Celebrity Women Novelists and the Cosmopolitan Fantasy

In the consumer package, there is one object finer, more precious and more dazzling than the other – and even more laden with connotations than the automobile, in spite of the fact that that encapsulates them all. The object is the body.

Jean Baudrillard¹

He took his clothes off and kept his long stretched yellowish underpants. He didn’t offer me a glass of water or a rose. I didn’t see chocolates or fruit. I didn’t hear a word or a whisper. He didn’t caress me as I imagined. He just sat on top of me like a camel afflicted with leprosy.

Warda Abd al-Malik²

The quest for the cosmopolitan woman that both the state and some sections of Saudi society strove to locate and highlight after 9/11 has found its expression in the fiction of an even younger generation of Saudi women novelists. Like the novelists discussed in the last chapter, these young women are urban, educated, sophisticated, and conversant in many languages. They 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 not only business and investment opportunities but also the media in its old and new forms. Unlike the novelists discussed in the last chapter, the new novelists are extremely young – for example, Raja al-Sani was twenty-four years old when she published her

first novel, *Girls of Riyadh*, in 2004. Others may be slightly older, but they are still only in their early thirties. The heroines of this younger generation are immersed in a cosmopolitan fantasy, portrayed as cappuccino drinkers, shisha smokers, and globetrotters. They move between home, college, private business, and shopping centre like aspirant, privileged youth anywhere today. While al-Khamis’s heroines move between the modern house in Riyadh and the village or farm, the new generation of novelists know only the local modern high-rise shopping centre, the cafe culture, and their equivalents in famous world capitals. Above all, they are ‘connected’ through their family networks, exploration of the virtual world of the Internet, and regular travel abroad. Their language is a mixture of Arabic and English, with the idioms and abbreviations of email messages, Yahoo groups, Facebook, and Twitter creeping into their everyday language. Heroines are lovers who travel to London and Sharm al-Shaykh to experience freedoms denied at home, such as spending a night with a dream lover, simply sipping a glass of wine in a bar, or sharing time with the opposite sex in restaurants, cafes, and parks. From the new wide avenues of Riyadh to the streets of London, New York, and San Francisco, they skilfully navigate places and cultures. They travel for education, work experience, freedom, and holidays. The novelists and their heroines are products of the neo-liberal capitalist economy that creates ‘avenues, means, and commodities of gratification, material and symbolic, often related in one way or another to sexuality’.

At home, heroines shop in glass-and-steel malls, carry Louis Vuitton bags, and blog in Arabic and English. Some transgress so much that they find themselves in the hands of the Committee for the Promotion of Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong. Others are engaged in playful, carefully concealed acts of courtship and flirtation that do not lead to such dramatic ends. The struggle of these heroines is a battle between them and society, with its many agents of control. In these novels, mothers, fathers, brothers, and husbands work hand in hand with the *mutawwa* to enforce surveillance over young women.

Some women novelists document the lives of ‘halfies’, hybrid Saudis, some born abroad and brought back to live in Saudi Arabia. While their

---

3 Immediately after the publication of *Girls of Riyadh*, a novel entitled *Shabab al-Riyadh* (The boys of Riyadh) appeared in Beirut. There is no date of publication. See Tariq al-Utaibi, *Shabab al-Riyadh*, Beirut: Dar al-Shafaq, n.d. The novel seems to have attracted no attention.

fathers are Saudis, their mothers may be Arab, American, or any other nationality. They are in between cultures, geographies, and languages. Their numbers increased dramatically with the advent of higher education scholarships that sent thousands of young Saudi men abroad to seek education. Many came back with foreign wives or had several children born in the United States, Britain, Egypt, and other scholarship destinations. While many novelists are themselves ‘hybrids’, in genealogical, educational, and cultural ways, their heroines stretch hybridity even further. What unites the novelists with their heroines is that both are young urban women who have emerged as a result of the increasing immersion of Saudi Arabia since the 1990s in late capitalism, frequent travel, globalisation, consumer culture, privatisation, and the neo-liberal market economy. In this context, the old Wahhabi religious nationalism finds itself struggling to keep such ‘immoral’ influences away from the nation while it is itself immersed in the same forces of the new economy. But it too globalised its message, capitalising on new communication technologies from YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook. The battle between the old-fashioned religious nationalism and the icons of the new modernity is, however, difficult to win. The old fatwas survive to condemn excessive consumption, Western influences, and other undesirable ways of behaving and thinking. The youth of the country ignore them, and women challenge them – if not in real-life situations then in novels.

Heroines are depicted as depoliticised and with no interest in the big picture in which women are enmeshed in a web encompassing society, politics, economics, and religion. They seek personal freedoms rather than social rights for themselves as a group. They launch into attacks on the rigid morality imposed in public places and aspire to free themselves from its prohibitions. Unlike a previous generation of Saudi women novelists, these young novelists delve into the lives of cosmopolitan bourgeois women who, since 9/11, have been celebrated not only by the state but also by the international media and literary critics. Such novelists are taken to represent the new voices of Saudi women, despite the fact that many Saudi women do not share their lifestyle, language, international education, consumption patterns, wealth, and privileges. But this successful minority of women novelists and celebrity writers are the new face of Saudi Arabia. The novelists aspire towards tamayyuz (distinction) at a time when consumption patterns threaten to homogenise through the acquisition of material goods, aspirations, and behavioural patterns. While many new Saudi women can acquire the new lifestyle and purchase its gadgets, not all can achieve the celebrity status of the new novelists.
Together with outspoken princesses and other female professionals, they are promoted by local constituencies and international audiences and observers aspire to see, promote, and advertise.

International attention dedicated to such new novelists captures an age-old fascination with Muslim women in general and Saudi women in particular. While in the West there is some previous familiarity with the fiction of Arab women novelists, there is no precedent for the new interest in the Saudi women novelists who have emerged in the post-9/11 period, although Saudi women have been writing both novels and non-fiction since the 1950s. Despite previous timid attempts to translate Saudi women’s short stories into English,⁵ nothing matched the excitement and publicity that surrounded the translation of Raja al-Sani’s *Girls of Riyadh* in 2007. The historical context of this new interest in Saudi women’s fiction is extremely important for understanding not only their fiction but also the local and international context in which Saudi women are perceived, promoted, pitied, and supported.

Since 9/11, many Saudi women novelists, especially Raja al-Sani, have become ‘Muslim celebrities’, with special emphasis on their identity as Muslim. Interest in their work goes beyond the literary quality of their novels to touch the deeper political and social contexts that have generated such disproportionate attention being dedicated to a new phenomenon. In the words of al-Sani’s translator, Marilyn Booth:

> The contemporary Saudi novel, especially with a female authorial signature fixed to it, is a case in point. 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.⁶

The mysteries are believed to have been at least partially exposed in fiction.

When writing fiction, young Saudi women novelists with an eye on international celebrity status embark on a journey of self-orientalising. In

---


⁶ Marilyn Booth, “‘The Muslim Woman’ as Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translating Arabic: *Girls of Riyadh* Goes on the Road”, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 6, 3 (2010), pp. 149–82, at p. 160.
Booth’s opinion, ‘it’s the harem (in Hollywood) all over again’. Yet the difference between the old well-documented Oriental gaze and the current one stems from the fact that Saudi women have themselves become authors of their own orientalist texts. Moreover, if the old-style ‘orientalism’ described by Edward Said and others was driven by relations of power, the current self-orientalising Saudi literature is driven solely by commercial, sensational considerations. Young Saudi women write their own orientalist texts in response to market forces in a neo-colonial setting, namely the current Saudi context with its new scrutiny by global media, economic privatisation, and the commercialisation of literature and intellectual production. Young novelists aspire to become celebrities rather than simply literary figures.

Saudi women – rather than foreign male ‘orientalist’ authors – produce images of idle Saudi women who are desperate for excitement, seduction, love, and adventure in a society that allegedly denies them all these pleasures. Other Arab women novelists have already engaged in this genre of writing, producing work in response to market forces, consumption patterns, and the expectations of an international reading audience. Those whose books have become available in the international marketplace have orientalised Saudi women, who appear as the other, against which an Arab novelist can distinguish herself for a Western audience. In the Lebanese author Hanan al-Shaykh’s novels, the Lebanese heroine who finds herself in the desert kingdom escapes from the hell of primitive-ness and liberates her soul by moving to Western capitals. In the post-9/11 period, however, it is not only foreign authors who depict Saudi women in orientalist terms. Saudi women themselves are the authors of their own orientalist fiction. As expected, the centrality of sexual desire, romantic love, society’s denial, and personal suffering tend to be common, well-rehearsed themes, which have increased in demand as a result of commercialisation and consumption associated with late modernity. As mentioned before, the entry of Saudi women into the late consumer capitalist economy privileges desire and encourages the diversity of the ways in which it can be fulfilled.

