

THE RISE OF SAUDI NOVEL: ORIGINS, EVOLUTION AND THE FORMATION OF LITERARY IDENTITY

EL AUGE DE LA NOVELA SAUDÍ: ORÍGENES, EVOLUCIÓN Y FORMACIÓN DE LA IDENTIDAD LITERARIA

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| Abstract |

The present article traces the origins and developments of Saudi novel from its inception in the 1930s to the contemporary period. It aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the historical trajectory, artistic progress and thematic transformations of the novel in Saudi Arabia, while drawing attention to the noteworthy achievements of Saudi novelists. The article argues that the Saudi novel, despite its modest beginnings, has evolved into a sophisticated and powerful literary form that reflects the social, cultural and intellectual transformations of Saudi society. The article asserts that, despite its relatively late emergence, the Saudi novel has been remarkably successful in establishing its own identity by addressing the complexities of local realities while engaging with universal human concerns. By mapping its evolution and underlining its challenges, the article contends that understanding the history and the major characteristics of Saudi novel is crucial to appreciating its role in articulating collective and individual experiences within the rapidly changing society.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia; Saudi novel; Women novelist; Formation; Contemporary novel.

| Resumen |

El presente artículo traza los orígenes y la evolución de la novela saudí desde sus inicios en la década de 1930 hasta la actualidad. El artículo analiza cómo la novela se convirtió en un género primordial en la literatura saudí. Se espera que este artículo contribuya a dar a conocer mejor la novela saudí y los notables logros de los novelistas saudíes entre los lectores no árabes. Los estudios sobre la novela saudí en inglés tienden a centrarse en novelas o autores concretos, especialmente en escritoras. No existe ningún estudio sobre la novela saudí desde sus inicios en la década de 1930, lo que ha motivado la realización de este estudio introductorio. Cabe señalar que, debido al gran número de novelas saudíes que se han publicado, especialmente desde 2001, el artículo solo pretende ser una introducción al tema. Aún queda por escribir un estudio más amplio y detallado de la novela saudí en cada etapa, sus características básicas, sus técnicas de escritura y su estética. Además, el artículo arroja luz sobre las principales características y los retos a los que se ha enfrentado la novela saudí en cada etapa.

Palabras clave: Arabia Saudí; Novela saudí; Novelistas mujeres; Formación; Novela contemporánea.

| Introduction |

Novel, as understood today, is relatively a new genre in the Arab world dating to the turn of the twentieth century. Yet, poetry remained the pre-eminent literary genre to the mid-twentieth century. Only after 1950s did novel become a leading form in Arabic literature. There is almost a general agreement among Arabic critics that the origins of Arabic novel lie in the western traditions (Allen, 1982, p. 15). It was introduced by a number of Arab diasporic writers who lived in Europe and North America towards the turn of the twentieth century. Translation of western novel into Arabic also played a major role in introducing novel to Arab writers and readers alike. Arabic novel moved slowly for almost half a century before the emergence of influential writers in Egypt, Lebanon and Palestine. However, it was Naguib Mahfouz, the 1988 Nobel Laureate, who “elevated this literary form to new heights and firmly established it as a genre in the Arab literary world” (Pervez, 2008, p. 478).

Saudi novelists first encountered the genre via the works of Egyptian and Lebanese writers. Saudi novel, like Arabic novel in general, had humble beginnings. It did not attract the attention due to the dominance of poetry in the Arabic literary scene. However, some writers made remarkable attempts at this genre as early as the 1930s. Though there have been many carefully crafted Arabic novels which have been positively received and widely hailed by critics during the second half of the twentieth century, Saudi novel remained largely unknown to both Arab and non-Arab readers and was given a peripheral place in the Arabic literary scene. Only recently in the new millennium that Saudi novel started attracting the attention of readers and critics alike.

Though a relatively recent phenomenon, Saudi novel has experienced remarkable and dynamic growth and transformation since the 1930s. Emerging in a period when poetry was the dominant literary form, the novel in Saudi Arabia gradually and confidently established itself as a major literary form capable of articulating the complexities of Saudi society and the tremendous changes it has experienced over the decades. As the Saudi Kingdom evolved economically, socially and culturally, so too did the Saudi literary voice, moving from simple and modest narratives that reflected the simple traditional life to highly sophisticated works that explore modernity, identity and the tensions between tradition and change.

The primary objective of the present study is to trace the origins and development of the Saudi novel since its emergence in the 1930s to the present period. The article attempts to examine how the Saudi novel has evolved to become the dominant literary genre in Saudi Arabia, heightening its structural, thematic and stylistic transformations across the different historical phases. It also aims to highlight the contributions of Saudi novelists and situate their literary works within the broader framework of Arabic and world literatures. The study has been driven by the fact that despite the growing body of Saudi novel, critical studies in English are limited and mostly confined to individual authors or novels. A comprehensive survey that scrutinizes the corpus of Saudi novel

as an evolving and dynamic literary tradition is missing. This gap justifies the present study that attempts to offer an introductory overview which can serve as a foundation for more in-depth studies. The study deploys a historical and analytical approach; that is, it reviews the evolution of the Saudi novel through a historical or chronological lens and draws on primary sources including key Saudi novels and secondary sources such as scholarly and critical writings on Saudi novel. Each stage in the history of Saudi novel is examined in relation to its socio-cultural context. In order to provide a comprehensive and structured overview, the history of Saudi novel has been divided into four phases: the first, 1930-1959; the second, 1960-1979; the third, 1980-2000; and the fourth, 2001-2020.

