

**Digging Up of the Forbidden and Disclosure of the Hidden: A Dominant Presence or Rockets That Penetrate the Walls of Reality Thorough the Narrative World? A Reading in the Literature of the Sa'ūdi Women Writers *Banāt Al-Riyāḍ* by Rajā' Al-Ṣāni' as a Sample**



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**ABSTRACT:** The literary movement in the Gulf remained for several decades without feminist creativity till the end of the twentieth century nearly, when a lot of cultural, educational, and intellectual changes and the social transformations were devoted to raising the social awareness of the significance of acknowledgment of the women as a free creative entity.

Probably the reasons for the delay in the appearance of the play and short story that are written by the Gulf woman in general, compared to their Arab counterparts in Egypt, Syria, and Morocco are attributed to the conservative culture. It deserves mentioning, too, that despite the 'fear from the other', the contemporary Sa'ūdi novel witnesses a big noticeable boom that is represented in the plethora of the novel output and diversity of the directions of the women writers and their schools.

The Sa'ūdi woman's novel managed to break the prevailing traditional look of the Sa'ūdi society about the woman when the Sa'ūdi woman found a good outlet in the novel, and consequently, the novel was formulated as a broad and baggy literary system for the Sa'ūdi woman. The Internet also had a strong impact on the emergence of the voice of the Sa'ūdi female. Therefore, the novels that appeared varied between boldness and balance, and between what is considered a scandalous excess that can be called 'release' or 'venting out pressure' or 'de-frustration' (*fadfada*).

The Sa'ūdi women writers are interested in introducing the issues of the woman in a realistic way through their works through which these women writers take confident steps, and thus, they started introducing distinguished works that are received with Arab, regional and international welcome. One of these writers is Rajā' al-Ṣāni', whose novel *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* is dealt with in this study as a representative sample of the bold novels.

**KEY WORDS:** epic and history, moral research and Sufism, collective concerns, hijab, the Self and the Other, the spatial and temporal context, the cultural and social context.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Literature plays a significant role, not only as an aesthetic element or an observer of the social and intellectual reality of society from where it stems, but as an effective power that is able to move the constants and the for granted things, reveal the concerns of society, and cause a deep shock, after which it would be impossible for the social reality to remain merely a stable condition, and this is the main point.

In his book, *Tarikh al-Riwaya al-Haditha* (History of the Modern Novel), the literary critic Alperis commends the amazing possibilities of the art of the novel, and demands that novel writers should express the concerns, secrets and responsibilities that were the subjects of the epic, history, moral quest, and Sufism as a part of it. Tāha Wādi also points out that the novel, from the social side, and due to the capacity of its diversity, represents the tool of the literary communication among the discrepant crowds. He also claims that the novel has become inclined to be the poetry that has no order, no rhythm or meter in it, but some people call it "the prose poetry".

Critics have shown interest in the woman as the Arab novels introduce her because a lot of reformers and politicians noticed at an early period the effect of the woman's awareness, her education and liberation from all kinds of deprivation and rights on society and its development.

Hence, Qassem Amin was conscious when he asserted that the emancipation of women is not just a humanitarian requirement, but essential for national and patriotic progress. He said: "There's a way to get you out of the bad condition that you're complaining about and raise you up to the top ranks of civilization as you crave: free your women from the constraints of ignorance

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and veils"<sup>1</sup>. Dr. Sammy al Ḡarīdi makes a distinction between the movement of literature and its mobility. He says: "We have to distinguish between movement and mobility, which is revealed by the nature of the meaning in language, as well as by the cultural and literary consequences of women's goals in the service of their literature and intellectual particularity. The movement requires a deep-seated activity based on great ends that go beyond literature and society. There are only divergent individual cases of jurisprudence that are far apart in their feminist decisions and inconsistent in the features of their written content."<sup>2</sup>

The Sa'ūdi woman's novel began in the 1960s, with the beginning of formal education for girls with Samira Khashoggi (1935 –1986), as individual experiences till the beginning of the third millennium, and then the rocket launch of Sa'ūdi feminist literature started. Some of the titles written in the Gulf became the leading sales that spread very quickly. It is perhaps the technological boom and social reforms that have raised society's awareness of the importance of empowering the woman to be true partners in society's development.

The Sa'ūdi woman's narrative movement has been booming since the 1990s, at several levels. New names emerged in the world of storytelling and fiction for the first time, some of which sought to express social and subjective problems and concerns, and some seemed to want to catch up with the novelist caravan, especially as the novel became a very popular phenomenon.

Beginning in 2003, many novels started flowing into an unprecedented phenomenon in Sa'ūdi Arabia and even in the Arab world (20 to 25 novels per year)<sup>3</sup>. It is possible to consider the book of Asma' bint Muqbil bin Awad al-Ahmadi, "*Ishkaliyyat al-Dat al-Sareda fīal-Riwaya al-Nisa'iyya al-Sa'ūdiyya (1999-2012): Dirasa Naqdiyya/ "The Problems of the Narrating Self in the Sa'ūdi Women's Novel (1999-2012), a Critical Study,"* as evidence to the rise and prosperity of the women's novel and the many difficulties it faces at the literary, artistic and social levels, as al-Ahmadi determines that the novel deals with the Self and the Other from two perspectives: the first is psychological and the other is social. The novel carries a social collective concern that is colored by and mixed with different experiences. She also states that the Sa'ūdi woman's novel came to break the stereotype of the woman, and for the woman to get herself out of silence and move to action and influence.

The novel also focuses on the relationship between the woman and the other in society, and to emphasize that woman's writing still often adopts the *third person singular pronoun*, which reflects her inability to get rid of the fear-complex that prevents the woman from making herself a Self that has a 'pronoun' that speaks for her. In this case, the other becomes a subject of concern for her, which restrains her and limits her giving to this day<sup>4</sup>.

Asmā' al-Ahmadi finds that the women's novel serves as a record of human suffering, particularly the woman's suffering, and her study is intended to highlight the novel in the Sa'ūdi society today, especially that the novel has become the most appropriate art for the woman, and the closest to presenting her problems and issues as it is the most effective text in highlighting the woman's role and voice.

Ahmadi also clarifies the choice of her study to be between 1999 and 2012, which says that the Sa'ūdi woman's novel flourished in this particular period. At the beginning of the book, she points out that she chose to study this period because it constituted a breakthrough, to some extent, in the women's novel, which was formulated and appeared in an accelerated way.

She also says that it is not possible to talk about a woman's novel in Sa'ūdi Arabia without talking about the status of the woman in society and the field of culture, and her contribution to both and her relationship with the man in both fields, because the woman's access to writing means that she has begun to think with an open vision onto the world, a vision that gets her out of the role of the victim to a role that commensurate with her great biological role of that is characterized by her ability to give. This role is precisely the one for which writing and reading novels prepares.

al-Ahmadi asks: Can the woman write a novel that is disconnected from her crisis with the man? Can the woman absorb the surrounding masculine society and transform its tyranny into and intellectual, cultural and artistic authority<sup>5</sup>. She asks very important questions about the identity of the woman in society: Does the woman have her private identity? And does her identity differ from that of the man? Or does her identity branch from that of the man?

Then she deals at length with the role of the intellectual person in society. In her view, the intellectual himself no longer represents a firm identity and asks: What's the role of an educated woman? And does her role in society differ from that of an educated man?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Amin, Qassem (1899). *Tahrir al-Mar'ah*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cairo. P.58.

<sup>2</sup> al- Ḡarīdi, Sammy (2008). *al-Riwaya al-Nis' aiya al-Su'ūdīyah- Kitāb al-Mar'ah wa Tashkil al-Sard*. Beirut: Mu'asasat al-Intishar al-'Arabi, p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> al-Ahmadi, Asmā' Miqbil 'Awad (n.d.). *Ishkaliyyat al-Lghat al-Sarida fi al-Riwaya al-Nisa' iya al-Suodiya (1999-2012). Dirasa Naqdiyya*. Beirut: al-Dar al-'Arabiya li al-'Ulūm-Nashirun wa Nadi Jazan al-Adabi, p. 118.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 125, 147.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 67, 85, 87.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

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Critics have grown increasingly interested in Sa'ūdi feminist novels in recent years, focusing mainly on the analysis of the woman's narrative discourse as a narrative method used by most women writers to express themselves. Such literary pieces seem to give their writers a way out and an outlet that keeps her away from the tyranny of the masculine society that surrounds her and controls her life.

Thus, some of the women's writings reflect very clearly their view of the man in their societies and their urgent desire to change their conditions and status in society by revealing the complexities of their relationship with men.

However, the critics' interest has only been focused on studying the products of men Sa'ūdi writers, but not the women's writers, in poetry and prose in the past few years, even though some critical studies have emerged that examine aspects of Sa'ūdi women's writers writings in a casual way, as a result of the critics' immature view of women's literature at the time, which has led them to see that the woman's literature has not yet matured<sup>7</sup>.

Hassan al-Manasera says that the presence of the woman in the Sa'ūdi novel, whether as a writer or the person written about is considered a remarkable and an achievement. The woman's presence in the narrative work transcends somewhat her presence in real life.

However, Lamyā' Ba'shen, a Sa'ūdi critic, has some reservations about making the woman a central issue at the heart of the novel in general and the Sa'ūdi novel in particular and sees this as a reduction of the value of the novel. She says: The novel is not a social document written only to explain social situations and provide solutions to the problems of individuals in society; it is an art that has origins and rules that concern the critic more than the subjects that it addresses.

She also does not believe in the existence of women's and men's literature, but there is a serious literature and a naive literature. The woman and the man are both capable of producing poor texts and good ones. Malak al-Khalidi, a Sa'ūdi poetess, asserts that Sa'ūdi woman's literature is as creative as that of any woman's literature in any other Arab country.

She adds that Sa'ūdi novel had a particular interest in the woman, but this interest was first initiated by Sa'ūdi men novelists, and the reason for this is the male novelist's ability to raise some of the women's issues, but ultimately, the Sa'ūdi female creator took part in the presentation.