The evaluation of the new Saudi women’s literature is dominated by the Oriental gaze that is still fascinated by the hidden lives of veiled Muslim women – their love, passion, and straight and queer sexuality – a gaze that yields fame, celebrity status, and money through publication. The young, female celebrity novelist, veiled or not, is educated, articulate, and attractive. She combines her light, colourful designer veil with the latest Western fashion, from jeans to handbags. Her ‘Islamic’ femininity is defined in terms of her complete immersion in Western consumerist behaviour in which only a colourful silky veil visually marks any difference. Consumption is not simply about material goods, but involves the consumption of meaning, values, and aspirations associated with late modernity.

The novelist appears at international book fairs, gives interviews to the international press, and defends her fiction in several languages. In fact, she is the translator of her own fiction. While only a few Saudi novelists have regularly appeared in literary forums in the West, many find refuge in neighbouring Gulf countries, where vibrant and more open forums and media are available to women. In 2010, Saudi poet Hissa Hilal participated in The Million Poet, a television show, and won third prize for her colloquial poem in which she denounced religious radicalism and restrictions on women. She became a celebrity poet with the help of Gulf media and international attention. Many women novelists still publish their novels outside Saudi Arabia where well-known Arab publishers have identified a market for their so-called daring fiction. So far in this new genre of fiction, two novelists have chosen to publish under pen-names, reflecting a persistent fear of the consequences of producing explicit sexual stories involving adultery and homosexuality. They have thus escaped the celebrity status that awaits those writing under their real names.

The publication of several women’s novels since 2000 has coincided with the outbreak of Jihadi violence in the country. Between 2003 and 2008, Saudi Arabia experienced a fierce struggle between militant Jihadis and the security forces. Images of the carnage in major Saudi cities intermingled with regular Jihadi video clips on the Internet. The world came face to face with Saudi men’s indiscriminate violence, inflicted on both Muslims and non-Muslims. International media introduced their audiences to individual Saudi militants and their statements. More nuanced websites emerged to specialise in introducing the body of Jihadi literature to interested parties in the West such as policymakers, counterterrorism

---

10 Booth, ‘Translator v. Author’.
agencies, journalists, think tanks, and many others.\textsuperscript{11} They captured new realities in Saudi society that the state has struggled to keep hidden from the international community. In such a tense context, the new young celebrity woman novelist is a complete contrast to the bearded young Jihadi brandishing his machine gun and flaunting his suicide belt while uttering Quranic verses, vowing to annihilate the infidels, promising to eradicate the oppression that has befallen the \textit{umma}, and reading his own obituary in which he anticipates an encounter with the promised virgins. In contrast, the new young Saudi woman novelist is focused on this world: her body, desires, career aspirations, and personal advancement. Her personal narrative does not include any long-awaited virgin. The premarital sex and adultery that her heroines engage in are there to shock, normalise, and dramatise. These heroines are living bundles of passions and desires, whose satisfaction is described in great detail in this fiction. Novelists hide behind their heroines to describe not only Saudi society but also their secret sexual encounters and fantasies in a world restrained by many controlling agencies and rendered a restricting and dangerous microcosm for urban young female adventurers.

Women novelists embrace a cosmopolitan fantasy created by market forces – the media and advertising – on the one hand and real political, global, and social pressures on the other, which have made their appearance a much-awaited revelation. Novels in this genre shed the dark, stereotypical images of Saudi Arabia’s radical young men and their mentors, and the violence that they are capable of inflicting on both women and the global community. Instead, they depict a much more attractive alternative. Like the successful Saudi businesswoman, entrepreneur, and scientist, these novelists ‘normalise’ and ‘humanise’ Saudi society – and in particular its women – by confirming their membership in the neo-liberal globalised commercial and business world elite. The country can then be known not only for its violent men but for its young, educated female authors who write texts such as \textit{The Girls of Riyadh}, \textit{Women of Vice}, \textit{The Return}, and \textit{The Others}, all of which delve into prohibited territories kept away from the public gaze.\textsuperscript{12}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item[]\textsuperscript{11} For examples, see \textit{Jihadica} at http://www.jihadica.com/ and \textit{Jihadology} at http://jihadology.net/.
\item[]\textsuperscript{12} In this chapter, only these four novels are discussed, as they particularly represent the theme of the chapter. Other Saudi novelists have dealt with similar or related themes, but for reasons of space this chapter cannot claim to cover all novels published since 2000. A good review of Saudi women’s novels up to 1999 can be found in Suad al-Mana’s chapter on contemporary women’s literature in the Arabian Peninsula. See Suad al-Mana, ‘The
On the surface, the articulate young cosmopolitan novelist may be the antithesis of the radical Jihadi, but both are products of the political, social, economic, and religious context that is Saudi Arabia since the 1990s. While the Jihadi is believed to be the other, with whom we share nothing, the young Saudi woman novelist is sensationally exotic but she is like ‘us’. The novelist is enchanted by her own aspirations and relationships, while the Jihadi is obsessed by the alleged suffering of the Islamic community, the umma. The woman novelist shatters secrets behind the veil, while the Jihadi strives to produce more veils. The first exposes myths about authenticity, virtue, and morality; the second asserts all of these qualities. With the pen, the novelist inscribes the beginning of the dismantling of old taboos; with the sword, the Jihadi engraves the taboo in ancient texts and utterances. The novelist launches war on hypocrisy and proclaimed virtue; the Jihadi launches war on those who threaten virtue. But they are both at war with their own society and with authority figures within it. Both are restless, searching for meaning and action in a society that has lost its balance as a result of its rapid immersion in the trappings of late modernity without being able to become truly modernist. Both find refuge in the new communication technology, from simple email to discussion boards, Twitter, and Facebook. Both draw on the pathways of globalisation and transnational links. Both are constrained by authoritarian religious, political, and social powers that deprive people of basic freedoms. Both resent the authority of religious morality-enforcing agencies, traditional religious scholars, and social elders.

As such, both young novelists and Jihadis divide opinions in Saudi society and stretch the limits of its tolerance. Both have strong support among certain circles within society. Young women novelists are celebrated by male literary critics, the Saudi media, and the international literary community, but are also condemned for their corrupting influence by religious scholars and Islamist activists. Jihadis are praised for their courage, piety, and commitment to the umma in some religious circles inside Saudi Arabia and beyond, but they too are despised and fiercely fought by others within their own society. Both Jihadis and young women novelists belong to the same generation, which aspires to change their world. The rise of the celebrity female novelists cannot be considered in isolation from the development of radicalisation and violence. In fact, a few

young women novelists chose to focus on the personality of fictionalised Jihadis in a soul-searching exercise to identify causes and cures.\textsuperscript{13} While there are no specific references to women novelists in Jihadi discourse, novelists belong to a genre of women that Jihadis try to eliminate from the public sphere. Their struggle is to purify this sphere from those who imitate \textit{ahirat al-rum} (Western prostitutes).\textsuperscript{14} Badriyya al-Bishr, discussed in the last chapter, in her novel \textit{Hind wa al-askar} attributes the way her heroine’s brother, Ibrahim, becomes involved in violent \textit{jihad} as a function of distorted motherly love that glorifies the firstborn son and ignores the second. Sibling rivalry becomes the context in which the Jihadi is born. Elsewhere I have pointed to the generation gap between brothers, the product of men’s serial marriages, as a mechanism to understand why an old, privileged man may fail to understand the radicalisation of his very young brother. The radicalism of the new young generation provides an opportunity to overcome the limitations of youth, its subservience to the authority of elders – including not only fathers but also older brothers, religious scholars, and princes in Saudi society.\textsuperscript{15} Women novelists offer an insight when they trace the origins of radicalisation to unequal maternal love and affection.