| The beginnings (1930-1959) |

In Saudi Arabia, the first attempt at novel writing began with Abdul-Quddus Al-Anṣari (1906–1983). His novel *Al-Tawaman* (The Twins 1930) is considered by critics as the first novel in Saudi Arabia and Arabian Peninsula and one of the founding novels in the history of Saudi fiction (Zuhur, 2011, p. 274; Al-Hazimi et al., 2006, p. 28). The novel, centered on the transformation of Mecca into modernity and the social changes that accompanied such a transformation, depicts the clash between tradition and modernity, and has earned Al-Anṣari high literary plaudits by critics. Throughout his writing career, his goal was to establish a national novel that would reach the level attained by other Arab novelists. *Al-Tawaman* was followed by *Al-Intiqam Al-Tabiea* (The Temperamental Revenge 1935) written by Mohammad Jawhari's (1919-1998). Some of the critics consider Jawhari's novel as the first proper novel, in the sense that it has all the artistic and narrative merits that characterize modern novel (Al-Sabil, 2003; Al-Muhareb, 2011, p. 23). Ahmed Al-Sibai (1905-1984) published his novel *Fikra* (Idea) in 1948 which is considered one of most exciting texts in the history of Saudi novel because "it expresses a delicate sensibility through which the writer seeks openness to the world and a renunciation of the emotion of abstract thought...it is the first local novel to feature a woman as its central protagonist—an innovative and carefully crafted character, marked by a clear awareness of the political events that followed the Second World War" (Salami, 2012). The novel centers on a female character who rebels against the conventions and traditions that confine women and restrict them from pursuing their rights such as education and self-enlightenment and, therefore, some critics identify the novel as a feminist novel. In 1948, Muhammad Ali Maghribi (1915-1996) published his novel *Al-Ba'ath* (The Resurrection) in which Maghribi intended "to give encouragement and guidance to future generations of his countrymen" (Al-Qahtani, 1994, p. 51). The novel narrates the story of Usamah, a Saudi young man who travels to India for medical treatment, passing through Aden and Mukalla. Usamah's journey reveals the cultural and economic gulf between the different locations he visits and his native land stressing the importance of education for progress and development of the country as well as for fighting backwardness and illiteracy. While *Al-Tawaman* depicts the clash between the west and the east, in *Al-Ba'ath* the debate shifts to an East-East dialectic.

Novels by authors such as Abdul-Quddus Al-Anṣari, Ahmed Al-Sibai, Mohammad Jawhari and Muhammad Ali Maghribi are the earliest attempts at forming the Saudi modern novelistic genre. However, many of these early novels suffer from some flaws and drawbacks. For example, *Fikrah* has many “improbabilities” in its plot, “the lengthy lapses of the storyline into didacticism” and the rapid ending of the novel as well as the “uncomfortable conflict between realism, symbolism and romanticism” (Al-Qahtani, 1994, p. 49). These novels are didactic by nature and authors paid little attention to the artistic aspect of their works. Ahmad Muhammad Jamal (1946) writes:

We should like to apologize to our esteemed readers—in advance—for the fictional artistry that they may miss in these stories that we tell concerning Sa’ad artistry that they find in the stories of contemporary writers. We are not...one of those who dedicate themselves to the reading and writing of The Story, that is to say, by observing its rules, or what they conceive to be its rules, on which the Masters of the Art of the Story have agreed, or they conceive them to have agreed. (p. 6)

Writing about Saudi novel in the first half of the twentieth century, Al-Hamizi (2006) reinforces Jamal’s view, noting:

We can see the limited number of novels and their modest artistic achievement in this initial phase, which stretches back to the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. The writers of that time did not seek literary enjoyment; instead they made it their aim to write about matters of educational and social reform. They often emphasized their objectives on the covers of their novels, in dedications and introductions. (p. 28)

This first period coincided with the founding years of the Saudi state and society and hence it is characterized by a slow and sluggish production of novels. Generally, the few literary works produced during this period were marked by a poor artistic structure and fragile and poorly developed plots and many other narrative and literary deficiencies. “The early novels in Saudi Arabia,” writes Moneera Al-Ghadeer (2017), “were not considered a form of entertainment and had limited readership because, until recently, poetry was the dominant genre. These novels suffered from many defects such as unsophisticated narrative techniques, didactic tones, and minimal character development...weak artistic structure, conventional topics, and dull narrative presentation” (p. 398). The weak beginnings of Saudi novel is due to the genre being foreign to Saudi writers. As Abdel Rahman Munif (1979) once said: “The Arabic novel has no heritage. Thus, any contemporary Arab novelist has to look for a means of expression for himself, with hardly any guidance to aid him. It is thus inevitable that he will make some mistakes and display shortcomings” (as cited in Allen, 1982, p. 17). Moreover, the themes were outdated and traditional; the writers in this period were not able to tackle new and controversial themes (Al-Nemi, 2009, p. 16). They wrote in accordance with the larger political and social orientations avoiding any clash with the dominant political or religious systems of the period.