She says: The themes of creative women are consistent with their struggle against social ignorance, such as their talk about the bossy or the traitor man, the unjust society and lost emotion. She also says that the Sa'ūdi woman have found a good breathing space in the novel, as the novel has a broad margin that has room for everyone. The Internet has had a great impact on the voice of the Sa'ūdi female. Therefore, the novels came out and varied between serious, bold, balanced, and excessively scandalous that can be considered a kind of release venting out, or de-frustration ((*faḍfaḍa*)).<sup>8</sup>

In my opinion, this quantitative and qualitative acceleration of Sa'ūdi literature has not yet reached the point where women are incited to truly fight for change and support for a human being who is marginalized by enormous traditions of a society that does not want to recognize change. Therefore, such a battle would be a major revolution within society as a whole and not just against one side.

The woman is the first weapon of war, and she is the first victim on which all taboos must fall. We may not be untrue if we say that the form of this quantitative and qualitative acceleration of Sa'ūdi literature is a state of reaction to what surrounds her, especially that the impact of collective discourse on people's consciousness is much more than all literary works that can be produced, since religious discourse hunts every work that is out of context, to be publicly accused that its writer, whether male or female, is a heretic, atheists, disbeliever and other descriptions that incite society to fight him or her.

And that is what happened, in my view, to Rajā' al-Ṣāni' in her novel "*Banāt al-Riyāḍ Girls of Riyāḍ*," who deeply dived in the taboo of Sa'ūdi society, which is based mainly on sexual relationships between the characters of the novel, young men and women, but at the same time, this may also explain the unprecedented readability of the novel, being one of the most daring novels whose writer has dared to do what other writers has not dared during their writing career.

## 2. THE STUDY

For many years, many names have shone in the field of women's literature in Sa'ūdi Arabia. Between the short story, the novel, the critique, the very short story, or the flash story, the woman revealed the hidden secrets of her soul, and the Sa'ūdi women writers

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<sup>7</sup> 'Abd al-'Azim, Reem Yahya (2017). "Surat al-Rajul fi Riwayat al-Katiba Athir 'Abdullah al-Nashmi-Dirasa Tahliyya". Thesis for the M.A. Degree. Department of Literary Studies at Faculty of Sciences at Minya University.

<sup>8</sup> *al-Sharq al-Awsat Newspaper*, on 6/2/2011.

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soon took the lead in the cultural landscape in the kingdom and shared the man. Although many critics have rejected the term "women's literature", the Sa'ūdi woman-writer has been able to compete with men writers through works that have been very successful among the audience of critics and followers. She was able to put forward her own ideas and even exceeded them by using many aesthetic and artistic tools, which made her present in the cultural environment.

### **2.1 Questions of the Study**

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the reason for this attack on Rajā' al-Ṣāni', author of the novel, *Banāt al-Riyāḍ / Girls of Riyāḍ*?
2. Does the creator have to put his memory and creative imagination in the social balance before he releases his creative work in order to be acceptable?
3. Would the treatment of this literary work be different if Rajā' al-Ṣāni' chose a different title to her novel *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*?
4. How does the Arab Woman look from the window of the Sa'ūdi novel onto the reader?
5. Does the Sa'ūdi female writer approach writing about the forbidden and breaking taboos? How is that approach revealed? And did this have an impact on her literary production? What are her writing types and patterns?
6. To what extent did the novels written by Sa'ūdi women novelists contribute to establishing the self-presence of women in the novelistic scene?

The woman is considered an essential, urgent and powerful part of literary discourse. Sa'ūdi women's novels are numerous, but the woman is still struggling to push her level of participation in public life. Regardless of how and what the aim of the treatment is, which is reflected in the author's awareness of the presence of the woman's writer in the general landscape of life in Sa'ūdi society, the most important question remains this: *To what extent does the flow of literary works that deal with the woman contribute to proving her presence in the public life of Sa'ūdi society?*

### **1.2 The Objectives of the Study:**

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. **Knowledge** of forms, causes, and effects of the woman's identity crisis in the study novel here.
2. **Revelation** of the hidden in the literature of the Sa'ūdi writer and discovering the manifestations and types of her writing
3. **Knowledge** of the political, psychological and social indications and their influence on the formulation of the work of the Sa'ūdi writer.
4. **Contribution** to the image and writing format of the Arab woman writer in modern Arabic feminist literature, in order to complete the picture that is preserved in the reader's mentality, starting from the point that Sa'ūdi literature is one of the links of modern Arabic literature.

## **3. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY**

This study adopts the analytical descriptive approach, which tries to access the artistry of the narrative text and to determine its aesthetics through the mechanisms of that approach analytically, and to monitor the varied artistic features through collecting some texts that are quoted from the novel *Banāt al-Riyāḍ/ Girls of Riyāḍ*.

## **4. THE NOVEL**

The Arab woman entered the world of contemporary Arab novel and has outperformed men in many novels, which promises the appearance of Arab novels and novelists who will leave their mark on the history of the Arab novel, especially when some of them will be able to raise the interest of the intellectuals in their first work though they have not finished their second decade, as is the case with Rajā' ' Abdullah al-Ṣāni' in the novel " *Banāt al-Riyāḍ/ Girls of Riyāḍ*," which was published in its first edition in 2005, by al-Saqi Publishing House, and which came out in 319 pages of medium size.

The writer of the novel is a Sa'ūdi young lady, called Rajā' al-Ṣāni', who comes from a conservative Sa'ūdi family. The writer was only 22 years old when she published the novel. She is a graduate from the Faculty of Dentistry at University of King Saud. It took her six years to write the novel, which she started in her first academic year.

The novel evoked outrage, reactions and different comments from readers, especially because the closed Sa'ūdi regime, is exposed in the novel as a baseless, poorly constructed society, for its practices of a series of large prohibitions, which brings more problems and challenges, but the novel has gained praise by others for its realism.

The most important thing that this novel gave is its presentation of important questions about an absent conscience in the life of a society that grieves the woman. The presentation of questions was not artificial or coming from abroad, but from the middle of her conscience that is aware of its circumstances. The novel introduced it as it is in its two world, the physical and spiritual worlds so that the readers wake up to see unknown areas that live close to them but is less known to them.

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## 4.1 Title of the Novel

The title of a book is like the name of a poem, which is known by it and by which the book circulates and is thus considered a written necessity<sup>9</sup>. The title also depicts the identity of the author and guides the reader to predict the text contained therein, thus becoming the reflecting mirror that reflects its author. The main title is considered to be a text threshold that lights up text the ambiguities, decodes it and its symbols, but the subtitle is an extension to the main title<sup>10</sup>. Our talk in our study here is only about the main title.

The author quotes the title of her novel from a song by the artist Abdel Majid Abdullah, " **O Girls of Riyāḍ!**" By looking at the title of the novel, *Banāt al-Riyāḍ/ Girls of Riyāḍ*, it refers us to a city that is inhabited by a female species. All of this results from the robbing of the importance and status of the woman in society, on the one hand, and, on the other, it is considered a feminist rejection of the male dominance and the beginning of a triumph of the woman's cultural mobility. The novelist's desire for revelation and exposure increases when the novel is only the orphan's path to the kingdoms of freedom, which makes women in the novel more rebellious than men, because it goes to the script, to exercise her lost freedom<sup>11</sup>.

Thus, the declared cultural pattern that the title carries points out clearly a text that talks about a specific group in *Riyāḍ*, and in contrast to that, the explanation and interpretation come to strip the declared implied pattern that hides in its inside the dominance of the culture, the centrality of the man, and marginalization of the woman.

So, the writer is smart at choosing the name of her novel, *Girls of Riyāḍ*, as it is an attractive, catchy title that raises the curiosity of the reader and strongly invites him to become acquainted and discover the depths of a closed society, as long as he heard about it, imagined it, and longed to get into it, and reveal its secrets, especially the world of women in it due to the excitement, attraction, and charm that the presence of the woman has. This title attracted the reader but it caused outrage and disapproval of the objectors and made them deny responsibility for it and demanded that the writer should apologize to them.

The writer chose the title of *Banāt al-Riyāḍ/ Girls of Riyāḍ* as a nominal sentence without a predicate and left it for the reader to guess the predicate which can be related to the term "Banat/ Girls" specifically and the ambiguity that it bears and secrets that are associated with the "bint/ girl" in different social Arab sectors. What would happen if the word "girl/ bint" is defined by a predicate and by the area, namely, *al-Riyāḍ*? It seems that the writer intended to arouse the reader and storm his thought and suspense in order to make him like to enter the content of the novel enthusiastically as if she were creating a suitable environment to pose two questions: What is the secret of these girls? And what distinguishes the girls of Riyāḍ specifically?

## 4.2 The Cover of the Book

There is some consistency between the cover and the title. The larger area of the cover is occupied by the sky blue, the color of the sky, the sea, the space of freedom, movement, life, where rest and tranquility, which are inconsistent with the black color (name or title of the novel), where mystery, silence, night and secrets. So, what would it look like if the black color of sheets wraps a number of women who only show their faces or eyes?

The reader may, therefore, have an important question: What are these women hiding behind this black cover, especially when he sees three different types of males beside the pictures of the women, and thus the operation of connecting between them starts!

## 4.3 Dedication

The dedication of the novel consists of eight words in three lines. The writer starts it by choosing the narrowest and dearest circle (my two eyes) when she introduces her dearest body part to dedicate her work to it. Then she drops on it her most important member of the family, starting with the most important: The Mother, and then gradually moves to the 'sister' and all her friends. If this demonstrates anything, it demonstrates the importance of the subject on which the author is engaged.

## 4.4 Welcome and Preparation

The writer prepares for the novel by welcoming the readers to the list of *Sirih wa Infadahat/A Story That Is Exposed*. She chose the term "infadahat/ is exposed" because she is aware of the mentality of the Oriental Arab society, which tends in their nature to deal

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<sup>9</sup> al-Jazzār, Moḥammad Fikri (1988). *al-'Unwan wa al-Simiotica, al-Ittiṣal al-Adabi*. Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Misriyya li al-Kitab. 'Ālam al-Kutub al-Ḥadith, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> Shaqroush, Shadya (1994). *Simya' iyyat al-Kitāb al-Shi'ri fi Diwan Maqām al-Bawḥ li al-Shi'i 'Abdallah*. Cairo: 'Ālam al-Kutub al-Ḥadith, p. 31

<sup>11</sup> Abu Niḍal, Nazih (2004). *Tamarrud al-'Untha*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Beirut. al-Mu'asasah al-'Arabiyya li al-Dirasat wa al-Nashr, p. 26.