Young women novelists are new voices, delving into desire, sexuality, and passion, thus destroying the taboo that has always been associated with these topics. While al-Khamis and the other novelists discussed in the previous chapter write about lives constrained by history, geography, and tradition and may make strong allusions to sexual themes, the new young novelists choose explicit language. The body and its desire and passions have become central in many novels published since 2000. Born in the late 1970s, the new young novelists have indeed chosen to make war against taboos. Their heroines are not mothers and grandmothers, they are school and college students, struggling with restrictions on sexuality, personal freedom, marriage choices, and relationships.

According to a study prepared by Nadi al-Baha al-Adabi, \textit{Baha Literary Salon}, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of Saudi novels that deal with sex. In 2007, fifty-five novels, written by both men and women, had sexual themes. The number increased to sixty-four and

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{13} Ala al-Hithlul, \textit{al-Intihar al-majur} (Hired suicide), Beirut: Saqi, 2004.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{14} For detailed discussion of \textit{jihad} and gender in Saudi Arabia, see Madawi Al-Rasheed, \textit{Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation}, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 163–8.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{15} Al-Rasheed, \textit{Contesting the Saudi State}, pp. 134–74.}
seventy novels in 2008 and 2009 respectively. These figures attest to the predominance of the economies of desire in which sexuality is central. As expected, novels with explicit sexual material have attracted criticism. In oral cultural settings, Saudi women, and Arab women in general, engage in informal and elaborate ‘sexual’ talk that may appear shocking to Western middle-class women. The latter are far more reserved in discussing their own sex lives in the company of female friends, but they have no qualms with exploring and exchanging information gathered from sources such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* magazines and popular television series dealing with explicit sexuality. Saudi women’s sexual conversations are neither condemned nor embarrassing for those who engage in them, provided that they take place among married women. These conversations often exclude young unmarried girls who are equally engaged in constant sex talk among themselves. What is shocking for Saudis is the entry of sex talk into the public sphere through novels written by unmarried girls. Religious sex manuals are accepted and widely circulated in Saudi Arabia, provided that they are supported by religious evidence and opinions. However, the novels discussed in this chapter are different. They are narratives of personal female desires, passions, and sexual encounters that are still not welcomed in the public sphere – hence the strong reactions of many Saudis when confronted with novels such as *Girls of Riyadh*. When informal, private, girls’ sex talk moves from the oral context in which it usually takes place to become international literature, the majority in Saudi society are shocked – with the exception of a small cosmopolitan, government-employed intellectual and business elite. For example, the poet, diplomat, and civil servant Ghazi al-Gosaybi endorsed *Girls of Riyadh* and wrote the prologue.

In general, women’s sex novels have been condemned by many literary critics and a large section of the public. Even Arab literary figures and observers have been astonished by the daring literary productions of this later generation of Saudi novelists. Layla al-Othman, a Kuwaiti novelist and essayist, who herself had written daring texts with explicit sexual references, accused Saudi novelists of overdoing the sexual theme. Many Saudi women writers agreed. Sharifa al-Shamlan and Siham al-Qahtani

---


17 For details of Layla al-Othman’s long journey through the courts where she had to defend her novels, see Layla al-Othman, *al-Muhakama* [The trial], Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2009.
accepted al-Othman’s criticism. Al-Qahtani wrote that she is sometimes ashamed to read sections of these novels. While al-Othman’s long writing experience allows her to deal with sexual themes in sophisticated ways, many new Saudi women novelists lack such skills, and hence their sex scenes tend to be vulgar without the benefit of dramatisation, according to some critics. But other Saudi women writers were surprised that al-Othman, who suffered ostracism and imprisonment in Kuwait as a result of her daring literary productions, should voice a criticism relating to explicit sexual material found in recently published Saudi novels.\textsuperscript{18} 

Many Saudi novelists explain the saturation of the new literature with sexual themes as a reflection of the obsession of Saudi society with this human instinct. Novelist and essayist Badriyya al-Bishr argues that sexual themes in the new literature do not equate to society’s excessive obsession with sex. Contemporary Arab literature ‘is saturated with sexual scenes but critics do not concern themselves with this. Only when Saudi women write about sex, they are singled out. This is because the country has been grounded in darkness and now things have changed. Women’s voices, which were absent, are now heard around the world’.\textsuperscript{19} Saudi society, in her opinion, is ‘organised around sex, either to make it permissible or to prohibit it. Sex is everywhere. Obsession with sex permeates all institutions like marriage and education. Young girls encounter sex as children if they are sexually harassed, they then come face to face with it as adolescents, whose mothers groom them for marriage. Later in marriage, sex is the primary purpose’.\textsuperscript{20} In general, many Saudi women criticise their reduction to sex objects, not only in novels but in society in general. Educationalist Mounira al-Jamjoum forcibly argued that ‘we had enough of limiting our humanity as women to sex’.\textsuperscript{21} This overwhelming presence of sex and representations of sex in popular fiction is not unique to Saudi Arabia. Iran, a country that shares many features with Saudi Arabia, has also engaged with promoting, regulating, or condemning sex in more recent years in an unprecedented manner at the level of both state and society. In Iran, sex has become both a source of freedom and an act of

\textsuperscript{18} Huda al-Daghfaq, ‘Saudiyat yuwajihna itihamat al-Othman hawl al-jins al-rowai’ [Saudi women respond to al-Othman’s accusations regarding sex in novels], \textit{al-Watan}, 4 May 2010.

\textsuperscript{19} Interview with the author, Dubai, 5 January 2011.

\textsuperscript{20} Interview with the author, Dubai, 5 January 2011.

\textsuperscript{21} Mounira Jamjoum, ‘Kafana hasran li insaniyatana fi boutaqat al-jins’ [We have had enough of limiting our humanity as women to sex], interview in \textit{al-Hayat}, 8 March 2011.
political rebellion. But since the 1980s, the regulation of the sex life of the citizens has been taken as a state policy, explained and propagated by religious scholars in the country.

The overwhelming place of sex in contemporary Saudi society may not be simply a function of an innate and eternal ‘Saudi’ obsession, amounting to a pathologically compulsive condition, but rather a reflection of interrelated contemporary factors. First, the alleged obsession with sex is nothing but a reflection of the marriage between two forces: religious nationalism and its focus on the private sphere as a protected and heavily regulated arena, and the state’s desire to gain religious legitimacy through controlling and regulating the private sex lives of its citizens. This regulation is manifested in the endless signs separating men and women in the public sphere, from the market to mosque, university, and school; the regulation of marriage to foreigners, subject to the requirement of obtaining permission from the Ministry of Interior; the guardianship system imposed on women; and many other legal restrictions, at the heart of which is the regulation of the body and its desires, in addition to family and marriage. The political and religious forces have combined to generate the obsession that baffles novelists such as Badriyya al-Bishr and many outside observers. In order to comply with the tenets of the old religious nationalism, the state must be seen as regulating, controlling, and managing all personal and private desires. The occasional raid on a mixed encounter between a man and a woman in a restaurant or cafe, the central theme in a novel discussed later in this chapter, is very important. It is a symbol signifying the state’s commitment to protecting the public sphere from the excess of desires, initially stimulated by the state and its entrepreneurs under elaborate urban shopping development plans and private entrepreneurial initiatives to transform the landscape into one where the cosmopolitan fantasy flourishes for all to see but not consume or enjoy. To distinguish this newly created urban space from any other one in the world, control of sex and desire must become a priority for the state to remind its people occasionally of its commitment to religious nationalism.

Second, Saudi immersion in a capitalist economy that fetishises sex, promotes unlimited desires, and stretches the imagination in the service

---


of gratification must have turned a natural instinct into an obsession. The oil economy had a tremendous impact on gender relations, marriage, and sexual life. Sudden wealth opened new opportunities for sex while social mores and religion were not able to advance at the same speed. As discussed earlier, Saudi ulama have struggled to accommodate old desires that became more urgent under the new oil economy. The popularity of misyar and urfi marriages in the 1980s is an example of the constant quest for solutions to problems imposed by a changing economic, social, and demographic context. The solutions obviously remain grounded in the requirements of religious nationalism, that is, privileging procreation within the legitimate Islamic framework of the family. Saudi ulama justified these marriages, and from the 1990s invented more daring unions such as misfar (travel), nahar (daytime), and boyfriend marriages in order to respond to contemporary issues. A Saudi student at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah shocked a public student forum in which discussion of misyar was organised by students in higher education when she announced that ‘like men, women too look for sexual pleasures’.24 Other girls supported her in private. These new unions remain controversial, but they are increasing – especially among older unmarried women who live with their parents. Misyar marriages are now organised informally by female matchmakers who have good knowledge of the local marriage ‘market’ and arrange compatible unions.25 Matchmakers are reported to say that they receive between seven and ten applications daily from men seeking misyar in Jeddah. Religious shaykhs who run offices attached to mosques for facilitating marriage in Jeddah conduct misyar marriages regardless of whether the shaykhs accept them or not. Many women still object to solutions seen as privileging male interest, without any consideration of the impact of such unions on women.