One significant issue remarkable in this period is the absence of women novelists. This absence is attributed to many factors including the belated introduction of formal education for girls. Actually, it was in the 1930s that Saudi males started receiving formal education, whereas the females had their right for formal education in 1960 when a royal decree was declared to establish the first girl school. Before 1960, only the elite girls were able to learn reading and writing in *Kuttab*, traditional and religious education. They learned just reading and writing and simple religious instructions and teachings. They, in other words, were not exposed to modern education. Further, the restrictive tribal and patriarchal environment and religious authorities put many obstacles before women education and public life.

| The age of transition 1960-1979 |

The two-decade period between 1960 and 1980 is considered as the stage of transition in Saudi novel. In this period the Saudi novel moved to a new stage. Writers such as Hamid Damanhuri, Ibrahim al-Nasir, Ghalib Abu al-Faraj and Abdullah Sa'id Jum'an gave the Saudi novel new dimensions. During this period, Saudi Arabia witnessed the emergence of the first Saudi women novelists such as Hind Ba Ghaffar, Aishah Zahir Ahmad and Huda Abd al-Muhsin al-Rashid. This transition and the new development in the narrative art is attributed to the new translations of world literatures into Arabic. According to Al-Qahtani (1994), "It was not until translation from other literatures into Arabic became more general and such translations made their way into Saudi Arabia by way of Egypt and Lebanon that Saudi writers began to adopt a more 'artistic' approach" (p. 64). Furthermore, education in this period played a major role as many of the writers in this period received a better education either inside Saudi Arabia or abroad, and, therefore, they were highly acquainted with world literatures. These writers came into contact with foreign writers in the Arab world like Egypt and Lebanon or in Europe whose works—mostly translated into Arab—had a tremendous influence on their writings. They used foreign works as models in their writing. Hence, their novels were more sophisticated and more artistic. Al-Qahtani (1994) observes that "[l]iterature in Saudi Arabia was stimulated by exposure to foreign literature; it assimilated what this had to teach in the way of characterization, plotting and structure" (p. 68). It was during this period that Saudi novel moved towards artistic maturity, transcending deficiencies of its earlier experimental stage and adopting nuanced plots, multidimensional characters and embracing more sophisticated narrative techniques and thematic concerns.

Among the writers of this period is Hamid Damanhuri (1922-1965), who, while a student at Alexandria University, came in contact with and was greatly influence by Egyptian novelists such as Muhammad Husain Haykal and Naguib Mahfouz. He published his first novel *Thaman al-Tadhiyah* (The Price of Sacrifice) in 1959. It was the first Saudi novel to incorporate most of the elements of the artistic novel and, therefore, critics single out him as "the father of the novel and *Thaman* as the first work in Saudi Arabia that fulfills the artistic qualities of the novel" (al-Ghadeer, 2017, p. 400). The novel was successful

and it was included in the literary curriculum in secondary schools in Saudi Arabia and was translated into a number of languages. His second novel *Wa Marat AL-Ayam* (And the Days Passed, 1963) failed to achieve the same success that his first novel achieved. Though his early death in 1965 cut short his literary journey, many critics refer to Damanhuiri as the father founder of modern Saudi novel (Al-Muzaini, 2011).

Ibrahim al-Nassir (1934-2013), “a major pioneer novelist in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia” (Al-Hazimi, 2006, p. 327), was born in Riyadh and had a traditional education in *Kuttab* where he studied Quran and other Islamic basics. Besides his high school degree, al-Nassir was a keen reader in his grandfather’s personal library where he read Arab and Western novels and poetry. In his autobiography *Ghurbat al-Makan* (2009), he wrote about his arrest by the Saudi authorities and stated that his arrest was due to his relation to a secret organization with views different from Saudi governmental views (Al-Nassir, 2009, pp. 47-67). Further, his liberal ideas such as critique of traditional social customs, women freedom, gender and equality among the social classes caused him many problems especially with religious clerics and sheiks. Because of the adherence of the Saudis to religion, al-Nassir’s liberal ideas were opposed by Saudi society in general and were considered as challenging and opposing to Islam.

This stage came to an end with the novels of Ghalib Abu al-Faraj (1921-2006), who published five novels between 1977 and 1982. However, most of his novels are set outside Saudi Arabia. For example, *al-Shayatin al-Humr* (The Red Devils, 1977) narrates the story of kidnapping the petroleum ministers in Vienna in 1976 and their deportation to Algeria by the kidnapping gang. *Ghuraba’ bi-la Watan* (Strangers Without a Homeland, 1981) narrates the story of politicians who live in exile in Cairo. *Al-Masirah al-Khadra* (The Green March, 1982) deals with the relations between Algeria, Spain, Morocco and Mauritania. His novel *Sanawat Al-Daya* (The Lost Years, 1980) is considered one of the early Arabic Bildungsroman novels (Abudi, 2011, p. 139).