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with secrets and scandals through their daily coexistence with reality. By doing this, the writer amplifies the reader's suspense and prompts him to be able to read her novel.

### 4.5 The Story and Idea of the Novel

Stylistically, the novel imitates the language of the age, namely, the Internet Age. It consists of 50 messages that are spread on the Email network. She started sending them on 13.2.2004 and ended on 11.2.2005. She stopped sending messages during Ramadan month and resumed sending them after it passes. The Time of the novel consists of 50 email messages throughout a year, but the time of the stories covers six previous years.

Rajā' al-Ṣāni' makes debates with virtual readers. She starts her fifty messages weekly, in which she replies to her readers who refuse her project, and threatens them with more scandals with various editorials, which, in my view, can be a subject of research study. The opening editorials are: Seven Verses from the Koran; Four Ḥadiths from Various Sources, (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhari, Sunan Ibn Maja, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim); Four Poetic Passages from Nizar Qabbani, and Three from Jubran Khalil Jubran. She varies the sources of the sayings of classical philosophers (Socrates and Aristotle), the Modern ones (Tagur and Bernard Shaw), and Arab and Western Writers (Tawfiq al-Hakim, Oscar Wilde, Balzac, Victor Hugo), the poets (T. S. Eliott, Ibrahim Najī, Bader Abd al-Muhsin), Cinema stars (Mahmoud al-Meliji), politicians, Roosevelt), without forgetting some common sayings and calls, and contemporary female Arab singers (Dhikra, Julia Butrus), in addition to critics and thinkers from different nationalities, as if she sought by that to collect witnesses from everyone on the condition of the Sa'ūdi woman, or probably she sought to satisfy the tastes of all her readers.

In my opinion, Rajā' al-Ṣāni' knows she is the daughter of the environment that she writes about in her novel, and knows that she will face major problems, especially when her discourse reaches after publishing her novel, but still she insists on publishing it so that her discourse on revelation of the hidden and the secret relations will reach. We see her say clearly that she has reached the position of the black American bishop Martin Luther King, who faced race discrimination in his society: "I might face difficulties now, as Luther had faced...but he did not say it is impossible to reform this world; and now he is remembered as one hero of the heroes of this century after he was treated as a criminal in his life; I might find few people who believe in my case now, and I might not, but I doubt to find a lot of objectors after a century from now"<sup>12</sup>.

The novel tells on Mwa's tongue, the owner of the Website *Sirih wa Infadahat/A Story That Is Exposed*, the stories of four of her friends are from *Girls of Riyad*, who are Sa'ūdi young girls from the affluent class. The girls are connected in a relationship of friendship and revelation of secrets, who are called: Qamarah, Lamis, Sadīm, Masha'il (Michelle): "I preferred to divert a little in the events and change a lot of the names, in order to protect our 'salt and bread' in a way that does not contradict the truth of the novel or soften the bitterness of the truth"<sup>13</sup> in addition to Um Nuwer, whose house was the meeting place of the four girls and the scene of uncovering their secrets and planning how to face the coming developments.

The four friends found in Um Nuwer, who was marginalized by society because of her deviation, what they could not find in their families. Um Nuwer was their secret keeper, and shared them their thoughts and found solutions if one of them had a problem. She was very entertained by their presence, and her house was always the most convenient place to exercise the freedom they could not exercise in any of their houses. They are four young women who challenge Sa'ūdi Arabia's strict social and sexual restrictions. According to state laws, women have to cover all parts of their bodies and be accompanied by forbidden men (mahram) in public places. We read in the novel that two of the four characters hide in men's clothes.

"Masha'il wears pants full of pockets and a large coat covering her entire body, covering any sign of femininity," and adds: "Lamis, however, wears a traditional white robe (smock/ jilbab) and a headband ('iqal) on her head. Her height and athletic body gave her appearance of a handsome young man"<sup>14</sup>.

The novel tells the story of each of them in her emotional life and what each one has suffered in her relations with the man in a closed society. Each of them was a victim of a conservative society that rejected her right to meet and associate with a man and even denied her any love relationship with him. Each of them is the victim of a man who sees in the woman only a follower who does whatever he asks of her. This is a man who rejects the woman if she is equal with him in education and knowledge, which prompted Sadīm to wonder: "Is the woman's education - including theoretical science and life experiences - a blessing or a curse?"<sup>15</sup>

They try to revolt against their society by circumventing their taboos in various ways, but clash with the man's fossilized mentality, which is unable to develop and urbanize itself, and which treats the woman with the mentality of parents and grandparents.

<sup>12</sup>al-Ṣāni', Rajā' 'Abdulla (2006). *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Beirut: Dar al-Saqi, p. 113.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 50

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

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Therefore, their life stories are similar in what they encountered and suffered, which shows a resemblance in the rigid masculine character, and mentality of the men with whom they had an affair that caused their tragedy.

Therefore, the novel tries to dig into a reality full of contradictions and uncover the masks of a society she described as "the sick society" in which young people suffer from limitations that restrict their freedom, and where the dream of intermingling between the two sexes is a big dream for many students of the two sexes. So, the house of Um Nuwer constitutes, as said before, the only safe and breathing place for the heroines of the novel.

In my opinion, the novel has a confrontational force as the reader used to read in the introduction of the novels an apology by the writer, if there is a coincidental similarity between the heroes of his or her story and the events in reality. He or she does that to protect himself or herself from accountability and litigation in the courts. But Rajā' al-Ṣāni' confirms "any similarity between the protagonists and the events of the novel and reality is an intentional similarity"<sup>16</sup>.

Rajā' al-Ṣāni' also declares in the novel her position and willingness to begin by recounting, telling and exposing hidden scandals, and why it took her so long to expose them, as if she were preparing to leak a dangerous secret of the State, which shows that she is willing to stand up on her own and face: "I messed up my hair, smeared my lips with blunt red, and beside me, there was a dish with lemon - and - chatter potato chips. Everything was ready for the first scandal"<sup>17</sup>. She chooses the name "A Story That is Exposed" to the Website where she publishes what she considered "scandals of the Sa'ūdi society," and asks her readers to be ready to hear "the biggest scandals and the loudest youth parties."

She clarifies herself in order to prevent misunderstanding: "You're on a date with the biggest local scandals... Mwa is speaking to you, and she is taking you into a world that is closer to you than you can imagine. It is a reality that we live but we don't live in, we believe what we like to believe, and disbelieve the rest"<sup>18</sup> and consequently, the reader's expectations increase, even if it seemed to many non-Sa'ūdi readers that what she tells in her letters is not scandalous, but just ordinary news of some young people, such as news of events that harder and more dangerous events can happen in other countries around the world but are not called scandals. For example, if a fiancé abandons his fiancée, or a young man chooses his life partner in response to the wishes of his family are considered normal, but when it comes to Sa'ūdi Arabia, the reader knows why such problems among young people are considered so scandalous.

In my opinion, the novel *Girls of Riyāḍ* has come to break down taboos in the conservative Sa'ūdi society. It speaks openly about sex, lesbianism, and young women seeking a freer life: "Everyone is surprised about my boldness in writing and blames me for raising the "taboo" subjects that we are not accustomed to discussing in our society so openly, especially by a little girl like me"<sup>19</sup>. And we read: "The famous coffee shop on Dessert Street was the first stop at which they stopped, and from the shaded glass, the young men realized with their insight that at X5 there was a precious catch, and therefore, they surrounded the car from all sides... at the entrance to the market, the girls got off, followed by a large group of young men..."<sup>20</sup>.

The Narrator starts her first meeting with the reader by quoting Surat al-Ra'd (Thunder) from the Koran as if she wanted to give her speech more credibility in a closed conservative society. She plays on some delicate strings, which is likely to have a stronger and deeper impact. She begins her first message by quoting God's saying: "God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves (Surat al-Ra'd/ Thunder 11)"<sup>21</sup>. In my opinion, she does that in order to alert human beings to the significance of being ready to accept changes and open onto the Other and the wide world with all its concepts.

She chooses Friday to send her messages to her readers, expecting the Koran and Friday speech will have an effect on a society that built around itself a strong religious wall, but despite her knowledge of her society's enclosure and the difficulty of its acceptance to change, and the impossibility to reveal everything in the soul, in reality, she chooses the Virtual World as a field of talking and space for moving the characters and addressing the readers with issues that belong to high classes and a mentality of their male young men, who do not appreciate the responsibility that is on their shoulders, so which responsibility can be given to a young man who is unable to choose a life partner? How can he be held responsible for running an institution or managing a life when he's unable to take responsibility for his own choices?

She chooses a poem by Nizar Qabani, in which he describes the sad reality of an Arab girl, as her entry point to the tales of her friends, whom she describes as living now under the "shadow of a man", or "a man who is like a wall"<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> *The Holy Koran: Surat al-Ra'd*. Verse N0. 11.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.10.

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### 4.6 Structure of the Novel

The structure of the novel consists of three spaces: **The first space**, in which the author revolves with semi-static emotional movements built with the audience of readers and followers of emails. This space turns into an orbit between reality and imagination, generating an internal monologue, and sometimes a dialogue with the imagined reader.

**The second space** represents the narration of the omniscient narrator who knows the real events. We read the recounting narrator, who takes good care not to slip in, share in the events, or reveal their identity, especially in the light of the pressure of the followers to reveal her identity, or even to express her opinion on the characters whom she introduces.

**The third space** is represented in the dialogue that takes place between the heroes of the novel within the frame of the fifty email messages. Each message is introduced by a title, a date and a subject of the message, followed by a quote from a poet, a writer, a philosopher, or a verse from the Koran, which is sometimes followed by a comment by the Narrator or one of the readers, which is followed by the message.

