'tasimah, wa'ma'tasimah*". The Abbasid caliph, Al-Amu'tasim Billah, sent a threatening message to the Romans asking them to bring that woman out of prison or else he would fight them in a bloody war. The Roman prince did not respond, so Al-Amu'tasim Billah marched with his army to prepare for the siege of Amoria (Ibrahim 2020). Alsaqir's character cry resembles, to an extent, the cry of "*Wa'ma'tasimah, wa'ma'tasi- mah*". For her, Alsaqir is the Arab man who would bravely defend the image of Saudi women. Alsaqir, in this case, is similar in his manly merits to the Palestinian *fid'i*, a freedom fighter, "(literally self-ransomer) fighting against imperialism or Israeli occupation comes to center stage in Arab masculinity, idealized as a hero volunteering to stand bravely and selflessly against impossible odds, who is quick-tempered when it comes to nationalist pride" (Kahf and Sinno 2021, p. 10). Thus, Alsaqir, in this case, represents the Saudi women's liberator from imperialist liberals who could distort their image as honorable Saudi women.

Alsaqir's character gets very excited when he tells her that he already started his response to Alsanea's novel by writing a series of novels, and his *Girls of Riyadh: The Complete Picture* will be the first to be released very soon. This depiction of a Saudi woman raises questions of whether or not the reader will apply a generalization about women in Saudi Arabia in the same manner that Alsaqir does about Alsanea's representation of not only her culture but also of her gender. The fact that most public places are segregated in Saudi Arabia and Alsaqir's claim that his representations of the Saudi women in his novel are "complete" makes his depiction an incomplete picture. Although he depicts a woman in a male space, he does not leave space for her voice to grow as a separate entity from other women. In other words, his female extremist character is calling upon a hegemonic discourse that defines and confines women within a unidirectional perspective that views them as very conservative religiously and culturally.

The "free" category of girls of Riyadh in Alsaqir's book is not represented in a more sophisticated way than the first category. One of these free girls falls in love and repeatedly expresses to her father that she wants to get married. Her father's response comes in the stereotypical form of the Middle Eastern man—abusive. Not only does he insult her and physically and emotionally abuse her, but also, he bluntly and vulgarly calls her names, an action that tarnishes the image of the caring father as well as the innocent, shy girl of Riyadh. This scene becomes a space in Alsaqir's novel wherein gender constructions are reinforced. The confusion this book brings to its local readership is that while Alsaqir aims at defending the image of Saudi women and representing the "complete picture" of girls of Riyadh, he, at the same time, does not give them agency to have a voice nor a space to negotiate an identity that breaks through the rigid social definitions of what a woman and a man are. By allowing his female character to seek his help, personally, in a segregated café for men, he enforces the bond of manhood in terms of heroism without allowing her to develop resistance enactment. Alsaqir, then, reproduces the conventionally socially established link between heroism and masculinity, reinforcing the binary opposition between masculine and feminine performances. Following Joane Nagel, Alsaqir's position is elevated to resemble a nationalist hero: "Terms like honor, patriotism, cowardice, bravery and duty are hard to distinguish as either nationalistic or masculinist, since they seem so thoroughly tied both to the nation and to manliness" (Nagel 1998, p. 252). Such a portrayal of Alsaqir as a manly hero explains how masculine identities are constructed socially despite the advancement of digital media. While being deeply concerned with highlighting the heroic masculinity in Saudi society, he was sowing the seeds of doubt about women's agency and their multiple subjectivities.

Alsaqir's portrayal of Saudi women leads to an image that masks a complex fabric of realities about women's lives in Saudi Arabia in the twenty-first century, the age of digital media and communication, where the experiences of the character are extremely highlighted, and the gender identity is influenced with new ingredients that make it a more fluid and sophisticated identity and subjectivity. Masculinity, as well, should be evaluated within a set of social constructs. Julie Peteet notes that "Masculinity is neither natural nor given. Like femininity, it is a social construct" (Peteet 2000, p. 107). Alsaqir overlooks Peteet's notion of the flexibility of masculine and feminine identities. The narrative in Alsaqir's work silences women's voices and reduces them to social subjects that are assigned to speak and act within traditional dynamics and specific structures.

This appropriation of Saudi women's subjectivities limits and excludes the potential for resistance. I read this appropriation as an oppression of women's agency. According to Butler, "the domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regularity consequences of that construction" (Butler 1999, p. 7). The coercive exclusion of subjectivities that are not subtly explained as the systematic definition of feminine/masculine is a form of oppression that strips dignity, progress, creativity, and any kind of emancipation. Thus, in offering an alternative to such coercive representations, Alsanea and her work constitute a form of social and gendered resistance.

Eventually, Alsaqir delineates his characters' narratives, putting words in their mouths that match his own patriarchal views and read well in accordance with his set masculine and