The second phase, unlike the first one, witnessed notable developments in writing merits, style, characters and themes. This phase is referred to as the “renewal phase” (Al-Hazimi et al., 2006, p. 7). This may be attributed to the intensification of state education programs and the opening of many schools, institutes and colleges with specialized programs across the Kingdom. Many modern publishing houses were established during this period. It was during these two decades that many libraries such as the Saudi Library, King Abd al-Aziz Foundation Library and the National library were established. These social and educational developments considerably influenced the development of the Saudi novel, shaping its stylistic approaches and thematic concerns. According to Al-Hazimi et al. (2006), these new changes “encouraged the emergence of the novel as an art form, distinct from the didactic novel of the previous period” (Al-Hazimi et al., 2006, p. 28).

Regarding women novelists in Saudi Arabia, it was during this period that the first Saudi women novel was published. Samira Khashoggi (1935-1986) is considered by many critics as the first Saudi woman to write a novel. She was a progressive author and the owner as well as the editor-in-chief of *Al-Sharkiah Magazine*. In 1962, she began *Al-Nahda*, a

women's welfare association, based in Riyadh; it was the first organization targeting Saudi women. She published her first novel *Waddatu Amali* (Farewell to My Dreams) in 1958. Due to social and religious restrictions on women writers, she wrote under the pseudonym 'Samirah Bint Al-Jazirah Al-Arabia' (Samirah Daughter of the Arabian Peninsula) and, like many male writers of the period, she chose foreign settings for her novels. Among the pioneer women novelists was Hind Ba Ghaffar (1955 -), whose first novel *Al-Bara'ah Al-Mafqudah* (Lost Innocence) was published in 1972. The novel, set outside Saudi Arabia, is an adventure crime novel, telling the story of an Egyptian girl named Ghurbah living in Cairo and is suspected of killing her friend. The plot is so loose and the incidents are of entirely random occurrence and lack close-knit unity. Aisha Zaher (1959-) is another Saudi woman novelist of this period. Unlike Ba Ghaffar or Khashoggi, Al-Zubaidi's novel *Basmah min Buhairat Al-Dumu* (A Smile from the Lakes of Tears, 1979) takes place in Jeddah and Riyadh and deals with divorce as a social issue and its psychological consequences on children. However, the novel is ill-structured and lacks deep characterization. Huda Al-Rashid (1950-), another pioneer and prolific Saudi novelist, wrote many novels and is considered as the first Saudi feminist writer. The heroine of her first novel *Ghadan Sayukun Al-Khamis* (Tomorrow will be Thursday, 1979) is the mouthpiece of the author herself. She is an educated girl, working as a journalist and has many ideas she wishes to introduce into the community to improve women's life in her community. The novel is well-constructed with realistic dialogues and subtle characterization. It is the first women novel in the modern sense of the word. Al-Sayyid Dib (1989) writes that the literary value of women novels in this period was weak, with Huda Al-Rashi's novel as the only exception.

Due to political, religious and social factors, many of the early women novelists wrote, published and set their works in foreign lands and often their characters were not Saudis. Hence, many of those novels show an influence of those countries such as Egypt and Lebanon. Some critics do not consider such writings as belonging to Saudi Arabia. Such critics contend that Saudi women's fiction prior to 1980 did not thematically represent the nature of Saudi society and that the novelists did not represent the reality of Saudi women, as such novels were not generated by the cultural, social and educational nature of Saudi society.

Generally speaking, novels written during this period are undeveloped tales and lack artistic merits of novel writing. Many authors of this period lack familiarity with the fundamental structure of the novel and world literature in general. They are often unaware of the essential requirements and prerequisites of crafting a novel. Thematically, their novels are romantic and didactic in nature. Hence, novels of this period are ignored and decried by critics who cited "their limited literary quality" and denied "that they belong to what is accepted as the Saudi social and cultural environment" or claimed "that they do not represent the reality of Saudi women's lives" (Almarhaby, 2021, p. 3). Further the literary production of women in this period was limited. According to Kanie (2017), only six novels written by women were published during this period. In spite of these weaknesses, however, such works remain the first step in the history of Saudi women novel and the role played by these early women cannot be underrated.

| The age of maturity 1980-2000 |

This period is known for the conflict between conservatives and liberals. Conservatives represented by religious sheiks and clerics and liberals represented by writers who started writing experimental novels and experimented with modern writing techniques. Moreover, it was in the 1970s and 1980s that Saudi novel came to maturity. A new generation of writers including Abdul Rahman Munif and Ghazi Al-Gosaibi made significant contributions to the Saudi novel. Their literary production marked a turning point in the history of Saudi literature, as they introduced narrative techniques, new themes and social concerns which reflected the realities of modern Saudi Arabia.