In my opinion, there is no defect in the structure of the novel. The novel is coherent dramatically from the point of view of the roles of the characters. There is a dominant authority of a single narrator who recounts from one point of view and one voice tales of her four girlfriends: "I see nothing wrong if I list the flaws of my girlfriends in my letters for the benefit of others who have not had the opportunity to learn at the school of life, the school that my girlfriends have entered from the widest of its doors: The Door of Love!"<sup>23</sup>

We don't read in the lines of Rajā' al-Ṣāni' a fictional craziness, but lines that reflect reality as it is, as someone who see himself in the mirror, whatever the flaws and advantages are. All that she did was that she boldly drew the curtain from a velvet world that is known only to the one who he belongs to it: "After years of striving for perfection that does not suit a man like Firas except him, Firas kicked her perfection with his foot and turned to the ordinary one"<sup>24</sup>.

The narrator reveals herself to be pulling out very quickly, leaving her traces as emails to tell the secret of those around her, and then she reveals to us that the names of the heroines are fake, despite the truth about their stories: "What makes me write about them if I don't believe in them? I am every one of my friends, and my story is their stories, and if I have absented from disclosing my identity at the moment for special reasons, I might reveal it one day when these reasons go away, and then I will tell you my whole story, as you are eager to hear, honestly and transparently"<sup>25</sup>.

The novel *Girls of Riyāḍ* is a single narrative line, with stories of a dual society, in which the exposed side is more hidden and the hidden side is more visible. All of these stories seek unevenly to address the issue of the woman out of known and repeated subjects such as infidelity, male intransigence and sexual intensification. Side by side, other extremely daring subjects appear such as lesbianism, as these subjects are treated with uncommon boldness in Sa'ūdi literature, as if we were faced with a "tsunami" in the face of what is happening today in the Sa'ūdi novel<sup>26</sup>.

### 4.7 The Main Subjects of the Novel

The novel deals with several subjects:

#### 1. Place

The novel focuses on two types of 'space'. The *first* is the place in which the events of the narrative take place, which lasted for a year in Riyāḍ, starting from the character's home in front of the computer screen. The *second* is the place into which the events of the novel took place and lasted for six years between Riyāḍ, Jedda, Najd, London and England in general.

#### 2. The Nowhere Place

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 236.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.140.

<sup>26</sup> Sa'ūdi writers started writing about sexual deviation such as Tariq bin Bandar al-'Utaybi in his first novel *Shabab min al-Riyad* (2006), in which he tried to follow *Banat al-Riya d/ Girls of Riyāḍ*, journalist Hani Naqshbandi in his first novel *Ikhtilās* (2006) and playwright Ibrahim Badi in "*Hub fi al- Sa'ūdiyya*" (2007); Fayzah Ibrahim in *Banat min al-Riyāḍ* (2006) and *Sa'ūdiyyat* by Sarah al-'Aliwi (2006); Miriam al-Hassan in *Fatat al-Sharqiyya* (2006). We notice that the majority of these texts focus on the "local place", which raises the question of inserting the name of "*al- Riyāḍ*" on the covers of the novels, as if the experience of Raja al-Sani in her novel *Banat al-Riyāḍ* established "the first domino stone" so that the next stones start appearing after it.



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The **Nowhere Place** is the main focus in the novel and it is the computer screen, which is the hero of the text. It is a traitor mass that belongs to the Internet buttons that wait for its movement. After each message, the place expands to generate other places, which are the depths of the girls and their ability to transcend their 'fear'. This remarkable transcendence, which is considered a basic focal point for dealing with everything that is inherited, which made a fuss in the social environment before other things, which showed the split and gap between two generations, as we clearly in the novel: one generation said that it was an outgrowth of social privacy and the writer has to disown her work, and another generation that celebrated it, and between these two generations, there is an important paradox that originates from the truthfulness of vision and crossing to the future without intense conflicts.

In my opinion, the common familiar place in the narrative text was abolished to the advantage of the virtual place, which started to infiltrate to the life of people in a remarkable way, and became part of their life, transcending those places with all their ancient types (street, café', factory, field, sea, home, school, university,...) to the advantage of summarized places such as the computer screen, which started to move very dangerous places especially among the new generation, who started to advance and all the wall of time and place started to fall down without planning to it; exactly as the writer did, who found herself one of the holders of a hammer that demolished what was, but she did not mean to demolish exactly, but the thing that was called her to do so.

So, the authority of the place as an architectural space in this work seems to be absent, but its dominance emerges strongly through the space of human relations. The place here imposes its presence as a social rather than an architectural space, and constitutes the first force to control the fates of the characters, and it did not appear in its architectural space, but it gains its existence through its human presence and the type of social relationships and what the traditions and customs impose with all their weight and dominance.

### 3. Time

The most important feature that characterizes Time in the novel *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* is the "overlap of the narrative time"; the *time* of writing the novel and the *narrative time* of the events. The time of writing the novel is controlled by the writer of the novel, who is the hero who controls it and lasted for a whole year, as she pointed to it at the end of the novel: "I admit to indulging in my girlfriends' story for a whole year..."<sup>27</sup>

And she was not a neutral writer in it. On the contrary, she expressed a lot of her views on the characters, the events and the attitudes that she interacted with, and with the *narrative time of the events* of the story, which lasted almost six years: "The story, which began almost six years ago, is coming to this day, and by that, the end of my emails has come"<sup>28</sup>. The writer was neutral in the events and characters of that time.

It should be noted here it is the author who determines the place and time at which she will meet her reader, and he can only just accept, and if he is satisfied with her conditions, he commits to sit in front of the computer screen and follow through her website, which she had set for him at the time she chose from Friday every week, and thus, she deprives the recipient of his freedom to choose where to read or when to read, and so, she also identifies the audience of her readers, who own the computer and know how to handle it.

In other words, her readers consist of the educated audience who belong to the above - middle class and the rich, the people of her class and the class of the heroines of her novel, which means that the stories and biographies that we will follow are limited to the people of this class and depict their lives but do not give us a full picture of all Sa'ūdi society in Riyāḍ, especially its poor and marginalized classes, which tells about the vast difference between the rich society of expenditure, and society of poverty and misery there.

### 4. The Social Issues

The writer deals with the issue of the *social bottom*, and several social issues that are based on inherited customs and traditions that negatively affected the Arab woman in particular, and the oriental Arab families in general including:

#### a. The Obsession of Commitment and Fear of Spinsterhood.

One of the common traditions is the mothers' and experienced women's invitation of girls at the age of getting married to adopt the behavior of pretending to be what they are not! This is expressed in the manner of eating and drinking, talking, and walking in order to succeed in getting a groom after getting his mother's consent, and ultimately, guaranteeing the future submission of the bride to her mother-in-law's rules and blind obedience to the husband, and thus, her personality is abolished, and she becomes a

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 312.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 308

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mirror to the other and not to her reality: "Don't become easy..." Abstention and reluctance is the secret of the man's lust. Her eldest sister Nafla, did not give in herself to her husband until the fourth night, and like her, her sister Ḥassa did"<sup>29</sup>.

After guaranteeing the groom, the girl behaves according to her nature, and thus, clashes take place and lead to problems that bring tragedies to her life: "The policy of "Yalla Yalla", (Little by Little, Slowly! Slowly!), which means "hardly, hardly!" is the best way in our conservative society, and then, to a 'quick engagement' according to the instructions of Un Nuwer, "and after that, be slow as you like! ... you should follow this policy in detail: "Walk, Yalla Yalla (slowly, slowly)! Move, Yalla, Yalla!, Smile Yalla Yalla! Dance, Yalla Yalla! by Mind and by 'Heaviness/ Seriousness'! Don't be light/simple/ naive! Count your words! Count your look...!" and there is no end to their instructions"<sup>30</sup>

### **b. Curiosity and Intrusion**

Curiosity and intrusion is a social and moral problem in the Arab world, at home, on the street, and on the market: "The eyes of the women in the market followed the Qamara and Sadīm and the rest of the girls alarmingly. Each woman was looking at them from behind her veil (niqab) boldly and defiantly, as if she were saying: "I knew you but you did not know me. That is the case with us in the markets; men stare at women for special reasons, and women stare at each other for the instinct of "Laqafa/ Picking"! No girl can walk in our markets in God's safety"<sup>31</sup>.

### **c. The Woman's Jealousy**

The Woman's Jealousy appears at wedding occasions and social relations: "Qamara's smile expands as she listens to the praise of her friends and sees the jealousy hidden in their eyes... Women do not beautify themselves for men, but to offend other women"<sup>32</sup>.

### **d. Alcohol Drinking**

Here is the irony: a conservative committed, closed society that imposes the concealing cloak of the woman's body, and legalizes the apparent relationships of both sexes, while it practices in secret what is forbidden and taboo: "That night, Lamis shared Michelle a bottle of expensive champagne, which the latter had taken from her father's locker for special drinks on important occasions"<sup>33</sup>.

### **e. Contradictions of the Oriental Man's Convictions**

While the Oriental man lives with the conviction that he must associate himself with a conservative woman, free from emotional experiences, and ashamed in bed, a girl who is not easy even under the contract of the marriage, he lives with the conviction of his heart that happiness can only be achieved with the free bold, lustful girl, and thus, he begins to live with the duality of the conservative Oriental man in front of society and the man free from all these constraints behind the scenes, which explains Walid's behavior with Sadīm when she presented herself to him as a wife after the contract (qiran) and before the wedding ceremony, he sent her the divorce paper.

"Did she make a mistake by giving herself to him before marriage? Ooh! Ooh! Is Waleed mad? Isn't he her legal husband since his matrimony? Was he testing her?"<sup>34</sup>

### **f. Women's Inferiority in front of Men:**

The inferiority of the woman, which is deeply rooted in the Eastern societies, and which appears in the novel when Sadīm was forced to sign by her fingerprints on her matrimony contract while her husband signs by the pen: "Sadīm was forced to sign by her fingerprints in the sizeable notebook... after neglect of her protest against non-permission to her to sign. Her aunt said to her: "My daughter, just make your fingerprint. The Sheikh says "You should make your fingerprint, not sign. Men only can sign"."<sup>35</sup>

### **g. Oppression Practiced on Women**

The patriarchal society imposes on the woman fear of unjust provisions that suffocate her and make her look for an alternative outside the family frame, neighborhood and society to vent her innate needs and energies: "Sadīm restarted cursing her luck when she found out that Tāhir's friend was a Sa'ūdi... May God take him off! What brought him. Even here I cannot behave according to my nature? The Sa'ūdis are always after me! Everyone realizes that the Sa'ūdi woman feels more comfortable to mix with non-Sa'ūdi men than with Sa'ūdis... As usual, on every international flight, Sadim went to the airplane bathroom to wear her cloak."<sup>36</sup>

### **h. Luck and Fate**

The members her society, especially the woman, resort to luck and fate as a rack or hanger to justify her vulnerability and lack of boldness in making decisions and determining her own life. "Let's be honest to each other. If you had not admired him, Qamara,

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 15

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 25

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 26

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 122, 123, 134.

