



Internet-Mediated Narrative as a New Paradigm in Contemporary Saudi Arabian Fiction: A Postmodern Reading of Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2007)

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Abstract - This research paper studies the way the Saudi female novelist Rajaa Alsanea subordinates aesthetics to ideology in her novel *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), through a genuine artistic creativity grounded in an interactive narrative method entirely based on the exchange of e-mails between the narrator and the narratees. Rajaa Alsanea's poetics reveals basic aspects of postmodern aesthetics, which is an aesthetics of subversion and deconstruction of classical normativity. She subverts the sociocultural order and deconstructs the traditional and patriarchal discourse prevailing in Saudi Arabia, through the cyber-activism of the female narrator who tells the stories of four "girls" living in a conservative society. The Internet turns out to be the ideal medium for breaking silence in the novel.

Keywords: aesthetics - Internet - narrative - postmodernism - Saudi Arabian - subversion

Resumé - Le présent article s'intéresse à la manière dont la romancière saoudienne Rajaa Alsanea subordonne l'esthétique à l'idéologie dans son roman *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), notamment à travers une authentique créativité artistique ancrée dans une technique narrative interactive entièrement basée sur l'échange de courriels (e-mails) entre la narratrice et les narrataires. La poétique de Rajaa Alsanea révèle des aspects fondamentaux de l'esthétique postmoderne, qui est une esthétique de subversion et de déconstruction de la normativité classique. Elle subvertit les normes socioculturelles et déconstruit le discours traditionnel et patriarcal en Arabie Saoudite, à travers le cyber-activisme de la narratrice qui raconte l'histoire de quatre femmes vivant toutes dans une société conservatrice. L'Internet s'avère être le média idéal pour rompre le silence dans le roman.

Mots-clés : esthétique - Internet - narration - postmodernisme - saoudien - subversion

INTRODUCTION

Written by the Saudi female novelist Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh* (2007) illustrates perfectly well the impact of the "*changing social and artistic circumstances*" on literary creation (Hudson 1963: 129), more specifically on the

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novel in Saudi Arabia. Originally published in Arabic under the title *Banat Al-Riyadh* (2005), then translated into English two years later as *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), Rajaa Alsanea's novel is a demonstration of creativity as the author comes up with a narrative technique entirely based on the use of communication technology, as a case in point on internet forums or chat rooms. As a matter of fact, it is through an e-mail narrative method that the narrator tells the story from the beginning to the end of the novel. In this respect, Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* meets the definition of "techno-fictionalization" (Al-Ariss 2012: 519) or "technology writing" (Al-Ghadeer 2006). To borrow a technological terminology, Rajaa Alsanea marvellously updates Hudson's 1910 statement: "What the novel loses in actuality and vividness by its substitution of narrative for representation it thus amply makes up for in other ways" (Hudson 1963: 129).

As hinted at by the title of the novel, *Girls of Riyadh* is about the story of four Saudi girls who live in Riyadh, the capital city of Saudi Arabia. Their respective names are Gamrah Al-Qusmanji, Sadeem Al-Horaimli, Lames Jeddawi and Michelle Al-Abdulrahman; and they are friends. The narrator is a girl as well; although her identity is not revealed, it appears that she is their friend. She recounts their intersecting stories: their friendship, which started at school, their growth, love experience, studies, marriage experience, and many other existential tribulations which have befallen them. While grappling with the difficulties of life in their sociocultural environment, they also try to challenge the traditions and norms which prevail in the conservative kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Like the characters in her novel, Rajaa Alsanea is a "girl of Riyadh". *Girls of Riyadh* is a taboo-breaking novel which "shows the modern side of Saudi Arabia" (Saleh 2006: 1). Throughout her novel, Rajaa Alsanea is committed to "countering prevailing discourse with literary creativity" (Badry 2018). Structure and language are two fulcrum points of the narrative in the novel *Girls of Riyadh*.

Researchers have approached the novel *Girls of Riyadh* through various perspectives: feminist, linguistic, sociocultural and postcolonial. The following paper seeks to read *Girls of Riyadh* with the lens of postmodern aesthetic theory. To put it otherwise, the purpose of this paper is to explore the way, through a genuine artistic creativity, Rajaa Alsanea subordinates aesthetics to ideology. The paper studies how, in the novel *Girls of Riyadh*, an aesthetics of subversion and deconstruction shapes Saudi women's cyber-activism for breaking silence¹.