Ghazi Al Gosaibi (1940-2010) is a well-noted diplomat, poet and novelist. He wrote more than sixty books and was one of the best-selling writers in the Arab World. The magnum opus of his work and the best known novel is *An Apartment Called Freedom* (published in 1994 and translated into English in 1996). *The Majalla*, a London-based, Saudi-owned, news journal called him “Godfather of renovation” (*The Majalla*, 2010). In his writings, Al-Gosaibi stands closer to common people and “openly denounces the Western-educated Arab elites who feel superior to the simple man rather than using their training to improve the situation in their home countries” (Labonté, 2010). Moreover, Al-Gosaib “was a liberal who loved his nation” (*The Majalla*, 2010) and due to his liberal views, many of his works stirred controversy and were banned in Saudi Arabia. For his modern views and liberal reforms, he was hated by Islamists and conservatives (Mostyn, 2010). Al-Hazimi et al. (2006) observes that Al-Qusaibi’s poetic “voice is an independent one which distinguishes him from many other poets. His language is rich, coherent and highly evocative. The personal tone of Al-Qusaibi’s poetry did not obscure his foresight and perceptiveness in dealing with general Arab issues and the causes of the Arab world” (p. 17).

Abd Al-Rahman Munif (1933–2004) is “one of the greatest modernist Saudi Arabian novelists” (Zuhur, 2011, p. 278) and “[o]ne of the most acclaimed novelists and intellectuals in the Arab world” (Mejcher-Atassi, 2019, p. 1). Born to Saudi parents, Munif grew up in Jordan. His life in Iraq, Egypt, and Serbia had a tremendous impact on his thinking and writings. He authored thirty books. In 1982, he published *Alam Bila Khara’it* (A World without Maps) in collaboration with the great Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. His trilogy *Cities of Salt* (Mudun al-Milh) which includes *Cities of Salt* (1987), *The Trench* (1991) and *Variations on Night and Day* (1993) is considered as “a break-through in Arabic narrative art” (Boullata, 1998, p. 191). Munif’s literary production carried Arabic literature to “new horizons” (Mejcher-Atassi, 2019, p. 1). Due to his controversial themes and new writing techniques he employed while “trying to fashion a novel that is uniquely ‘Arab’ in its view of history as well as in its narrative style” (Meyer, 2001, p. 72), Munif “may be among the most misunderstood and underrated Arab writers in terms of his formal experimentation” (Meyer, 2001, p. 76). “In his quest for formal innovation,” writes Mejcher-Atassi (2019), “Munif clearly went beyond other Arab authors...as he investigated past narrative traditions along with contemporary practices

and future possibilities. His novels are greatly informed by Arabic literary heritage and interspersed with intertextual references, ranging from Imru al-Qays to al-Jahiz and Ibn Qutaybah” (p. 5). Munif’s influence on subsequent generations of writers in the Arab world has been profound and far-reaching. According to Al-Ghadeer (2017), Munif “has left a mark on the modern generation of novelists that is still evident, especially in the realistic approach and complex narrative structure” (p. 400). Nevertheless, due his politically unconventional writings, Munif was deprived of his Saudi citizenship in 1963.

Actually, this period coincides with the economic boom in Saudi Arabia. The production of oil in the 1970s in commercial quantities and the wealth resulting from this production had tremendous impact on social, economic and religious style of life. People had the opportunity to travel abroad as tourists, students or businessmen and so came in contact with foreign cultures and literatures. This contact influenced the literary production of that period. Further, more people joined educational institutions. Saudi Arabia saw an expansion of public libraries: during this period there were 68 libraries across 66 towns. Moreover, the arrival of millions of foreign labor brought different cultures to the country. The Saudi society came out of its enclosed life and started borrowing new social, literary and cultural aspects from other cultures and literature. Novelists began experimenting with new narrative techniques and tackled controversial themes. Hence, this phase is remarkable for its rapid production and innovation in literary techniques and plot structure. In spite of the obstacles and difficulties they faced, writers of this period were able to overcome those obstacles paving the way for the generation of the new millennium. These writers opposed many of the dominant socio-political and religious discourses voicing the unspeakable. There had been a conflict between those who wanted to keep a conservative society and those who wanted to move along with the modern developments. Hence most of the works produced in this period were published outside Saudi Arabia. This period is referred to as “The modernization period” and is considered as “the richest and most complex in the Kingdom’s history because it was in this era that the pace of social change exploded and the emergence of the middle class, mainly as a result of the oil boom in the 1970s” (Al-Hazimi et al., 2006, p. 8).

As noted above, the social structure of Saudi society changed rapidly after the economic boom of the 1970s. People moved to cities and mixed with foreign people and restrictions on women’s behavior and freedom loosened. Women were given formal education and were exposed to world writings. Saudi women novelists in this period show better writings. And the number of novels published during this period increased to 33 novels (Kanie, 2017, p. 283). There is a remarkable evolvement in both themes and structure of Saudi women novel during this period and novel started tackling some daring and more sensitive themes, challenging taboos considered socially and culturally sensitive (Al-Nuami, 2004, p. 9, Al-Manasira, 2008, p. 22) and which reflected the changing of Saudi society.