feminine paradigms. For example, Alsanea falls into the confused girl category, appearing as a naïve, sensational girl who does not have a viable goal in her life to do or a respectful dream to achieve. The religious girls meet Alsanea and decide to punish her for defending Saudi Arabian women by revealing the secrets in her book, *Girls of Riyadh*, to teach her a lesson; they ask her questions until she gives up and admits that she is the writer of *Girls of Riyadh*. In a sarcastic way, they call her the lion, as she belongs to the lion family. They wickedly and secretly say to each other, "Oh lion, you don't know how I'll respond to you now?" (Alsaqir 2011, p. 50). Obviously, these girls do not acknowledge that the lion is always associated with courage, boldness, strength, and proclaiming authority and leadership. So, to call Alsanea the lion is, in fact, to give her an honorable title that indicates herself determined, self-governing and self-reliant character. Alsaqir confuses himself and forces his characters to behave and speak in ways that conflict with the labels he assigns them. Alsanea, in his novel, confesses that Alsanea is sensational and unrealistic; the religious girl, Abeer, tells Alsanea about her lover. This makes Alsanea very jealous of her, wishing she had a lover like Abeer's (ibid., p. 51). Eventually, this scene asserts that women in Alsaqir's work are confused, and thereby, they do not represent the girls of Riyadh. On the other hand, Alsanea's book is a piece of literature that is true to its place and time—the digital age that enforces the immediacy of the discussed subjects on social media platforms. Its personal experiences reveal the changes that Saudi Arabia has witnessed in the last twenty years in which women started to demand equality and personal freedom. Their search for new spaces within their culture and religion is a hallmark of this new age in the Arab World, the age of revolutions and search for freedoms, and emerging subjectivities that put dignity at the forefront, even if the cost is life itself. Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* is only one electronic space of many that chant for freedom, dignity, and a new tomorrow. Alsaqir's obsession with creating the representational category of Saudi women limits the creativity in the novel. Butler asserts that the assumption of an incomplete category of women allows for creation, productivity, and "a permanently available site of contested meanings". Butler contends that gender should be understood as an open site, never complete, never finished, never fully representing any sex; otherwise, it will be dead (Butler 1999, p. 21). She says:

> Gender is a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purpose at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure. (Butler 1999, p. 22)

Alsaqir's imposing regularity on gender domination is a coercive regime on art as well as on Saudi women and men. Thus, women and men, according to Butler, as a category, are still emerging in a process of emancipation, creating spaces where "it is open to intervention and resignification" (Alsaqir 2011, p. 43). In this context Samira Aghacy discusses the clash between two types of manhood in Lebanese literature which also applies to Saudi manhood: "The ideological norms and prevalent version of manhood as virile, savage, autonomous, and anachronistic clashed with one erupting out of a new set of historical circumstances, one that is fragile, insecure, and repeatedly found lacking in agency and initiative" (Aghacy 2009, p. 130). Alsaqir's essentialist ideology and version of masculinity as the protector and the savor of Saudi women and their femininity, the virile, clashed with a new set of hallmarks of modernity and the digital age wherein women have a voice and agency and where his version of manhood and masculinity proved to be ambivalent. The insecurity of Alsaqir's male character in his novel as a man is what provokes him to defend the binary opposition of gender.

7. Conclusions

This study examined how the works of Arab women writers serve as a counter-narrative that attempts to redefine the gender establishment in a productive way as they offer flexibility in terms of identity. Mosteghanemi's *Nassayn com* and Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* search for spaces for underrepresented or foreclosed gender practices that are assumed to be wrong and immoral. These works destabilize conventionalized notions of masculinity and gender. The

female characters in these works are considered failures for their inability to conform to the set criteria of their gender. However, they challenge the norms and create noise, shedding light on formerly unthinkable images that are read decontextualized within the cultural societal context in their region. Their practices reveal the "sexual harassment", to use Butler's words, towards whose sex and gender, defying the notion of the universality and the perception of women and men as categories that are identified by their commonality. Mosteghanemi's *Nassayn com* and Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*, as this essay shows, allow subjectivities of their type, forming a rainbow of multiple colors and practices that coherently blend in the societal matrix without the need for calling upon the coercive binary opposition between feminine and masculine practices. The emancipation of the women characters in Alsanea's work is a form of feminist resistance. They define themselves within a new space that exceeds gender limitations and local paradigms, defying social confinements and translating their new views of life and growing awareness of existence into reality. Mosteghanemi's and Alsanea's literary spaces bring new realities of life and allow for the emergence of new sensibilities that promote non-ideological subjectivities. Both works represent their modern time and utilize digital platforms to defy rigid models of masculinity and femininity. However, as vanguard leaders who aim to spell out change, these characters/writers are always challenged and accused of being "not normal". While Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* and Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Nessayne com* question the notion of fixed gender roles, Ibrahim Alsaqir's *Girls of Riyadh: The Complete Picture* strives to rigidify it. While the cyber-community can be a site of confinement, it is a site of freedom in this study. The focus of this study is not to idealize the cyber community but to highlight its existence as a marker of the digital age, the age of revolutions and upheavals that call for social justice and freedom. The literary digital spaces travel from one societal frame to another and from one readership to another, demanding a close reading of the Arab woman's subjectivities and perception. The local and global readers of these digital spaces and their fluctuating postings that often express the unexpected bring hope that their counter-narratives can transform and expand existing identities that steadfastly resist all kinds of oppression.

Notes

1   It literary translates into "revealing a scandal", in Arabic

2   In his article, "Is Sadeem Legally Married to Waleed?", Tijani explores in depth how Sadeem's and Waleed's marriage is legal and Islamically complete. Tijani lists the conditions of a complete marriage according to Islamic law: the marriage proposal by the groom and its acceptance by the bride; the consent of bride's guardian; at least two witnesses; the dowery (mahr), and the publicity by having a feast for friends and community (10). He adds that with the exception to the first condition, all could be waived. Accordingly, Sadeem's and Waleed's marriage is legal and Islamically complete.

3   *Al-milka* is a term well-known in the oil Gulf countries that refers to the official Islamic engagement, in which most people finalize and sign the marriage contract and exchange wedding bands.

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