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you wouldn't have taken him. We shouldn't say about everything "It's our luck and we have nothing to do with it! We always play the role of the victim, and we don't express our opinion! It's the ultimate negativity."<sup>37</sup>

### **i. Sectarianism**

It is the eternal dialectical issue that divides society and brings it to the abyss. For example, we read how the issue of the suffering of the Shiite minority in Sa'ūdi Arabia, considering them "infidels", and preventing non-Shiite citizens from dealing with them, and even suspecting their foods: "Qamara and Saḍīm warned her (Lamis) of the Shiite's foods because they do not refrain from profaning their foods secretly if they know that a Sunni will eat it, and they do not hesitate to stuck poison in it so that to be rewarded for killing a Sunni"<sup>38</sup>. This discrimination is not limited to the heroines, but goes beyond official institutions. For example, when the police caught Lamis and her colleague, Ali in a café, they released her after her father's presence, but Ali was imprisoned: "Lamis felt pity for Ali after she heard the cop whisper in her father's ear at the office that they had discovered that the boy she was with was a one of the 'Rejecters' (*Rāfiḍah*,) and that his punishment would be much harsher than hers"<sup>39</sup>. The novel is satisfied with such a quick reference without giving it long discussing the problem of the Shiite minority in Sa'ūdi Arabia.

### **j. Contempt for Non-Sa'ūdi Arabians:**

Michaëlle speaks about another serious social issue, which is the *contempt of anyone who is non-Sa'ūdi in origin*. She says: "Why doesn't society respect my family's difference from the rest of Sa'ūdi Arabians? Everyone thinks I'm a bad girl just because my mother's an American; how can I live in such an unfair society?"<sup>40</sup> A manifestation of this discrimination is the refusal of Sa'ūdi families to associate their son with a non-Sa'ūdi Arabian girl, and with anyone who believes in a different belief from the Sa'ūdi's belief, even if he is a family member. Despite the openness of Michelle's family, and despite the fact that her mother was an American, her family categorically refused to associate with her cousin, only because he was a Christian. "Her father raged in a way she didn't expect after hearing her hint about her admiration for Matty, her aunt's son."<sup>41</sup>

### **k. Society's Rejection of Homosexuality**

Though the writer does not give significance to this issue, she refers to it through Nuri's story whose name was changed by society into "Nuwer" and his mother's name into Um Nuwer (Nuwer's Mother): "Nuri did not show his softness in front of his father... but his father heard from his neighbors things that made him furious. He entered his son's room and started beating him with his hands and legs until the boy suffered fractures in the thorax, the nose and one of his arms. The father left the house after this incident to live with his second wife."<sup>42</sup>

We conclude that the author is satisfied with hinting at such issues, even though she just refers to them and even though she does not state her position on such issues.

Another important point is that even if the author makes sure that she appears as a defender of Sa'ūdi women, she does not have any position or judgement on the issue of polygamy, as the novel considers it to be an ordinary issue in the Sa'ūdi society, and she does not criticize it. She points out that Nuwer's father abandons Nuwer's mother and son and goes to live with his second wife and makes Nuwer's a matter as a predestined act of God: " After this incident, Nuwer's mother entrusts her fate to God, and decides that this was a blight by God and she must be patient with it"<sup>43</sup>.

The novel, in my view, is a form of outrage directed against the traditional version of heritage and a transition to the corresponding version of society, who has obviously begun to get rid of the many powers and styles that have been worn. It also indicates a transition to another stage from the total intellectual/religious/cultural to the same particulars to be intellectual/religious/cultural particles within the social architecture. Hence the importance of what we read in the novel.

Besides, the novel, in my opinion, is exciting because it reveals what is happening at the Gulf social bottom, in particular, and the Arab society in general. In this novel, we are in front of a new creative space that introduces to us the virtual human being, the social and digital language, rather than the cultural language, as it used to be, and the ensuing shortcuts, brevity, imagination, freedom and extraordinary communication. So, the *Girls of Riyāḍ* is a summoning for a new reality, in which the writer starts her virtual world from a reality in which the truth intersects with questions, doubts and a desire to know.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 145.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 30

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We also say that the point of the novel here is to reveal concrete reality. When the author allowed herself to present this reality through a creative text, she was surprised by the extent of the reactions, which were mostly positive, even if they divided between supporters and opponents.

So what the novel says is a powerful blow to a social wall built over a long time of coercive arrangements, to come up with an answer that calls for listening to the new drifting current, which is taking place at the social bottom and started to float on the surface, and indicate new things that are beginning to crystallize with the daring new cognitive shifts, and started posing questions and rejecting what is imposed on them.

The novel ends with the opposite of what the reader expected and the opposite of the author's promised, as she chooses an expected fate for the Sa'ūdi woman. Qamara remains unmarried, which is an ordinary fate to a divorced woman, who has a son in Sa'ūdi Arabia. Sadīm is forced to marry her aunt's son, while Michelle is linked to an Emirati youth, and Lamis marries Nizar, as if in such an end, none of anyone's fate disappoints the reader's horizon of waiting. The novel enshrines the position of the divorcée, Qamara, and the woman who gave up her honor, Sadīm, and the fate of the liberated girl, Michelle, while Lamis reaches the shore of the "ideal" marriage by wearing a hijab (veil) and travelling with her husband to continue her studies abroad.

*Banāt al-Riyāḍ* represents an important stage in the development of the Sa'ūdi novel in general. It actually constitutes a major transformation in Sa'ūdi Arabia as it absorbs the importance of the moving cultural context, and was even involved in it, which makes it a sign of protest against reality, which it reflects and writes about. However, this protest is, in our opinion, is evidence to a kind of openness whereby this novel appears to be *first*, socially open, and *second*, an artistic openness, and *third*, a linguistic openness. All of this makes any novel a subject of question and discussion, according to critic Moḥammad 'Abdullah al-Ghaḍami.

Apparently, *Girls of Riyāḍ* might make us say that it is more a novel of a cultural discourse than an experimental narrative discourse in the narrow structural sense of the narrative. Even the cultural discourse is not free of a close recounting of identity or what is called 'identity policy', as the theory of postcolonial discourse calls it, so that the cultural discourse in the cycle of narrative fiction will appear to be more of a protest than a desire to expose the hidden and the infested.

In this context, it is possible to point out the need for cultural criticism due to the significance of this type of criticism, which critic Abdullah al-Ghaḍami prepared for. Its significance appears from the point of view of 'social diseases' or what al-Ghaḍami calls 'cultural shortcomings' that take textual forms that appear in the fields of behavior, traditions and norms<sup>44</sup>.

On the level of the Sa'ūdi society, this criticism appears to be very important in terms of revealing the nature of the patriarchal society, which is unfolding culturally, to understand and recognize the source of the fuss that was created by the "*Banāt al-Riyāḍ/ Girls of Riyāḍ*."

*Banāt al-Riyāḍ*, which I consider the forefront of the clash with society, constitutes a safe margin in which the woman writer expresses her attitudes towards the male practices, especially the social and sexual injustice that are inflicted on her by her guardian, the man. Besides, *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* gives her an unrivalled opportunity to question, revolt and protest against the prevailing mainstream.

**To sum up**, the most important thing in the novel is the cultural discourse itself, which seeks to rise by writing and live up to the level of 'weapon', or 'fingernails' in the context of response to the masculinity of society.

We can add that while the novel does not elaborate on sexual relations, it does address them with high transparency, indicating a high level of awareness of the importance of insinuation and suggestion in building the idea without engaging in direct reporting. At the same time, resort to the use of insinuation reveals that the subject is highly sensitive and socially dangerous, which leads the author to be cautious in introducing the subject of sex. Although she dared to knock hard on the wall of prevailing relationships, she did not give herself the audacity to deal with sexual relations clearly and explicitly.

### 5. LANGUAGE OF THE NOVEL

The woman's writing in cultural and literary criticism is considered a transformation into a collective voice. It is not just an individual act in terms of composition or gender, but a collective voice. The author here, as well as the language, are two cultural structures in which the woman appears as a human kind, and the text appears as a linguistic kind, and femininity is then an act of authorship and creation and an act of reading and receiving.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>44</sup> al-Ghaḍami, 'Abdulla Moḥammad (2000). *Qira'ah fi Ansāq al-Thaqafa al-'Arabiyya*. al-Dar al-Baydha' - Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, p. 89.

<sup>45</sup> al-Ghaḍami, Abdulla Moḥammad (2006). *al-Mar'ah wa al-Lugha*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfi, p. 182.

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The first and foremost principle of the feminist novel is linked to the unbridled desire to express life, freedom and triumph. Therefore, it resorts to the feminist discourse in order to pass the tragedy on and be freed from it. Sometimes it sets off from a fundamental point that stems from a sense of humiliation and oppression in a bossy male society that is full of pressure in many respects. Thus, the feminist novel puts the responsibility of all the damage that is done to her on the man. Therefore, there's a subjective issue that starts with it from reality and extends to the spaces of the narrated text, and its subject is often about the relationship with the other/the man<sup>46</sup>

The issue of freedom and rebellion dominates the novel of this study. We notice the dominance of the feminine language in the novel, with female characters taking the author's attention, while the man's personality is secondary and marginalized or is given a non-ideal event, so that it will match women's perception of men. The novel also depicts the woman's struggle with her inner psychological transformation and the issues and concerns that prevail in women's society. The author is united with her heroines to express her vision, in terms of attitude towards the man and prevailing customs in society. She dresses them a suit of patience and steadfastness against the injustice of the man who appears only through a woman/heroine. In doing so, she exiles him from her world, creating her own world and her own feminine language. Thus, buries the man alive, who actually buried her in reality, explains him, reveals his secrets, and shows his subtleties<sup>47</sup>.