One of the novelists in this period is Amal Shata, who published four novels. Her first novel, *Ghadan Ansa* (Tomorrow I shall Forget, 1980) shows her deep consideration of

plot structure and characters. It is considered as an 'artistic' novel as it "conforms to the criteria of the modern novel in technique, structure, plot and characterization" (Al-Qahtani, 1994, p. 133). It is a feminist novel dealing with oppression of women. Safiyyah Anbar, is another novelist of the period. Her first novel *Afwan Adam* (Sorry Adam, 1986) is a love story and deals with woman freedom and her decision to lead her own life as she chooses. Anbar wrote this novel for a female audience in particular and tried to express her feminist ideas and beliefs. Novels of the period are more mature and show a deep influence of Egyptian writers particularly Mahfouz. As Moneera al-Ghadeer (2017) writes: "In the period of maturity, women novelists improved their artistic techniques, experimented with the genre, and continued to address social topics contextualized within a fierce debate between the conservatives and modernists" (p. 420).

| Contemporary period: 2001-Onwards |

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Saudi novel was turned inside out. All links with previous conventions were broken. The new novel, for which Gosaibi, Munif and Al-Nasser paved the way, relied on experimentation and the creation of new worlds. This period started in 2000, particularly after the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Among the most celebrated writers of this period are Abdo Khal, Yousef Al-Mohaimeed and Turki Al-Hamad. Many of the works of these authors have been translated into various languages including English. Before 2001,

Saudi society has...represented a major obstacle to the modernisation of literary forms. Even poetry, which was and still is the major literary genre in Arabic culture, described by literary historians as the 'Divan of the Arabs', has not undergone the major transformations here that it has experienced in other Arab countries such as Iraq, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon. (Saleh, 2010)

However, with the advent of the new millennium, the literary landscape in Saudi Arabia underwent a significant transformation. This literary awakening has many reasons, the chief among them is the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA. Since then a change in the Saudi political, social, religious and literary scene and atmosphere fermented, opening Saudi novel to an unprecedented process of experimentation and modernization of literary themes and forms. Today, more than before, many Saudi novelists are known internationally and some of their works have been translated into more than one language.

Abdo Khal (1962-) is one of the most celebrated novelists of contemporary Saudi literature and the winner of the 2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction. He is one of the most daring writers of Saudi Arabia and his novels, as he himself states "address the sacrosanct trio of taboos in the Arab world: sex, politics, and religion" (as cited in Flood, 2010). His novel *Throwing Sparks* (2008), the title is a Quranic reference to hell, is one of the widely read novels in the Arab world. Through a poignant and powerful narration of an agonized and underprivileged protagonist, Tarek, the novel portrays

the lives of underprivileged and poor Saudi people living in a slum and the wealthy residing in a grand palace that towers over and overshadows the slum; it depicts a city divided between heaven and hell. The novel “exposes modes of racial, political, and sexual violence and inequality in an unnamed Gulf kingdom” (El-Ariss, 2012, p. 514). Khal believes that there still are many issues to be addressed by Saudi novelists: “many of the problems in our societies are buried down under and we hardly talk about these issues. We need to address the realities we are facing instead of sitting back and flogging ourselves for meaningless issues” (Deane, 2010).

Yousef Al-Mohaimeed (1964-) is a prolific writer and one of the critically acclaimed contemporary authors who have recently emerged from the heavily censored environment. Many of his stories have been translated into English, Italian, Russian, Spanish and German. *The Washington Post* reported: “Yousef Al-Mohaimeed is taking on some of the most divisive subjects in the Arab world...in a lush style that evokes Gabriel García Márquez” (as cited in Penguin, 2007). Annie Proulx, as cited in Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing Rights Catalogue 2012, describes Al-Mohaimeed as “a rising star in international literature.” Commenting on Al-Mohaimeed’s language and style, Harvey Freedenberg (2007) writes: “Al-Mohaimeed’s prose is taut and yet lyrical, evoking the harsh beauty of the desert landscape in spare sentences rich with vivid imagery.” Al-Mohaimeed’s debut novel *Wolves of the Crescent Moon* (2007) has been considered a milestone in modern Saudi fiction. Due to its daring themes and unconventional structure, *Wolves of the Crescent Moon*, as many reviews show, is Al-Mohaimeed’s most popular work. The novel presents an image of Saudi society that breaks away the dominating image of Arabs as “white-robed sheiks climbing into Rolls-Royces to survey vast oil fields” (Freedenberg, 2007). His next novel *Where Pigeons Don’t Fly* (2009) relates the story of a young Saudi man who, due to his step-father and religious authorities known as Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), leaves Saudi Arabia for Great Britain and never returns. The novel also deals with male-female love, which is, due to religious clerics, prohibited in a country like Saudi Arabia.

Turki Al-Hamad (1952-), one of the most influential Saudi writers, is well-known for his trilogy *Atyaf al-Aziqah al-Mahjurah* (Phantoms of the Deserted Alley) which includes *Adama*, *Shumaisi*, and *al-Karadib* (1997-1998). However, his novels, due to the instigation of religious clerics, were banned in Saudi Arabia and three fatwas against him were issued. One of these fatwas permitted his killing for blasphemy (Halasa, 2005). Al-Hamad also reported that he received unknown death threats. In 2011, Al-Kharashy published a book *Nazrah Shar’yyah fi Kitabat wa Rewayat Turki al-Hamad* (Religious View on Turki al-Hamad’s Writings and Novels). In this book, Al-Kharashy accuses Al-Hamad of apostasy as he observes that many of his ideas cannot not be expressed by a true Muslim (p. 190). It can be said that Al-Hamad’s trilogy has shook up the conservative society and become a model in breaking taboos, opening the doors for the coming generation of novelists to challenge the dominant discourse (Al-Nemi, 2009, p. 31). Al-Hamad has become internationally read: “After Munif...Hamad becomes the second novelist of Saudi origin to be presented to British readers” (Buchan, 2004).