While the oil economy contributed to the consolidation of the obsession with sex and enforcement of sex segregation, the recent neo-liberal monetisation, privatisation, consumption, and excessive advertising since the late 1990s are all contributing factors that have pushed young Saudi women novelists to privilege sex stories in their recent literature. Saudi society is not essentially or naturally obsessed with sex; it is simply being drawn into global images and practices of old and new desires, sex being only one of them. It is therefore not a surprise that novelists have

Celebrity Women Novelists and the Cosmopolitan Fantasy

internalised the alleged obsession with sex and saturated their stories with a quest to enjoy it against the background of disappointing marriages, social, legal, and religious restrictions, punishment, and denial. The ‘sex novel’ appeared exactly at the time when the state decided under pressure to reverse previous restrictions and promote the cosmopolitan woman. The erotic theology discussed in Chapter 3 is no longer the only manual that determines sexual desires and regulates sexual acts. Today Saudi society is exposed to other sexual paradigms that are eroding previously taken-for-granted wisdom on sex and desire. The new novels reflect these new developments and articulate the tension between old and new.

This chapter explores the literature of some of the young women writers who represent and articulate the cosmopolitan fantasy of the state and sections of Saudi society, mainly the upper middle class that is part of the state apparatus through education, privilege, employment, entrepreneurial activities, and global business. This group includes both celebrities such as Raja al-Sani and other less well-known writers, for example journalist and novelist Samar al-Moqrin. More daring novelists use pseudonyms, for example Saba al-Hirz and Warda Abd al-Malik, both of whom focus on premarital sex and homosexuality. These two capture the surge in Saudi women novelists’ focus on explicit sex scenes, both heterosexual and homosexual. They turn the body and its desires into instruments of war against social taboos and religious restrictions. The ‘struggle of the body’ may not be the only challenge facing contemporary Saudi women, as observed by Layla al-Othman, but these novelists have chosen to highlight aspects of this struggle that touch not only relations between men and women but also homosexuality, which has become a public concern in recent years as a result of globalised international discourse on the subject. All four novelists published their books in Beirut. Al-Saqi, their publisher, promotes this literature in the Arab world and abroad. At the time of writing, only al-Sani and al-Hirz’s novels have been translated into other languages.

RAJA AL-SANI: HIP-HOP SAUDI MUSLIM GIRLS

In 2005, Raja al-Sani’s first novel, Banat al-Riyadh, enjoyed great success in both Saudi Arabia and the Arab world. It was translated into more than twenty languages. The novel does not exploit explicitly sexual scenes

26 al-Watan, 4 May 2010.
but is focused on young women’s seduction and desire. On her own web page, Raja wants to be known as ‘a Muslim writer from Saudi who became famous through her bestselling novel...the author received death threats for bringing her nation’s women into disrepute’. To an English-speaking audience, this biographical statement encompasses all the attractive dimensions that fascinate and enchant those who seek the secrets of Arabia ‘behind the veil’. Together with a photograph of the veiled novelist, the statement ensures interest and fascination. ‘Muslim’, ‘Saudi’, ‘women’, and ‘death threats’ are combined here to open realms of excitements and promises of scandals. The series of words responds to a set of images that have become dominant about Muslim women and their oppression, and confirm an old, well-entrenched stereotype about Saudi Arabia. But audiences must explore further to arrive at critical moments at which the stereotype begins to be challenged.

The daughter of two doctors, al-Sani lived in Kuwait before her parents returned to Saudi Arabia. She is a dentist who started her training at King Saud University, and after the publication of her first novel, she moved to Chicago – partly for graduate education and partly to remove herself from the storm that erupted after the novel’s publication. Although al-Sani challenges many perceptions about her own society, on her web page she confirms her Muslim identity and commitment to her country. She informs her audiences that she has plans to return to Saudi Arabia and develop her own private dental practice. She is then a committed Muslim woman who does not wish to escape to the West permanently, as she wants to work in her country and cause change from within. Such a narrative is familiar in the context of Saudi Arabia. Working and changing the system from within is the ideal choice. Its advocates escape labels such as ‘Westernised’, ‘traitors’, and ‘agents of foreign domination’ and replace them with commitment to Islam – but with a new cosmopolitan outlook. It is a strategy that avoids condemnation and reinforces the high moral ground of its advocates. In many ways, this narrative remains grounded in religious nationalism, with a modern twist. This, however, did not spare Raja al-Sani the wrath of some of her compatriots. Two Saudi citizens went as far as to file a lawsuit against her because her novel ‘is an outrage to the norms of Saudi society. It encourages vice and also portrays the Kingdom’s female community as women who do not cover their faces and who appear publicly in an immodest way’. The lawsuit was rejected by the Court of Grievances in Riyadh.

28 See http:www.rajaa.net.
29 Riad Qusti, ‘Court Rejects Case Against Rajaa al-Sanea’, Arab News, 9 October 2006.
The success of al-Sani’s novel in Saudi Arabia and beyond\(^{30}\) is attributed to the fact that many young women were able to see themselves in one of her four characters. More importantly, its success is a function of the cosmopolitan fantasy that the author promotes about sophisticated, mobile elite women and their families, who are competent in many cultures, languages, and dialects, and who are constantly searching for excitement and contrasts rather than conformity. No interview in the Western press would be complete without the interviewer commenting on the novelist’s elegant appearance, which can be described as ‘hip-hop Muslim’. In the words of a journalist, al-Sani ‘erupts from the lift, a whirlwind of designer labels, perfect manicure and lip gloss, consulting her Gerald Genta watch, a white saucer, inset with diamonds. She looks fabulously glitzy, as you would expect from the writer of a novel widely hyped as “Saudi-style Sex and the City”’.\(^{31}\) *Girls of Riyadh* is considered to be a Saudi version of British and North American ‘Chick Lit’, combining concern with identity, race, and class with a depiction of messy social realities facing young women.\(^{32}\)

In the novel, the narrator, who remains unknown, promises to describe a series of local scandals and rave parties involving her four girl friends, using the liberating new medium of the Internet pages. The narrator, who calls herself *moi*, is a cybernaut who promises hot stories about scandals assembled through email messages on Yahoo. Every week, she replies to emails and proceeds to tell more stories about her characters. She warns readers and subscribers to her ‘seerawenfadha7et’ Yahoo group that any resemblance between the characters in these stories and reality is deliberate (*maqsud*), and thus from page one she merges fiction with reality. The lives of four young women are centred on education, entertainment, their aspirations for love and career, marriage, divorce, achievement, and disappointment. The university is the context in which the girls mix with others whom they would not have encountered in old Riyadh. Shia girls from the Eastern Province intermingle with local Najdi, Hijazi, and Qasimi girls. The intermingling serves as a context to highlight difference and diversity. The girls come face to face with religious and cultural differences that make the local a heterogeneous mix, contrasted with the


homogenised image peculiar to the religious nationalist ideology, with obvious stereotypical, predetermined, and prejudiced opinions about the other.