The oppression of social and moral relations and the psycho-masculine attitude towards woman makes her writings far removed from her overwhelming desire to be informed in the necessary language in order to formulate her desire to write this implicit awareness of domination, persecution, the plundering of rights and the confiscation of freedoms, which is exactly the same as the author's awareness of writing, even if it is awareness that is often tainted by a state of anxiety and psychological fatigue.

No matter how disillusioned, bored, weak motivation and feeling drained, the novelist faces forces that constantly draw her to be persistent<sup>48</sup>. These are the forces of womanhood that strive to enter the male colony for self-fulfillment<sup>49</sup>. No one can write without taking an emotional stance on what's happening in the world. So, in my view, the speech and motivation of the narrative writing are united by the author, Rajā' al-Ṣāni', whose language is characterized by being a protesting language, in order to resist the masculine power that oppresses the women of her society.

Through the character of the narrator and the heroines of her stories, Rajā' al-Ṣāni' limits the place where she tells, the language in which she will present the novel and the style in which she will choose. The novel was presented on 50 weekly computer-screen episodes, written in the form of private messages, and sent to every Internet user in Sa'ūdi Arabia. She prepares each episode with a special commentary, quotation of any Koranic verse or common saying or passage of poetry, and a review of some of the comments received on its previous episode, and a response to some of them.

She would draw the followers of her stories by her more scandalous stories in the coming episodes, and she would be promising those who attacked her that what she had given so far was nothing in front of what would be: "We're still at the beginning, dear ones. If you started the war on me in the fifth email, what would you say about me after reading the next email? Better things are coming for you!"<sup>50</sup> And so she was leaving the recipient in suspense for the next episode until the final episode to surprise him that there were no big scandals or what would set fire to the green and dry.

We read simplicity and spontaneity in the style of Rajā' al-Ṣāni' treatment. The novel is introduced in a simple language that blends between formal classical Arabic and colloquial Arabic in different accents with inserting slang words, or words from other languages and introducing them in an exciting attractive manner of that the reader does find difficulty in understanding even if he is not a Sa'ūdi Arabian. Language is a way of portraying the reality of the woman, where the Sa'ūdi woman is depicted as subdued, submissive, and helpless.

So, what distinguishes the novel of Rajā' al-Ṣāni' is the language levels with spontaneous techniques and skills, in which the folk and colloquial are harmonious, and which makes her touch the hidden depths of the reader and arouse his curiosity for knowledge. In addition to the narrator's standard classical language, there are four levels of narrative language:

- **The classy classical (fushā/ fasiha) standard language**, which occupies the largest space in the text of the novel;

<sup>46</sup> al-Ṭawīl, Su'ād (2010). "al-Riwaya al-Nisai'ya al-'Arabiyya wa Khitab al-Dat". *Majallat al-Mukhber. Abhāth fi al-Lugha wa al-Adab al-Jaza'iri*. Issue 6. Baskara. University of Moḥammad Khayḍer, p. 2.

<sup>47</sup> al-Jundi, Darwish (1985). *al-Ramziyya fi al-Adab al-'Arabi*. Cairo: Maktabat Nahḍat Miṣr, p. 34; 'Affaya, Moḥammad Nur al-Din (1988). *al-Hawiyya wa al-Ikhtilaf fi al-Mar'ah wa al-Kitaba wa al-Hamish*. al-Dar al-Bayḍā': Afriqya al-Sharq, p. 14-19.

<sup>48</sup> al-Ghadhami (2006). *al-Mar'ah wa al-Lugha*, p. 47.

<sup>49</sup> Gurmallah, Saleh Ziyad (2005). "Majāz al-Āi'q al-Ijtimā'i fi al-Qiṣa al-Su'ūdiyyah al-Qasira". *Majallat 'Ālam al-Fikr*. Issue, 1. Vol. 34, p. 67.

<sup>50</sup> al-Ṣāni', Rajā' 'Abdulla (2006). *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*, p. 36.



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- **The popular vernacular language**, which pervades the conversational scenes, where we read the following section in the Syrian dialect: "By God, ask Qamora to control herself... Nothing serious has happened... people are still here. No one has gone! Besides, all brides, all of them are late... to create suspense!"<sup>51</sup>

We also read another section in the Gulf dialect. "I asked her: and you, aren't you going to tell me something...I want to tell you that I put on glasses!"<sup>52</sup> and there other a lot of other examples in the novel.

We also have the spoken vernacular dialect for singing. When Michelle dances in her sweethearts wedding: "He has not dropped in for two days! From where can I bring him, from where? Maybe his family did not allow him!... he is late for me! Oh people... this is not his nature! I am worried about him...Who prevented him? Maybe his family did not allow him...Maybe his family did not allow him"<sup>53</sup>.

We also read: "Why does first love refuse to leave us? It returns again to the past to wake us ... Julia Butrus..."<sup>54</sup> There are so many other examples in the novel.

- **Popular Proverbs, Common Sayings and Quotations**

We read popular proverbs when the Narrator's sister looks for the letters that Mwa wrote, and she was ready to sell. The writer comments: "The livelihood of the idiot is on the crazy ones". We also read her proverbs in her comments on those who were angry at her emails: "Beat them with your loud voices, and don't let them beat you!" We also read a proverb when Michelle discovers that the disease of 'paradox' hit her parents, who represent freedom: "He who lives with people for forty days, becomes one of them"<sup>55</sup>. We also read: "He who does not like that can drink the sea water" and "Damn love... it humiliates so much!"<sup>56</sup>

- **The Use of English Words**

The language of the people of the Gulf is clearly influenced by the English language, which has become a part of their spoken and written language. So we read how Michelle responds to her friend during her conversation in Qamara's wedding. "Where's the hell did she get this dress from? True, she's so careful but she has to slim a little."<sup>57</sup> Consequently, this mixture lends an attractive touch to the text which can be motivating to the reader to continue reading and communicating with the writer.

To sum up, we can say that these messages are not a high sophisticated language or a language of a beautiful art, but the language of the common people. A lot of words are colloquial ones that are not easily understood. A lot of English words intersect the sections of the dialogue, which indicates that the rich class are highly influenced by the language of the country they lived in during their studies or trips. Besides, a lot of phrases and sentences are weak. In addition, language errors could have been avoided if the writer had taken care to show her novel to a language editor before printing it, which, in my opinion, might pave the way for the legitimacy of writing in a weak language that is far from the fine and correct language of literature, which might threaten the aesthetics of the language and style of writing literature.

## 6. STYLE OF WRITING

Writing for Rajā' al-Ṣāni' is considered an attempt of rebellion, but, in my view, it will not be so, unless the space of freedom becomes narrow. In a society such as that of Sa'ūdi Arabia, which is characterized by extreme religious restrictions, it is impossible to talk about literary production in isolation from the woman at the level of her presence in literature and creativity as an important issue for discussion and research, where the woman constitutes a main focus in most literary works. So the woman in the literature of Sa'ūdi women is at the heart of the novel, but she is also the victim of censorship. The woman writes and a lot of eyes around her watch her.

The most striking thing we can read in the style of the Rajā' ' al-Ṣāni' is her possession of the spirit of joking and irony in her critique of things. She did not deliberately write a novel according to the taste of the Arab reader. Actually, she abandoned the discipline and measurements that govern the novel's customary construction, and was drifted after the openness of her character onto the present time. When she wrote the novel, she was the 20-year-old girl, who lives the Internet age, which seemed to be evident in the structure of the novel. Her art architecture was closer to the pattern of e-mail messages, with their metaphors of wisdom, poetry and Quranic verses, which she made sure to start with before narrating her messages.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p.,12.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

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The aim of the narrator "Mwa" in the form of the first person singular is to uncover the characters of her girlfriends as they enter their life struggle in a society that subjugates human being, especially the woman, to its authority completely. Therefore, her letters are introduced according to the style of the autobiographical text.

The autobiographical concept requires that the "I" of the author conforms with the central character, and this constitutes a way of breaking the walls of society. "Ladies and gentlemen, you are on a date with the biggest local scandals and the noisiest youth nights. Moa, who speaks to you, moves you to a world that is closer to each of you more than you can imagine."<sup>58</sup> And although she is having a dangerous adventure, she technically avoided getting involved by expressing her opinion on them, and she merely presented them according to her artistic vision, with which she created the events and characters in the letters.

Thus, the choice of the form of "memoirs" in the novel as a method for her narrative construction is largely successful. The style of "memoirs" in the form of e-mails is a more efficient self-narrative technique in the disclosure and conveying of the human feelings and human relations in an Eastern Gulf Arab society, whose particularity lies in its submission to a set of taboos that the individual cannot cross over, even if that society appears to be, formally, a contemporary society, while at its bottom, it is held as a hostage to the heavy social and traditional customs. Besides, it is compounded by a religious authority that is very difficult to overcome, and if that happens, the individual will face a miserable fate.

The author chose to wear the mask of the narrator or story-teller, who is at the same time the implicit author, and gave herself the name Mwa, which, in my opinion, is a strange name. It is meaningless in Arabic, so it might just be an attempt by the author to impress the readers of the messages as they try to identify her among the main female characters in the novel.

We also say that the author's attempt to hide behind the character of the omniscient narrator occurs in the context of rebellion against the type of social-relationships, and stripping them, and the option of posting them online, which is also a narrative technique that gave the narrating character its freedom to tell and reveal.

This is in addition to the interaction provided by the Internet following the process of exchanging messages with virtual friends, which gives them their social dimension in impact and presence.