The fourth phase is a period of great transformation in regard to Saudi novel. It overcame poetry which has been dominating the literary scene since pre-Islamic period. Writers abandoned the traditional narration which dominated the narrative since 1930 and began experimenting with new narrative techniques. Novels of this period were more daring and bold and tackled highly controversial themes and issues including the political, the religious and the sexual and were remarkable for their variety of themes and their highly artistic quality. Writers such as Turki Al-Hamad, Abdo Khal and Yousef Al-Mohaimed wrote their best novels and highly contributed to the expansion and development of Saudi novel. Moreover, during this period, there emerged a young generation of writers such as Abdullah Thabit (1973-) the author of *Al-Irhabi 20* (Terrorist No. 20); Mohammad Hassan Alwan (1979-), author of *Saqf al-Kifaya* (The Ceiling of Sufficiency, 2002), *Sofia* (Sofia, 2004), and *Touq al-Tahara* (Purity Collar, 2007), *Al-Qundus* (The Beaver, 2011), and *Mout Sageer* (A Small Death, 2016); Fawzi Sadiq (1971-), the author of *Amirat Iblis* (Princess of the Devil, 2009), *Seri Lilgayah* (Top Secret 2011), and *Al-Lidi Talen* (Lady Tallinn, 2020). As stated above, there have been many factors for this change including the Gulf war, the openness brought by new Satellite TV and internet and finally the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the USA. These political, social and economic changes have remarkably influenced novel and art production in general. It can be claimed that the transformation that the Saudi narrative witnessed during this period is a response or a reflection to those political, social and economic changes.

After 2000, the “Saudi novel has moved into terrain colored by a neoliberal, cosmopolitan fantasy” (Özdalga, 2015, p. 12). Contemporary writers adopted the tools of new narrative modes in novels and began to formulate new parameters in terms of style and other conventions of modern fiction. They experienced new narrative techniques such as magic realism, alternative history, counter-narrative, nonlinear plot, allegory etc. There is also a tendency to use ancient Arabic myths and folktales. These writers “belong to the emerging middle class that has benefited from oil wealth, education, and, since the late 1990s, the free market economy that opened up business and investment opportunities and also the media in its old and new forms. The new novelists are extremely young” (Al-Rasheed, 2015, p. 133). Al-Rasheed adds,

These new novelists know only the local modern high-rise shopping center, the cafe culture, and their equivalents in famous world capitals. Above all, they are ‘connected’ through family networks, the virtual world of the internet, and regular travel. Their language is a mixture of Arabic and English, peppered with the idioms and abbreviations of e-mail, Yahoo groups, Facebook, and Twitter... The novelists and their heroines are products of the neoliberal capitalist economy that creates ‘avenues, means, and commodities of gratification, material and symbolic, often related in one way or another to sexuality’. (pp. 133-4)

These writers challenged the dominant culture using explicit language and waging wars against what have been for a long time considered as taboos: “While a previous generation of novelists wrote about lives constrained by history, geography, and tradition, and may make strong allusions to sexual themes, the new novelists choose explicit language. The

body, its desire and passions, has become central in many novels published since 2000. These new young novelists have indeed chosen to make war on taboos” (Al-Rasheed, 2015, p.136). Hence, these novelists have been accused of transgressing the religious, social, political boundaries.

Most contemporary novels deal with the socioeconomic changes caused by the oil boom of the 1970s and modernization that accompanied it and its effects on Saudi society. Since the 1970s, a process of modernization has been launched in almost all sectors such as healthcare, education, transportation and thereby “catapulting the country into modernity” (Maisel, 2012, p. 202). People living in rural areas and Bedouins living in the desert moved to the new, large cities. Life in a new and unfamiliar environment left a tremendous psychosocial impact on people, a theme which has been tackled by many of the contemporary authors. The major themes found in many of these novels include alienation, unbelonging, loneliness, disillusionment and longing to the past.

As a result of these profound developments, contemporary Saudi novel has been celebrated universally and gained acclaim on the global stage. Publishers as well as readers are keen to publish and read their works: “Publishers are keen to get their hands on Saudi writing: if there is a single society that contemporary US readers see as encapsulating the mystery of the ‘Islamic Orient,’ it is Saudi Arabia. Within that mystery, the mystery of mysteries remains the Arab Muslim woman, often homogenized and made to stand in for an entire society and history” (Booth, 2010, p. 160).

The last phase of the Saudi women’s novel extends for a period of approximately twenty years. Women novels of this period, like their male counterparts’ novels, “broke the taboos of sex, religion and society...addressing these themes without reservation” (Kanie, 2017, p. 283) and for this reason, this period is described by critics as “the women’s novel revolution” (Juraiddi, 2012) and regarded as being that of “the revolt of the novel” (Kanie, 2017, p. 283). These daring endeavors of contemporary women novelists have been described by Al-Rasheed (2013) “as a result of communication and consumption associated with late modernity” (p. 216).