In addition to tragedy, the four girls share a fascination with the rituals of seduction experienced by marriageable girls of every culture. Their longing for a ‘love match’ is crushed by old men and women who resist losing control of their girls and cooperate to continue their surveillance. An arranged marriage ends up in divorce (Qamra), while another awaited marriage stumbles when Sadim allows its consummation prior to the wedding night. Michele, the ‘halfie’ whose Arabic is not so good, cannot achieve full acceptance in society, as her mother is American. Mixed parentage becomes an obstacle in the face of marrying her first love. Finally, the only success is Lamis’s marriage to a colleague in medical school. The girls move between Riyadh, London, Chicago, and San Francisco, very much like upper-class cosmopolitan Saudi girls. The boredom of life in Riyadh is intercepted by liberating holidays, education, and work experience abroad. While all the girls aspire towards the fulfilment of their love and career aspirations, they struggle with restrictive norms, traditions, and social pressure. They find refuge in a Kuwaiti divorcee who opens her house to the girls and their lovers. Her house becomes multaqa al-ushaq (the lovers’ meeting place). The girls are even ready to venture into forbidden territory to meet potential marriage candidates, thus exposing themselves to severe punishment and harassment. The theme of girls pursuing men is a reversal of traditional marriage arrangements in which men and their mothers would embark on a search that would culminate in finding a suitable wife. Al-Sani’s girls are in many ways similar to others in the Arab world who have recently shocked their society through their daring narratives about finding a suitable husband.\(^{33}\) Al-Sani’s girls are all skilful in circumventing the endless limitations of their society. They seem to know what they want and pursue it despite restrictions. Some fail while others succeed. The novel moves seamlessly between

\(^{33}\) In Egypt, the phenomenon is illustrated by a very successful blog turned into a book that was translated into several European languages: see Ghada Abd al-Al, Ayza atgawiz [I want to be married], Cairo: al-Shorouq, 2008. The current marriage crisis in Egypt is discussed in many scholarly works. For further details, see Hanan Koloussy, For Better, For Worse: The Marriage Crisis that Made Modern Egypt, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010; Hanan Koloussy, ‘The Fiction and Non-Fiction of Egypt’s Marriage Crisis’, Middle East Report, December 2010, available at http://www.merip.org. For a comparison between Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, see Frances Hasso, Consuming Desires: Family Crisis and the State in the Middle East, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.
tragedy, irony, laughter, and trivial occupations. It anticipates the stardom of its author, the newspaper controversies, and finally an interview on al-Arabiyya television hosted by Turki al-Dakhil, known for choosing controversial figures to interrogate. Al-Sani achieved the stardom depicted for her narrator. An endorsement by novelist, poet, and minister of labour, Ghazi al-Gosaybi, reflects local connectivity, encouragement, and support. Al-Sani may have enraged many religious scholars and Islamists, and offended the guardians of religious nationalism, but she was protected from above.

Each chapter opens with a couple of lines from a poem, a phrase from a famous writer, a verse from the Quran, or a saying from the hadiths. The text becomes anchored in a hybrid space that invokes multiple layers of meaning and experience. But in this pastiche, al-Sani exposes hypocrisy in Saudi society, which explains the strong negative reaction she received in the country. She tells familiar stories such as those associated with aeroplane toilets where women swap their Saudi attire for Western fashions and vice versa, depending on which direction the plane is flying. She highlights the lies that people fabricate and the risks they take to overcome the prohibited. She exposes the double lives of upper-class Saudis who move between languages and cultures assisted by substantial wealth and privilege. When things get ‘too much’, a recurrent theme in the novel, heroines can pack their suitcases and leave – either for short breaks or permanently – choices that remain beyond the reach of the majority of the population.

Islam and culture are not taken for granted, but their troubled relationship is explored with insight into how they collide at one level while reinforcing each other at another. For example, after the religious marriage formalities are completed, sexual relations between husband and wife are rendered licit in Islam. However, social tradition prohibits the sexual act until after the wedding night, and even then, a bride is supposed to resist it for several nights to show her shyness and purity. In the novel, a girl is divorced for the simple reason that she practised what is permissible in Islam but prohibited by society. In a society that practises severe sex segregation, a girl’s dream to mix with the opposite sex may push her to choose to study medicine for the very limited educational contexts in which she will be exposed to boys. Segregation forces boys to accompany girls to shopping centres under the pretence that they are their brothers. The youth emerge in this novel as assertive and skilful in overcoming social and religious obstacles. But many tragedies are unavoidable. These are anchored in a world where the veneer of piety and tradition poses real
challenges for the privileged classes who by virtue of their wealth, education, and consumption patterns become intolerant of their own society and alienated from its control agencies. While fathers struggle to hide behind the façade of conformity, thus allowing themselves liberties they deny their daughters, the girls live, at night and on the pages of the Internet, a life denied them during the day. The girls of Riyadh are both strong and weak, resilient and vulnerable. They invoke sympathy, admiration, and pity. The novel invites the reader to consider fictionalised Saudi girls as real, hence the extraordinary success of the novel at a time when only trashy fiction written about life behind the veil dominated the market for fictional books about Saudi Arabia. Here we have a voice portrayed as ‘authentic’ and ‘Muslim’, speaking to Saudi, Arab, and (via translation) Western audiences. While the assessment of the literary credentials of this novel is beyond the scope of this author, what is important from my perspective is how the success of a specific genre of fiction authored by a young Saudi woman is yet another step towards finding the cosmopolitan woman who might be a fantasy or a reality. In both situations, she is a desired outcome, a long-awaited gift to save the nation from previous stereotypes, prejudices, violence, and misconceptions. While the cosmopolitan woman is already a fixture in real Saudi society, fiction depicts her as a woman embarking on a long journey in search of individuality, love, and desire. Although she engages in consumption made available in an open market, and enjoys all the education and degrees made available as a result of high purchasing power, she is in search of romantic love as advertised around the time of Valentine’s Day. The traditional socially legitimate love, intimacy, and even eroticism celebrated in traditional culture and ancient poetry and praised in old Islamic texts is simply not the one that a consumer age makes young girls and boys desire or seek. Today fictionalised Saudi women and many real ones seek ‘dating’, that ‘alien’ and forbidden practice, whose paraphernalia are red roses, chocolates, ribbons, and plastic balloon hearts. All are imported into the heart of Saudi Arabia. In al-Sani’s words, ‘Yes, there are dates. But in Saudi Arabia we eat them’.

Dating, whether fictionalised or real, does not appear to be a solution, as Saudi men who date are believed to be weak and under the authority of their mothers and fathers. In fiction and reality, and in the privacy of their homes, men parade their big bellies, wearing only their underwear and

34 See Booth, ‘“The Muslim Woman” as Celebrity Author’.
reflecting the light on their bald skulls. In al-Sani’s novel, Saudi men are a bleak and miserable group. The hypocrisy of fathers, the weakness of young men, and the treachery of passionate lovers paint a gloomy picture of those who assume control over women.

*Girls of Riyadh* is a challenge that celebrates the women who are denounced and despised by the guardians of religious nationalism, the feared, upper-class, Westernised hybrid women who confuse boundaries, and embrace multiple cultures, lifestyles, and languages. While the girls in the novel do not represent Saudi women, in reality their kind is becoming more common in urban Saudi Arabia.\(^\text{36}\)

**Samar al-Moqrin: Imprisoned Cosmopolitan Fantasies**

If al-Sani’s novel avoided explicit sex scenes in favour of a focus on the quest for seduction and flirtation, with *Nisa al-munkar* (Women of vice) Samar al-Moqrin throws her heroine wholeheartedly into the forbidden act of adultery. While al-Sani’s novel engages in aspects of self-orientalising, al-Moqrin delves into the heart of the orientalising project, namely sexualising Saudi women in an overt market economy of desire. In *Nisa al-munkar*, the heroine is described as selfish to begin with, thus anchoring her in a realm that challenges broad traditional expectations associated with motherhood, giving, and sacrifice. She occupies that twilight zone between marriage and divorce, a liminal, ambiguous, and dangerous phase experienced by women who are married but have not been granted a divorce. After eight years of marriage, Sara is *mu’alaqa*, hanging between marriage and divorce. Her appeals in the central Riyadh court for a divorce result in frustration until a new man, Raif, appears in her life, renewing her vitality and joy. She finally finds love on the streets of London, in particular in Queensway when she meets her lover. But meeting the lover whom she had previously encountered in the virtual world – through email, text messages, telephone conversations, and chat

\(^\text{36}\) The study of youth culture in Saudi public space is captured in Lisa Wynn, ‘The Romance of Tahliya Street: Youth Culture, Commodities, and the Use of Public Space in Jiddah’, *Middle East Report*, 204, 1997, pp. 30–1. See also Amelie Le Renard’s study of urban college girls in Riyadh and the ways they challenge restrictions in their daily shopping and consumption habits that centre around the shopping mall. They can be considered real versions of the fictionalised girls in al-Sani’s novel: Amelie Le Renard, ‘Engendering Saudi Consumerism: A Study of Young Women’s Practices in Riyadh’s Shopping Malls’, paper presented at a conference on Saudi Arabia, Princeton, November 2009. For an alternative view regarding youth culture, see Yamani, *Changed Identities*; Yamani, ‘Saudi Youth’.
rooms – proves to be daunting when their meetings become real. Nevertheless, in London the lovers satisfy their quest to encounter each other away from the policing agents of Riyadh who discipline every woman they encounter. Hyde Park becomes synonymous with freedom. It is enjoyed for its flowers and green grass, but most importantly for the sight of lovers exchanging kisses. While the rest of the world remains oblivious to such intimacy in public places, a Saudi mother shouts her insults: ‘Infidels!’