Besides, the comments, guesses and objections of friends via e-mails to the events and situations of the characters in the letters form part of the vocabulary of the narrative technique in the process of breaking the narrative illusion that the postmodern writings evoked, and were clearly spelled out in the writings of meta-fiction, especially with regard to the narrating writer's interference and his comment on the events. In this way, the process of fragmentation of the illusions between the reader and the narrative text is achieved, which constitutes an essential part of the process of construction, access and reception: "The world was a great commotion! My email box was bombarded with letter bombs "

Some of them warn me not to approach the red lines; some maintain that I've actually crossed them, and I will be punished. Some messages warn me of coming too closer to red-lines, and others maintain that I crossed the red lines, and others maintains that I actually crossed them and I will be punished..."<sup>59</sup>

We notice in her writing style her dependence on the investment of Koranic texts, talks and sentences by well-known writers and poets to support what she wanted to convey. These texts appeared at the beginning of each letter, which revealed the nature of the cultural components of the narrating character, the sensitivity of the character and its attempts to lean on an intellectual premise that supports the ideas that she wishes to convey, despite the absence of harmony and congruity in the quotes. For example, what can combine the between Nizar Qabbani's poems with all their call for an emotional and sexual rebellion, and texts quoted from the Koran? In my view, this reflects the problematic existential situation that the woman experiences in an environment that is governed by religious and social origins, both of which possess the status of reverence and inseparable dominance.

Artistically, we can say that the novel lacks several novelistic components. It is full of long narration, direct reporting in many sections, and yet, we argue that we are here in front of a young, creative novelist in her first experience. She broke the social taboo in the most conservative and closed Arab community. She opened gaps in the Sa'ūdi Arabia thick wall in order to look through them to what was going on there, and succeeded in creating interaction between the text and the reader in most of the space of the novel.

### **7. WOMEN AND MEN IN THE NOVEL**

The novel carries a clear audacity in its critique and dissection of the human relations in Sa'ūdi society through focusing on the female characters. The choice of women's characters is more reflective of the content of their critical speech with all their diagnosis and boldness because the woman in this society, where masculinity is the only authority, is the weakest element. The woman in all

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

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cases does not always have the decision on her life and her fate, and even if she passed several thresholds of education and progress in her technological career, she remains captive and subordinate to the man.

The novel deals with female models from the Gulf Arab velvet society: four girlfriends and classmates in the same school, who are devastated by life, face different fates. The girls (lizards), in the words of the author, face the males (crocodiles).

### • The Women of the novel

The women characters in the novel are: **Lamis Jeddawi**, who is the only positive type that the novel introduces. She is aware of the heavy weight of society in which she lives, satisfied with an ordinary husband who asked for her hand, and she lives with him a successful marital life. She is the type of the bold adventurous Arab girl who is considered lucky by the commonly accepted social criteria and did not suffer in her quest for what she wants. She gets a successful marriage, a distinguished certificate, emotional stability, and an assured high job. She is also the type of the woman who loves herself, and offers herself the right of adventure, experience, and life without caring for the satisfaction and blessing of her environment as her sister **Tamaḍur** does. All of this gained her larger maturity and awareness of life, which is reflected in her ability to deal with the Internet, to 'chat,' and to control her relations and communication without falling in the nets of the Internet young men. At the same time, she enjoys the pleasure of the experience and communication with the other sex within her limits and control. That is reflected in her directions and advice to Qamara regarding the use of the Internet and chat.

**Qamarah**, the ordinary girl who submits to the worn thoughts and gets married according to the traditional norms, is satisfied with her fiancé Rashed, who was chosen for her by her parents and married her to him. She is committed to her inherited mistaken instructions and bits of advice regarding her relationship with her husband. Thus, she prevents him from approaching her in the beginning: "Don't become easy ... prevention is the secret of arousing the man's lust..."<sup>60</sup>. She did not hand herself to him as her sisters, **Nafla and Hassa**, had done, till the fourth day, when the magic turned against the magician, when she discovered that after her marriage and her travel with him to live and study in America, that he was betraying her with his Japanese girlfriend Kari: "How did he manage to hide his relationship with this woman for nine months? Did he meet that woman continuously? Did he love her?"<sup>61</sup> Finally, he divorced her and sent her back home with her young child to Sa'ūdi Arabia. She suffers from her life as a lonely divorced woman; she hears people's comments on her, and notices her watching by a patriarchal merciless conservative society. In the end, she was ready to get married to any man, whatever he is: "I generally don't mind who comes, anyone, clean, dirty or untidy; just to come...! I am ready to accept any man! I am bored, girls! I'm exploding! Enough! I am about to deviate!"<sup>62</sup>

**Michelle al-' Abd al-Rahman**, who is a model of the mature, liberated girl, compared to her colleagues; the girl whose parents spoiled her and took an interest in her studies and education. She falls in love with a modern, liberated young man, Faisal, who loves her, too. When he decides to associate with her, she is rejected by his family, because there is non-Sa'ūdi blood in her as her mother is American. As soon as Faisal's Mom heard the name 'Michelle', she was ridden by a "goblin" (afrit). Faisal quickly rectified his error. They call her Michelle, but her real name is **Masha'il**. A black look from his mother's eyes frightened him and knotted his tongue<sup>63</sup>. She flies to travel to the United States of America, where and she falls in love with her cousin Matty:

"The thing that she admired most in Matty was his respect to her point of view, whatever the difference between them,<sup>64</sup> but her family rejected him because of his Christian ancestry: "Her father raged in a way she didn't expect after hearing her hint about her admiration for Matty, her aunt's son."<sup>65</sup> Her parents travelled and took her with them to Dubai. Her mind and heart remained owned by Faisal, and after attending his wedding ceremony to **Sheikha**, she agreed to marry the Emirati director Hamdan, convinced that "husbands hide under their smiles bleeding hearts and unfortunate souls in their experiences with their life partner."<sup>66</sup> Michelle is the only character who almost knows what she wants to do and choose. She defends her choice, and although her experience with Faisal failed, she has not been broken and considers this failure to be part of her journey to discover herself.

And when the time comes to clear her account with the one who abandoned her at a moment in her life, she does not hesitate. She moves on to settle the account with her full awareness and courage, and goes to the room where Faisal's wedding and Sheikha (who was chosen for him by his mother), was taking place: "She found herself heading down the long driveway to dance. It was the first time she had ever danced a Gulf dancing...She seemed happy and free. She danced and sang as if she were that night

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 302.

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the only one in that room. It was a celebration of her own to recognize her success and resilience, a celebration of her freedom from becoming a slave to traditions like the other miserable women in the hall."<sup>67</sup>

**Sadīm al-Ḥaramli** is a model of the loyal, loving, simple girl, who thinks that the wedding is enough for her to be someone's wife. She gets to know and love Walid and becomes loyal to him. He comes to get engaged, and she gets overwhelmed by joy as they make their marriage.

She considers herself to be his wife and gives herself in to him, believing that holding her matrimony to him allows her to go to extremes in her relationship with him. She is his wife by virtue of the law and society, but Walid then despises her, leaves her and stops every relationship with her, causing her pain, agony and suffering throughout her life in a society that considers the girl's hymen to be the girl's only treasure. "Did Walid think that she is a girl who had experience of sexual intercourse?" "Did he prefer that she repel him? She's done nothing more than respond to him in the way she sees on the TV screen or hears from her married or experienced friends, and he has just done the rest?"<sup>68</sup>

Even Firas, the educated young man, whom she meets in London, and who madly loves her, prefers that she be his mistress, and marries an ordinary girl.

"Make sure, Sadīm that Firas and Faisal, despite the great difference between their age, belong to the same clay and ethnicity, the same negativity and weakness, and follow the same backward customs and traditions. This is the clay from which the young people of this community are unfortunately created. These are just chess stones that are moved by their parents."<sup>69</sup>

**Umm Nuri or Um Nuwer** is a Kuwaiti woman who works as a math supervisor in the General Administration of Girls' Education. She breaks up with her husband after 15 years of marriage. She has one son, Nuri, who has feminine tendencies, which makes everyone call her Nuwer's mother or Noura's mother instead of Nuri's mother, which increases her grief and causes her more pain." "I get a lot of messages with insults to Um Nuwer.... Is "divorce" a big "sin" that is committed by the woman and not the by man, too? Why is a divorced man not persecuted in our society like a divorced woman?<sup>70</sup> This character represents an experienced woman who is familiar with human subtleties and needs that are innate, but are restricted and distorted by society.

**Arwa**, their lesbian colleague, has sexual relationships with girls, and wears men's trousers, according to sayings or scenes in the novel. Tamaḍur, Lamis' sister is a serious, disciplined girl who perseveres in her studies in the Medical School. Ḥassa represents the woman who is patient at her husband's shortcomings and dislikes him, but has to shut up so that she will not be stigmatized as a "divorced" woman by a merciless society: "Bear your monkey so that you will not have a worse one".<sup>71</sup> **Fatima**, the refusing Shiite Lamis's friend.

The models of women in the novel seem to be diverse in their own individuality within their borders. Despite the common societal boundaries that surround everyone, none of the women in the novel appears to be bold enough to face her societal boundaries. None of them had any role in determining the course of her life or even the form of the end in which her affective or marital relations ended. So most of the women in the novel seem to be accepting to the situation, even though the author puts responsibility for it on the masculine thinking that made the Sa'ūdi man prefer his wife: "to be

To be humble in education, submissive, and useless in to have a teacher's place in herself, who can formulate himself as he like". That's how the naive (understanding) girl became wanted and is registered on the Spinsters' list."<sup>72</sup>

In the face of these restrictions, the Sa'ūdi woman does not feel free unless she leaves this great prison. We read: "Michelle found out that the epidemic of contradiction in her country had increased until it reached her parents. Her father, whom she used to see as a rare symbol of usurped freedom in this country, had broken this magnificent frame that she had put in him to prove that he who lived with the people forty days has become one of them. It seems that her parents, too, have had their share of this contradictory environment in whose earth they were planted over the last few years."<sup>73</sup>

She says in her description of the condition of Michelle and her parents: "Immigration to Dubai is a decision that was taken by the parents after they were unable to get along with a strict determined Sa'ūdi society, and the interference of everyone in everyone's affairs."<sup>74</sup>

On the travel of Michelle's family to Dubai, she says: "Michelle's mother will receive greater freedom and esteem that she was denied while living in Sa'ūdi Arabia"<sup>75</sup>. She adds: "Michelle was talking only about the corruption, backwardness, and

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 300.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p.42

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 278.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 208

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 209.