The most prominent novelists of this period are Laila Al-Juhani (1969-), Raja Alem (1970-) and Raja Al-Sanea (1981-). Al-Juhani is the author of four novels and her novel *Days of Ignorance*, originally published in 2007, was translated into English in 2014. Like all Saudi women writers of this period, Al-Juhani writes “about women who travel the road less taken and find themselves entrapped in a traditionalist society where they suffer inequality and prejudice” (Al-Ghadeer, 2011, p. 269). Raja Alem is the first woman to win the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (Booker) for her novel *Tawq Al-Hamam* (The Dove’s Necklace, 2010). Alem’s work is poetic, lyrical, intricate, and demanding. Al-Sanea’s novel *Girls of Riyadh* (2005), a taboo-breaking novel, has been translated into more than 40 languages. The novel “caused a storm in the conservative Islamic state” (Hammond, 2007) and was banned in many Arab countries including Saudi Arabia.

Contemporary women novels are an expression of protest against different issues that challenge Saudi women such as social oppression, tribal and Bedouin culture, male

dominance, arranged marriages, the school system, discrimination against and abuse of women. These young writers “are assertive, innovative and critical, women speaking for themselves, shaping their perspectives and developing a language that is their own” (Kanie, 2017, p. 290) and deal “with experiences of frustration, failure and dissatisfaction that society refuses to talk about or to expose...they are revealing a world that is not permitted to be revealed, telling resentfully of experiences that are considered non-sexist” (Kanie, 2017, p. 290). Saudi women writers have used the novel as an adequate means to explore not just matters pertaining to women such as their rights, marginalization, and alienation within the community, but also more general issues such as politics, religion and culture. Their novels are populated with women characters who want to lead their lives as they wish without man’s domination. Kanie (2017) writes that contemporary Saudi novel “can be conceptualized as protest literature: i.e., literature that challenges society and breaks its social, religious and cultural taboos” (p. 290). The significance of these works does not rely on their literary merits but rather on the practice of “*al-bawḥ*, the mentality, will and courage of talking to confront the society; to tell about problems as they are, to let desire speak its language. The social message in these works surpasses their literary weight and the spirit of protest supersedes the aesthetics” (Kanie, 2017, p. 290).

The young generation of woman novelists in the new millennium learned from the experience of world feminist writers and, therefore, “developed a deeper critique of the Saudi state and society than their predecessors in the 1990s” (Kanie, 2017, p. 283) and asked “for fundamental changes to the bitter reality of the lives of Saudi women” and made “women’s social, emotional and physical emancipation” a central quest (Kanie, 2017, p. 283). For these women, novel has “become a strategic move to cope with the authoritarianism and domination that prohibit independent civil society organizations, promote conservatism, apply strict religious teaching, and enforce constant surveillance of women in public places” (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 176). Religiously, many of these writers attempted to “re-articulate Islam as a force for the empowerment of women” (Kanie, 2017, p. 284). They attempted to change the male-dominated discourse about women but never challenged Islamic norms and rules.

There are many factors which helped the rapid development of Saudi women novel in this period including the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA and the technological revolution of communication which made western writing available and was highly utilized by Saudi women writers. Further, there was an increasing number of readers interested in Saudi women writings both in the Arab world and in the west (al-Rifa’i, 2009, p. 55). Additionally, women novelists were encouraged by some male novelists; Ghazi al-Gosaibi, for example, wrote an introduction to Raja Al-Sanea’s novel *Banat Al-Riyadh*. Further, women novelists have been given a remarkable chance by the state itself. Kanie (2017) relates the emergence of “these novels to the attempts of the Saudi state and some segments of Saudi society to create the image of Saudi women as educated, cosmopolitan women” (p. 285). New developments in communication and the wealth obtained from oil revenues gave those women a chance to meet international writers and critics and became no longer isolated from world literature and cultures.

This provided them with a chance to experiment with new writing techniques such as symbolism, magical-realism, realism, interior-monologue, feminism as well as a noticeable use of mythology. These experiments, motivated, undoubtedly, by global literary and intercultural communication, were successfully used to express their feminist concerns such as women freedom and the conflict between modernity and traditions as well as some of the political ideas of the time.

| Conclusion |

To conclude, there has been a remarkable development in Saudi novel since its appearance in the 1930s in terms of narrative techniques, themes, boldness of presentation and issues investigated. Between *The Twins* and *Daughters of Riyadh* there has been great social, political, economic and religious transformations and many radical changes which have a significant impact on the development of novel. These transformations explain the differences that are remarkable between the two novels. Due to Saudis' exposure to foreign cultures through traveling and studying abroad, internet and satellite TV and the aforementioned changes there has been a significant impact on human relations, style of life, and people's view of religion, culture and politics. It is clear that development of the novel during the last ninety years parallels the development of the Saudi society itself and reflects this development. Though the beginnings were slow and non-innovative, there has been a great leap in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In the new millennium, the novel has reached a level unprecedented in any period in the past. It became more daring, highly bold, innovative, and influential.

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