In addition to love and courting, there is debate in ‘speak corner’ (Speakers’ Corner, Hyde Park), allegedly where Saudi dissidents started their opposition to the government. She is reminded that ‘this is Britain, the bastion of democracy’. After days enjoying the company of her lover and London, the moment of return arrives. Back in Riyadh, she sends messages to her lover who resists her appeals and ignores her calls. Obviously, he is someone who practises the usual hypocrisy, enjoying a woman while condemning her for her lost morality. Finally a meeting in a Riyadh restaurant with Raif ends in members of the Committee for the Promotion of Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong raiding the restaurant and arresting those who are together without being married or related. Raif serves a short prison sentence, while Sara is sentenced to four years in a women’s prison and 700 lashes. She initially refuses to sign the documents that implicate her in more serious offences and continues to profess innocence. Love and meetings are crimes. The shaykh in charge of her case insults her, using strong language that refers to her intimate organs. Scandal follows, and the family abandons Sara, inevitable outcomes after being caught by the Committee, regardless of the offence. In prison, Sara encounters murderers, prostitutes, and adulteresses. They tell their stories while invoking both defiance and repentance. Four months after being released from prison, Sara gives up on finding Raif. With no future or career, she works as coffee server (sababa) at wedding parties, a job for the poor and old. Women are hired during wedding parties to perform this job for which they get a meagre income. Despite being worried that she may be recognised by her friends during a wedding, she continues to work. At one wedding, using the microphone, the singer calls upon women guests to cover themselves as she announces that the bridegroom will enter the women’s hall to meet his bride. When the bridegroom arrives, it is Raif who enters the room only to leave Sara’s soul forever.

The cosmopolitan fantasy that *Girls of Riyadh* entertains is repeated in *Nisa al-munkar*. Its characters move between Riyadh and London to experience pleasure and escape the limitations of society and religion. In this novel, the boundaries between inside and outside are more rigid. Transgression is only possible outside, while adventures involving the crossing of boundaries inside result in tragedy. This black-and-white depiction of place seeks the fantasy abroad, as it is denied freedom and engulfed with danger at home. While ‘inside’ is the antithesis of cosmopolitan free life, it turns into a prison, the ultimate confined space, where vice is pushed away from the virtuous society. Longing for the outside and the pleasures that are permissible there is punished by banishment from the hearts of men. Men seek women as objects of desire abroad, after which they condemn them for their ‘immorality’. Women seek love and affection from such men, only to be disappointed by their neglect after a sexual encounter. Men do not want to marry a woman who succumbs to their desires, a well-rehearsed theme in many other literary productions. In al-Sani’s novel, Sadim’s marriage is annulled because she surrenders to her husband before the wedding night. Similarly, in *Nisa al-munkar*, Sara prematurely gives away too much and pays the price.

Al-Moqrin directs attacks at both Islamists and liberals: the first saturate the public sphere with their preaching; the second preach what they do not practise. The religious see vice everywhere and aspire to eradicate it, while *hadathī* (modern, secular) men are hypocrites when it comes to relations with women. Such blunt political messages and statements diminish the literary value of the novel and make it shallow, giving the impression of an immature literary style in which the novel is to be read as a statement about the plight of women rather than as a work of literature. It seems that the hasty publication of this short novel in 2008 was a response to a market that welcomed and celebrated al-Sani’s novel. *Nisa al-munkar* seeks fame by repeating a formula that has already been successful. Its opening adulterous act is punished by a vindictive society, while the desire to seek a cosmopolitan life remains unfulfilled. As the novel moves between the bars of London and the bars of the Riyadh prison, it desperately seeks to appeal to an audience beyond Saudi Arabia. It remains a short statement with serious limitations, but it is symptomatic of the context in which it was written, published, and marketed. ‘Breaking the taboo’ has become a marketing tool promoted by publishers and authors at the expense of serious literary qualities, but it cannot always guarantee fame. The fact that the taboo is about Saudi women and their sexuality has become standard, and in some cases, it results in success for the author and the novel. However, many Saudi
women novelists and their publishers underestimate the sophistication of Arab readers and the even more demanding tastes among an international audience, especially if they hope that their work will be translated – particularly into English. Novels such as the two discussed above represent a quest for the cosmopolitan fantasy on the part of both novelists and their heroines. Saudi women novelists are prepared to go as far as fetishising love and sexuality in the pursuit of breaking the taboo and appealing to Saudi, Arab, and international audiences. While some critics would applaud women novelists’ ‘courage’, ‘bravery’, and determination to seek the individual freedoms that other women enjoy, others condemn them as agents of corruption and Westernisation. A small minority of critics offer nuanced assessment of the emerging genre of literary production and assess the recurrent themes of sexuality, prohibition, denial, indulgence, and punishment. There is nothing new about these reactions to literary works that aim to shock, defy, and undermine many automatic assumptions about Saudi women. The authors and their novels, together with reactions to them, offer, however, a great opportunity to map the context in which gender issues became central not only to Saudis but also to the international community with its policymakers, journalists, publishers, and book markets. Authors who use their real names are prepared to go far, but not as far as those women novelists who use pen-names.

WARDA ABD AL-MALIK: BORN AGAIN FREE

Published under the pseudonym Warda Abd al-Malik, the novel al-Awba (The return) explores religion and sex, dismantling these taboos in London, Sharm al-Shaykh, and Riyadh. Sara, a young, bright girl, leaves school to marry pious Abdullah, the brother of her school’s social worker, the spinster Filwa. Filwa introduces the young girl to preaching and religious study circles, where girls learn about the unlimited rights of husbands and the protocols of sexual intercourse. Sara becomes indoctrinated in interpretations that make the road to heaven pass through the marital bed: women who please their husbands and refrain from tormenting them by denying them sex are guaranteed a place in heaven. The religious casquette of the religious awakening becomes her companion. In the religious study circle, she learns about the hell awaiting the hadathiyat, the modern corrupted girls, who should be banished from society. But Sara does not hate Satan as respectable Muslim girls are expected to do.

Abdullah, a mutawwa, is a repulsive lover and a boring husband. With no alternatives and with burning desires, Sara succumbs to him in bed,
only to be revolted by his ‘out-of-proportion beard’, smell of piety, and manners in bed. On the wedding night, the act of deflowering a virgin, which amounts to rape, turns into a nightmare: ‘He started showering me with crazy kisses on my cheeks. He devoured my mouth, chewed my tongue, and ground my teeth against his. His fingers squeeze my apple. My pain reached my neck. He did not leave me until the caller of prayer announced the early morning ritual’.39

Abdullah falls ill as a result of being possessed by an infidel jinn. His pious sister subjects him to exorcist rituals run by shaykhs who spit on their patients, prepare amulets, and read Quranic verses to drive the jinn out. Abdullah is exhausted and demoralised. He loses his sexual potency, and Sara, driven by the power of Satan, jumps on him in bed while he lies half-conscious and subjects him to a violent sexual encounter while he remains passive.