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complexity of the reactionary society. She was so excited to travel the day after tomorrow in order to begin her life again in a healthy environment other than this rotting one that brings about disease."<sup>76</sup>

Among the manifestations of breathing freedom outside the country is what the novel repeats, arguing that most Sa'ūdis, men and women, accept this situation reluctantly, and that once they have the opportunity, they will get rid of what handcuffs them, including the hijab, which the Sa'ūdi women see as an imposition.

"Before the plane landed at Heathrow Airport, Sadīm headed towards the plane bathroom and removed her cloak and hair cover to reveal a harmonious body wrapped in jeans and tight T-shirt", and as soon as the return plane gets home, you see that "Women and men line up in front of the bathroom doors to wear their traditional clothes. The women wear their robes, hair sheets, and veils (niqab), while men give up their suits and trousers, and tight their belts on their moving bellies, and go back to the white dresses that cover up their food crimes and the red shamgas (head covers) that cover their shiny bold heads."<sup>77</sup>

As these are some of the manifestations of the status of women in Sa'ūdi society, we see the status of divorced women as disastrous. The novel confirms that the Sa'ūdi woman may be easily divorced for a certain cause or without a cause: "A husband can divorce his wife because she does not respond to him in the way that excites him in bed, while the other divorces his wife because she does not hide her response to him and what does not pretend to be innocent and disgusted. These are just chess stones driven by their parents" <sup>78</sup>. And when she's divorced, she feels like she's expired, and she's no longer useful at anything. All her interest is getting a man of any shape and type. Qamara says after her divorce: "I don't mind who comes, anyone; he can come clean, can come dirty, and can come untidy. The important thing is that he comes. I am ready to accept any man!"<sup>79</sup>. That's why the reader understands why the Qamara's mother used to say to her daughter: "Anything except divorce... Our Girls do not get divorced"<sup>80</sup>.

We also read how the past throws its weight at the present and the future of all the female characters in the novel, where none of whom has been able to get rid of her walls. Each of them lives as her past has imposed on her, and thus, it has become difficult for her to restart a new life and throw behind her back her personal past, especially her emotional experiences. All the other jobs through which the woman can demonstrate her existence and identity will not compete with the importance of her emotional experience with men. In this way, emotional experiences turn into a constraint and alienation rather than a place that enriches her own human experience. This is undoubtedly attributed to the characters' suffering from their submission to the ethical and social restraints that curb their freedom in a way where the emotional experience with the man becomes a focus in whose mold the woman's character is framed.

The novel presents a picture of the reality of the youth in Sa'ūdi Arabia, and emphasizes the inferiority of the woman in a patriarchal manly society par excellence, without distinguishing between the educated woman or the ignorant woman. The educated is actually doomed to remain unmarried because the Sa'ūdis do not accept the educated girl. The demand for a naive young girl in their search of a suitable bride is still high compared to the demand for a girl with a high degree of education and general knowledge of life, which explains the high rate of spinsterhood among educated women, and makes them agree to serve the man: "Woe upon her if she forgets to get his clothes ready and ironed every evening, before he wakes up every morning, and she does not have the right to ask him for help in arranging the house, preparing food or dishwashing".<sup>81</sup>

The novel managed to show the Sa'ūdi man ruled by his traditions, no matter how much he learned or wandered around the world, and it is impossible to erase what was engraved into his memory as a small boy by education and contact with the culture of the other. It seems that the author says that everything that the Sa'ūdi society suffers from is due mainly to the masculine mindset that insists on the contempt of the woman, and seeks by every means to underestimate her. He does not acknowledge her as a human being who is capable of participating in life-making. Therefore, all the women characters seem to be victims. The men's characters, however, are nothing more than beings that do not give the woman the human emotion and feelings that she deserves. On the contrary, they carry inside themselves an inferior view, which makes it easier for them to remove her from their life at any time.

Rajā' al-Ṣāni' was able to show the man in his reality, away from the masks he pretends to be, breaking in her e-mails the forbidden taboos of an Eastern Gulf society, causing a precedent, and as a result, government services, hospitals, universities and schools have become discussion arenas for the events of these emails. Thus, the publication of these emails creates an interactive

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 43, 134.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 306.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p. 114.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 278.



## Digging Up of the Forbidden and Disclosure of the Hidden: A Dominant Presence or Rockets That Penetrate the Walls of Reality Thorough the Narrative World? A Reading in the Literature of the Sa'ūdi Women Writers *Banāt Al-Riyāḍ* by Rajā' Al-Ṣāni' as a Sample

narrative space between the writer and the recipient reader, which prompts the author to participate in the real-time event and express her judgments and opinions on the readers' reaction.

It was not only the female characters of the novel who bore the weakness and submission to society. The male characters also hold weakness and submission to this power, as is the case with the handsome young Faisal, in whom Michelle found a new model that is different from the Sa'ūdi youth, but later she revealed that he was no different from them. He abandoned Michelle after his mother refused that he marries her. He submitted to his mother's desire, giving up his own desire. We read: "As soon as Faisal's Mom heard that her name was Michelle, an elf rode her, and Faisal realized his fault. "They call her Michelle, but her real name is Masha'il (Torchlights)! A black look from his mother's eyes frightened him and knotted his tongue! Desperate Faisal cried. Miserable Faisal is under his dear mother's feet... He cried at his civilized girl, his sweetheart..., who will not be his share."<sup>82</sup>

The emotional relationship of the female characters in the novel takes on great importance compared to the male characters. For example, Qamara's character, and despite her divorce from Rashid, felt that she needed him desperately, especially after her divorce. When she slumps on her left side, and her left knee almost sticks to her chin while her right leg is stretched, she doesn't find Rashid's foot on her side; she swings too much and she feels the bed flares from underneath, or its strands turn into needles tingling in the pores of her skin."<sup>83</sup>

To sum up, we can say that Rajā' al-Ṣāni' managed in *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*, to pinpoint the burning issue but she limited her interest to the purely emotional aspects. Her treatment of the reality of the Sa'ūdi woman is superficial as she only blew the dust off a simple side that is related to the relationship between young men within the Sa'ūdi rich families, which is connected to the families' control of choosing the bride or bridegroom. Though the writer touched the status of the Sa'ūdi girl, she did not approach the phenomenon from the legal and political point of view. She didn't deal with the major political, economic, social and cultural issues of the Sa'ūdi society, even though she sometimes referred to some of the major social issues in the novel that have already been reported.

### 8. Summary

Although the Sa'ūdi writer Rajā' al-Ṣāni' managed to overcome all the obstacles and to break old writing restrictions, there are still many other restrictions, and there are some people and some traditions and conditions that restrict her pencil from revealing that facts. The ceilings of free expression are not high in Sa'ūdi Arabia, and therefore, we say that *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* increased the writer's challenge, and challenge and creativity of other writers. Restrictions of the woman's activity increase her steadfastness and helps her to go beyond all the obstacles and barriers and thus, she becomes more convinced of her talent and her literary mission.

The author, in my opinion, was able to find a place among the contemporary novelists due to her distinguished ability to address in her novel a subject that concerns the young people, which many people missed or avoided or ignored. The novel has been translated into about 40 world languages and has generated so much debate about it that its writer has received so many curses on mosque platforms and social media. The author's e-mails and posts were hacked and monitored by several religious groups, threatened with assassination, and almost banned from continuing her dental studies.

The secret to the spread of the story in this way came from the fact that it exposed the Sa'ūdi youth practices with the young Sa'ūdi woman so boldly. In doing so, she offers a great adventure by unveiling the hidden world of girls in a society that does not accept women in this shocking erotic form. Though the presence of women in Sa'ūdi literature is remarkable and clear, it has not come out of the coat of balance that satisfies all active actors in society, both religious and political. However, Rajā' al-Ṣāni' did not pay attention to all of this, and she wrote about herself, her environment and her friends, from an experienced self of her reality, without falsifying or misleading.

I think the secret to the sweeping attack on Rajā' al-Ṣāni' and her novel lies in her attempt to crack every "taboo", and tried to blow up a lot of traditional frameworks, useless cultural legacies, and a lot of social sacraments that have become as powerful as religion.

Rajā' al-Ṣāni' walked into forbidden spaces, uncovered many contradictions with an unconventional instrument, exposed hidden issues, and highlighted others that people do not speak about.

The novel was attacked because it tried to confront the people of its society themselves, with the utmost estrangement and clarity, which forced them, consciously or unconsciously, to get into the depths of the human soul and face them with a lot of contradictions.

Rajā' al-Ṣāni's treatment and description of her subject are bold, and her novel is a powerful cry that stirred a stagnant water that lasted for ages. Its echo resonated at different corners in the Sa'ūdi society and influenced it to stay part of its human

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.110, 111.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., p. 228.

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memory. Therefore, the novel is regarded as a loud grenade that uncovered all the hidden files in the Sa'ūdi society, and broke the locks of social and traditional repression.

The issue that story *Girls of Riyāḍ* skipped boldly is that it conveyed the reality of women with the utmost transparency, defying by that the movement of the male society in its entirety, which greatly facilitated the anonymity of the identity of the Sa'ūdi woman.

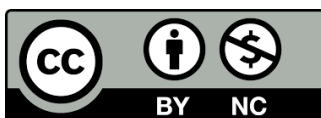
The Sa'ūdi regime has not allowed the novel to be distributed in Sa'ūdi Arabia so far, although the novel has not been officially banned. However, the censorship staff has not yet decided on it since 2006. We have not read that it was distributed in Sa'ūdi Arabia, although it has been printed at least four consecutive times. Copies have probably been smuggled into Sa'ūdi Arabia, and this alone indicates the crisis of the Sa'ūdi society that is monitored by the Sa'ūdi writer, Rajā' al-Ṣāni'.

Finally, in my opinion, the most prominent flaw in the novel *Girls of al-Riyāḍ* is the writer's authority over the characters, which makes the question about the liberation of the characters, or even the novel itself from this power or guardianship, a problematic and urgent question at the same time, because an important part of what should have been said through the novel spontaneously and fluently, was not said because of the over emphasis on the approach to remove and exclude the other.

Finally, we would like to say that what Rajā' al-Ṣāni' spoke about in her novel is not confined to al-Riyāḍ city or Sa'ūdi Arabia, but is a reality that exists in all Arab societies everywhere, albeit to varying degrees.

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