The first part deals with the significance of the study and specifies the research methodology. The second part discusses postmodernism in the Saudi Arabian context. The third part is a review of the literature about Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*. The fourth and last part analyzes *Girls of Riyadh* in the light of postmodern aesthetic theory.



1. Significance of the Study and Research Methodology

The use of technology in fiction is not a new phenomenon. Technology has already been used as a theme in works of fiction, but either in a dystopian or in a utopian context². With Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh*, the point is that technology is scrutinized in a realistic context; the novel is based on a digital story-telling process. The narrative is entirely done through e-mails, in what can be considered open forum sessions on the Internet. In so doing, Rajaa Alsanea engages in a mimetic process of the requirements of her time.

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a country where internet access is widespread. With a land area of approximately 2,150,000 km², Saudi Arabia is the largest country in the Middle-East. Following the digital revolution around the world as early as it started, Saudi authorities had early initiated a policy of technological development that consists in connecting all the provinces of the country, including the remotest regions. The development of the Internet is one of the outstanding consequences of this policy. It has sparked off social changes, notably with the prominent place of social media, which has put forward Saudi women activists, who make the most of internet forums for speaking their minds as well as for artistic expression. Breaking silence on the Internet is not a phenomenon specific to Saudi Arabia as it is also observed in other Arab countries. Al-Ghadeer gives the examples of Arab women writers such as the Saudi poet Hilda Ismail, and Jumana Haddad, a Lebanese novelist and activist (Al-Ghadeer 2006: 296). The Saudi poet Hilda Ismail was revealed through her collection of provocative poems translated into English under the title *Icons* (2005). Her poems were first released and shared in cultural forums on the Internet, commonly known in Saudi Arabia as "internet literature" (Mubarak 2005: 1). The significance of the present study lies in the fact that it shows how such "*changing social and artistic circumstances*", to borrow Hudson's wording (1963: 129), can shape artistic creativity in general, and prose fiction in particular.

Coming to the research methodology, postmodern aesthetic theory has been applied to the study of Rajaa Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh*. The methodology involves the analysis of *Girls of Riyadh* in the light of postmodernist canons such as fragmentation, deconstruction of classical canons, intertextuality, parody, eclecticism, playfulness, etc., to reveal how they are applied to a contemporary Saudi Arabian novel.

2. Postmodernism and Contemporary Saudi Arabian Novels

Postmodernism challenges key orientations that have dominated modernism, which was established by the idealist tradition from Kant to Collingwood, through Hegel, Clive Bell and classic analytic aesthetics of the twentieth century.



Postmodernism highlights the ways art is inextricably mixed with other aspects of life and culture; in so doing, it challenges the modernist orientations that tend to identify art narrowly with fine art and high art, dismissing the aesthetic-artistic importance of industrial and popular arts. In postmodern aesthetic theory, appropriation, eclecticism, difference, pluralism, contingency, playfulness, and even fragmentation, ephemerality, and superficial frivolity similarly come to be appreciated as aesthetic values (Shusterman 2005: 781). Many of the postmodern works blend literary genres, cultural and stylistic levels, the serious and the playful, appearing therefore as "literary anomalies" that resist classification according to traditional literary rubrics (Abrams and Harpham 2015: 228).

Alshammami considers that the postmodern Saudi Arabian novel is like the postmodern American novel in that it is informed by a dialectical relationship between utopia and ideology, which shows the weak utopian imagination. Following Jameson's argument that this weakness in the postmodern American novel is a consequence of the domination of late capitalism, Alshammami posits that, in the postmodern Saudi novel, the weak utopian imagination may be considered a consequence of other factors, such as radical Islamic ideology, which has increased alongside economic growth and racism (Alshammami 2017: 150). The investigation of postmodern characteristics helps to establish the Saudi novel as a postmodern novel rather than a postcolonial one (Alshammami 2017: 151).