After abandoning a pious life that centred on the trinity of kitchen, prayer mat, and marital bed, Sara drifts into a life of adultery, enjoying sexual encounters at home and abroad. From upper-class drinking parties in Riyadh to London’s Hyde Park, Sara is ‘born again, breathing the air of freedom’.40 Tormented by her regression into a life of debauchery, she becomes ill and disturbed. Her eyes sink, and her skin turns pale. Like her husband before her, she is taken to a shaykh to find a cure for her melancholy. The healing turns into a molestation session in which the shaykh mixes spitting, chanting, and physically abusing his patient. Sara does not abandon hope: ‘I want to live every minute of my life. I want to love. I want to be admired. I want to travel, read, go to the cinema, live every minute of life, sink in its halal and haram before it is over’.41

She feels that she needs to get rid of the remains of her narrow religious convictions. She swaps her religious cassettes for relaxation tapes, hoping to learn how to unwind and enjoy life. She swaps her high heels for comfortable, sporty trainers to cope with walking the streets of London from Bloomsbury to Edgware Road. Above all, she feels the need for a sophisticated short hairstyle, the ultimate cosmopolitan symbol of liberation, consumer culture, and sophistication. The haircut fits with the new lifestyle of consuming what Western modernity can offer – mainly parties, alcohol, and dancing. Her ignorance of real happiness ends with her ‘finger discovering the strawberry . . . I used to exhaust myself so that

40 Warda Abd al-Malik, al-Awba, p. 65.
the sheikh is satisfied... when he finishes with his dirt, I go to the bath to caress the strawberry. I cry with pleasure, that pleasure that I never experienced with Abdullah on top of me or under me'.

This short novel focuses on the suffering of the body in a disappointing and frustrating marriage, the quest for real pleasures with other men, and opting out from the comfort of the prayer mat. The journey takes the heroine to forbidden territory and prohibited foreign men. But at the end she finds comfort and hope in returning to education after she was denied this opportunity after her early marriage. The novel challenges tradition, which suppresses the personal in the service of the common good. Here we have private pleasures explored in a cosmopolitan context where men and women feel free. The longing for a Western place and context, both seen as liberating, comes through clearly. A sense of liberation is attached to short visits abroad, although the novel also creates islands of freedom inside Saudi Arabia. The text falls into the trap of orientalising the self against deliberate glorification of the freedoms enjoyed by others. Stereotypical images of the other and the self are an inevitable consequence of seeing the world as divided between those who are free and those who are oppressed. Freedom in the West and denial in the East become meaningless polar conditions that the novel fails to explore in a more sophisticated style. However, the novel aims to shock, to convey a sense of sophistication, and to engage in an unfulfilled cosmopolitan fantasy.

SABA AL-HIRZ: THE BODY AND THE HELL OF OTHERS

Drawing on Jean Paul Sartre’s famous expression ‘L’enferc’est les autres’, Saba al-Hirz’s novel al-Akharun (The others) stretches the limits even further when she captures the theme of minority women who are both lesbian and Shia. This blunt double engagement with ‘perversion’ prompted two Saudi critics to see the novel as expressing private dilemmas rather than Saudi social issues. According to Ahmad al-Wasil, the critics Abdullah al-Ghathami and Muhammad al-Ali both respond to and evaluate the novel from a purely masculinist, patriarchal position: ‘They

42 Warda Abd al-Malik, al-Awba, pp. 82–3.
43 Saba al-Hirz, al-Akharun [The others], Beirut: Saqi, 2006. The novel was translated into English as The Others, New York: Seven Stories Press, 2009. Saudi writer Wajiha al-Howeider was suspected of writing this novel. In an interview, she declined to divulge whether she is the author. However, she admitted that she published a novel under a pen-name in 2006, the year al-Akharun appeared in Beirut.
are both unable to surpass their patriarchal cultural tradition, hence they were dismissive of the novel as an exploration of private issues that are not bounded by place or time'.

The back cover of the English version promises the reader a serious, sensational, taboo-breaking, and courageous novel. It deals with the ultimate prohibition: lesbian sex among Saudi women. In this endeavour, the taboo is no longer prohibited but represented in fiction, which as usual is taken to represent a window of opportunity to observe real lives, desires, and struggles within a restrictive society.

All we know about the woman using the name Saba al-Hirz is that she was born in the 1970s in Qatif. She initially posted her writings on Internet discussion boards. In 2006, she published her first novel in Beirut. Like other novelists of her generation, she has used new communication technology to open up fresh avenues for exploration and expression. Al-Hirz’s story focuses on reality with its truths and diversity. Pretending to be a male homosexual at times, and at others a lesbian, the narrator joins discussion groups, learning from members’ private experiences and appropriating them as her own. The Google search engine offers an opportunity to find out more about ‘bisexuals’ and ‘homosexuals’. Such a search gives the heroine headaches, as she encounters opinions that criminalise these sexual acts or make them religiously haram (forbidden).

She soon discovers that Google may not have the solutions that she seeks, but she continues to explore its pages in search of her real self. It offers her the unique opportunity of addressing a man as azizi (dear), a forbidden expression in the reality of her environment. ‘Mr Net’ is a golden opportunity for women to experience reality. Her constant return to the Internet leads her to the realisation that it breaks the isolation of women, and allows them to meet others and establish networks outside the usual family and kin.

The narrator finally learns how to listen to her own body in a society where young women listen to the preaching of their elders. This body is wrapped in shame and embarrassment; she used to refrain from observing it naked in the mirror. On one occasion, we are told that she comes back from school to find a woman waiting for her. She forces her to open her legs and extracts a piece of her flesh. No explanations are given,


46 Saba al-Hirz, al-Akharun, p. 17.
leaving the reader to resort to guesswork. Is this female circumcision? Or is it an act of violence and abuse? Saudi society is not known for the former. The novel’s desire to shock leads to absurd incidents that have no meaning and are not put in context. The centrality of the body leads the author into obscure references. Characters are mentioned once and then dropped without any explanation, for example the narrator’s father, and the brother who leaves home to go to university.

The narrator finally finds a lesbian lover called Dhay through whom she learns to find pleasure. In the confines of the bedroom, they explore their bodies and identify their pleasures, away from a society that condemns them as sinful. Each encounter is immediately followed by the longing for another. The bedroom scenes become repetitive, culminating in boredom for the narrator. The relationship between Dhay and the narrator ends. The search for an alternative partner yields some results, and the reader is introduced to other girls.

The novel moves between the Husayniyya, where Shia women meet and volunteer for social work, college lecture rooms, and the bedroom, where the forbidden body is explored. The narrator is a voluntary worker at the Husayniyya, where piety and propriety are expected. She initially conforms to the expected role, but in secrecy she ventures into forbidden thoughts and actions. She isolates herself in her bedroom, keeping the door locked, to the annoyance of the mother, who demands that her daughter join her for meals and leave her bedroom door open. When she ventures outside her private universe, she is an active Shia woman who contributes to magazines and distributes forbidden Shia religious literature. While her articles are regularly edited and cut to reflect conformity, the narrator rebels and objects. But in the end, the will of the female editor, who guards tradition and values, triumphs over that of the narrator. In college, distributing Shia literature is punished, especially after sectarian conflicts erupt between the students. Again the Internet allows an escape from the vigilant eyes of the security directors. Despite her engagement with the community, the generation gap is clear. She is not interested in the songs and struggles of a previous Qatifi generation. She finds her entertainment in American music, films, and sport on Aramco’s Dhahran Channel. She asserts her individuality against the background of a community engaged in a struggle against its minority status in a country where its identity must remain subdued. The double struggle of the narrator as a lesbian Shia woman is expressed not only against mainstream society but also against her own Shia microcosm. Her battle against both does not leave many options. She is either *tahira* (pure)
or *ahira* (a prostitute). Her single self becomes split between the two. The body has its own pleasures, but her self must remain pure. Hypocrisy means that she has to hide the second aspect of herself, the bodily pleasures. Eventually she abandons her charitable voluntary work and her regular contributions to the literary magazine of her community. She cannot be conformist because she is a destroyer of norms and tradition. She finds pleasures in her rebellion and her body. Adventure is sensational and pleasurable.

The novel ends with a sex scene with Omar who falls asleep immediately after the act. They converse in English to refer to ‘dirty acts’, escaping shame through a linguistic device. The move from homosexuality to bisexuality highlights personal freedom and choices. Surprised at how quickly Omar succumbs to sleep, the heroine muses on a less than satisfactory exploration of sex with men.

*Al-Akharun’s* literary qualities may be rather rudimentary, but the novel remains important for its engagement with religious discrimination and social and religious taboos. Both Shiism and lesbian relations bring out questions about not only minorities but also minorities within minorities in Saudi Arabia. The oppression and controls that are exercised within a minority community, coupled with discrimination from the majority, are important themes highlighted in this novel. Moreover, many liberal Saudi writers consider lesbian relations, which are now openly being discussed in the media, to be a product of religious and social rules that prohibit mixing between the sexes. Those who are in favour of *ikhtilat* in schools and fewer restrictions on male–female encounters in the public sphere consider the ‘surge’ in lesbian relations a function of strict segregation. In their opinion, this leads girls to gravitate towards other girls in schools and universities, in addition to falling in love with women authority figures such as teachers. On the other hand, Islamist and traditional commentators consider lesbian relations in Saudi Arabia a function of the invasion of ‘Western’ values that are corrupting Saudis. A new phenomenon known as *boyat* (boys), in which young girls dress in men’s clothes, have short hair, and exhibit masculine behaviour, has become a recurrent theme touted as symptomatic of the corruption of the nation and the crisis of the youth under excessive consumption, media, and travel abroad. *Al-Akharun* deals with a number of themes that challenge society, its religious establishment, and political control at a time when many Saudis are searching for answers to the many new behavioural patterns they encounter among the young generation.
NEW WOMEN’S LITERATURE: SUBVERSION OR HEROIC RESISTANCE?

Assessing the literature of the new generation of women novelists provides an opportunity to explore the shifting practices and relations of power in Saudi society. These practices are generated by the state and theorised by the guardians of religious nationalism. The appearance of this new literature marks the changing balance of power between the state and the guardians of religious nationalism in favour of the former. This affects women in social and cultural contexts that are not always so different from the traditional contexts of the rest of the Muslim and Arab world. If there is anything unique about Saudi Arabia, it is the long historical association between the state and religion to which women have been central. Throughout the modern history of the nation state, women have been highlighted as a matter of concern not only for the state but also its religious guardians. The two worked together to enforce discrimination that projects the required images and practices of piety and propriety. While secular Arab nation states have, since the 1950s, espoused women and their emancipation as legitimate causes under the rhetoric of national development, the Saudi state declared women in need of protection, welfare, and paternalistic support under the umbrella of Islam. Protecting women, enforcing their modesty, and guarding their honour were state projects from 1932. In recent years, emancipating women, developing them, and promoting them are themes that have replaced the old fixation with the protection, piety, and honour of women. This concern over women was shared with other states in the region, but Saudi Arabia remained within the fold of religious nationalism, unable to free itself from its requirements.

However, it is in the political context after 9/11 that a weakening of the principles of religious nationalism has been deemed necessary to save the regime and improve its image. It is at this specific historical moment that the state switched from its traditional vision to one that specifically highlights the cosmopolitan woman and her contribution to culture,

society, and the economy. Together with a new generation of women entrepreneurs, the promotion of Saudi women novelists during the last decade is a product of this shift in state strategies. Moreover, serious economic measures such as restructuring, privatisation, and liberalisation, and pervasive consumption, advertising, and media expansion all led to the increased incorporation of Saudi women in global markets of commerce and publication. While Saudi Arabia’s men had already been drawn into this global market since the discovery of oil in the 1930s, the new economic changes that were introduced in the late 1990s began to have a dramatic impact on society, urban space, gender relations, and many aspects of social and political life. Violent religious and political trends consolidated their efforts to thwart the Saudi infitah (openness), which brought about dramatic change at the level of the individual, family, and society. Highly educated and well-connected young novelists challenged the image of Saudi Arabia as a hotbed of religious radicalism. Their novels dismiss myths about piety and highlight the quest for the cosmopolitan fantasy that had been nourished by the state and the conditions of the new economy with its excessive consumption and media activities. Women’s literature with its recurrent focus on sexual themes, the struggle of the body, and confrontation with the religious guardians of the Islamic tradition and society reflects the new restructuring of power relations in Saudi society. The state with its new modern development discourse, and society’s immersion in the forces of the new consumption economy that fetishises desire, pleasure, and sexuality, are the new context.

If resistance is narrowly defined as actions that challenge or subvert unequal power relations, then the new literature is neither subversion nor heroic resistance. But if one adopts a wider definition of resistance to include subtle utterances, practices, silences, gestures, and rituals, then the new Saudi novel is without doubt a textual critique of society and religion, with the state remaining beyond criticism. Young women novelists promote individualism at the expense of communal and collective solidarities, identities, and restrictive norms. They celebrate choice rather than conformity. But they remain avid supporters of the regime and unable to see that their exclusion is partly a function of political decisions and partly a function of the political paying lip service to religion. One of the most daring novelists discussed in this chapter, Samar al-Moqrin, launched an attack on those ‘Saudi liberals who criticised the King’s decision to reward the religious establishment for prohibiting demonstrations on 11 March 2011. The religious establishment deserves to be strengthened and rewarded for its position in support of the ruling family and protecting
the country from dissent’. Her frustration with Saudi liberal men, described as hypocritical, pushes her towards endorsing some of the most conservative interpreters of Islam, who have deprived her of basic human rights.

The novels are literary discourses that reflect the new relations of power between state and market on the one hand, and state and religious circles on the other. They demonstrate the power of the state in dictating the new change in gender policy at the expense of that of the religious scholars. Women novelists are not engaged in heroic acts of rebellion, as claimed by the media advertising these novels, or even researchers who have dealt with similar issues in other Muslim countries. The new Saudi novelists celebrate and endorse the powers that both the state and the new economy exert on them, rather than resisting them. Like the state, they consider the guardians of religious nationalism as obstacles to fully engaging with the opportunities that the new state/market offer in terms of cosmopolitan fantasies. This position, which many women have taken in the last decade, is easily reversed, as the position of Samar al-Moqrin in supporting the religious establishment demonstrates. This means that these women novelists are more likely to follow the state’s agenda rather than their own. Moreover, their novels express a disappointment with men as fathers, brothers, husbands, and lovers who fail to live up to the expectation of the cosmopolitan fantasy. The disappointment leads some novelists to explore the true meaning of passion, love, and understanding with other women, thus undermining the myths about Saudi men and their potency, in addition to exposing their hypocrisy.

For a long time, the state, the market, and religious nationalism have privileged men over women. State bureaucracy, surveillance, and resources allow greater sex segregation, leading to strict divisions between men and women, controlling the marriage choices of both but empowering men over women. Men regulate women’s entry into the public sphere and their access to government bureaucracy and new benefits. In addition to state bureaucracy, extreme wealth has led to differential access to traditional support networks. This exaggerates economic inequality between

48 Samar al-Moqrin, ‘al-Lilibaliyun yakhlutun al-habil bi al-nabil’ [Liberals are confused], al-Wiam electronic newspaper, 30 March 2011, available at http://alweeam.com/2011/03/30/%D8%B3...7%D8%A8%D9%84/.

49 For example, Pardis Mahdavi argues that young Iranians use sex as freedom and rebellion. This approach fails to see the wider context in which both the state and the market make sex appear as an act of rebellion whereas in fact it is nothing but an endorsement of the economy of desires. See Mahdavi, Passionate Uprisings.
men and women of the same family. Women novelists capture the new power relations between the genders; their work reflects a quest to be at the centre of the new cosmopolitan fantasies. The newly established shopping centre becomes an arena where groups of young men assert their power through simply roaming, driving, and flirting with women. On the other hand, young Saudi women resort to a sexualised femininity to lure and control men.\textsuperscript{50} Both the state and the religious police strive to control these new spaces.

Grounded in an analysis of the power of the state, market, and religion, this chapter has shown how this gender contest, which is above all played out under state control, unfolds in contemporary Saudi women’s literature and society. The sexualised femininity that is fetishised in the new consumer economy has infiltrated literature, as this chapter has demonstrated. Resistance through either violent or non-violent action may be too narrow to explain the new phenomenon of Saudi ‘Chick Lit’. It is perhaps better to imagine a continuum of resistance. Saudi women are stretching the boundaries with their words and deeds, partly in response to state and market forces and partly in response to their quest for freedom, individuality, and choice, all a product of the country’s immersion in late modernity.

\textsuperscript{50} In this respect, Saudi women share the obsession with sexualised femininity of their counterparts among Awlad Ali, studied by Lila Abu-Lughod. See Abu-Lughod, ‘The Romance of Resistance’.