For a long time, Saudi Arabia has been an economic power, with a standing greater than or equal to that of the other members of the most powerful economic organizations, including the Group of Twenty (G20) and The World Trade Organization (WTO). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has never been colonized. For these reasons, Alshammami considers that contemporary Saudi Arabian novels, especially those published after 2001, can be read as postmodern novels rather than as postcolonial ones. Postcolonialism is the usual paradigm that is used to analyze contemporary Arab novels.

Rajaa Alsanea may well have been influenced by postmodern novels, and postmodern aesthetics in general.

3. Literature Review

The publication of *Girls of Riyadh* aroused both interest among book reviewers, literary critics, academic researchers, and other literati. As a controversy-sparking novel, *Girls of Riyadh* aroused curiosity as well because it was published outside Saudi Arabia³. In her 2006 review of the Arabic version *Banat Al-Riyadh*, Heba Saleh, the correspondent of *BBC News* in Riyadh, writes that the novel has angered some people in Saudi Arabia, but it has also attracted praise for its



honesty. The release of the English version *Girls of Riyadh* in 2007 widened and diversified the readership as non-Arab countries, particularly Western countries, could have access to it and read about "Rajaa Alsanea's insight into the closed world of Saudi women", as stated by Andrew Hammond, the correspondent of Reuters in Riyadh, who avers that, with the English version, the novel went on sale worldwide (Hammond 2007: 1).

Saudi short story writer Hassan al-Neimy sees in the publication of *Girls of Riyadh* a turning-point for readership in Saudi Arabia. In addition, Alsanea's novel has given birth to a new breed of female writers in the kingdom, "the boldness of the book got women writing in the same style, publishing their own daily experiences", according to al-Neimy, who looks upon the "private worlds" of Saudi women as "fertile ground for literature" (in Hammond 2007: 2).

In his groundbreaking paper "Breaking Silence in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*" (2013), Isam M. Shihada approaches *Girls of Riyadh* with feminist theory and examines the status of women in Saudi Arabia. He analyzes the way patriarchy, double moral standards, tribal mentality and social hypocrisy violate their basic human rights.

On the other hand, Fatima Felemban's "A Linguistic Analysis of *Banat Al-Riyadh*" (2016) explores the Arabic version of Rajaa Alsanea's novel, *Banat Al-Riyadh*, and studies the language used for the narrative. Felemban underscores the plurilingualism that characterizes the Arabic version of the novel with the co-presence of e-Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic, Saudi Arabian dialects such as Hijazi and Najdi, and various Arabic dialects from the Arab world such as Kuwaiti, Egyptian, Lebanese and Syrian. Not to mention the linguistic borrowings from English and French. In this mosaic of languages, all put in the service of the narrative and competing through code-switching, Felemban particularly focuses on the place of the two Saudi dialects Hijazi and Najdi in the novel. Alsanea's novel provides a good sample for phonological and morphological study of these Saudi dialects, as some of the novel's characters are from the Hijaz and Najd regions of Saudi Arabia.

Going beyond a simple linguistic analysis in their paper "Building New Spaces" (2013), Gemma Ventura and Agnès Garcia-Ventura carry out a sociocultural study of Rajaa Alsanea's novel through a dual focus, language and gender. Analyzing both the Arabic version and the English version, they show how subversion is at the core of the novel. Indeed, it is a subversive novel in various ways: subversion of language, subversion of gender, subversion of symbols.

Using a postcolonial approach, Hindun (2021) analyzes *Girls of Riyadh* from the perspective of globalization. The author uses postcolonial theory and the theoretical framework of globalization to study such aspects as mimicry,



inferiority and hybridity in the novel *Girls of Riyadh*. The study discusses the influence of American culture on Arab culture and shows how it has an impact on the Arabs' way of thinking, and the behavioral changes it causes.

4. *Girls of Riyadh*, or the Art of Subverting Normativity

It comes out of the reading of Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* that it lends itself to a postmodern reading. Indeed, the novel displays a set of features that are closely identified with key aspects of postmodern aesthetic theory.

4.1. *The Fragmentation of the Narrative*

The narrative of *Girls of Riyadh* is based on a dual perspective, which installs fragmentation in the diegesis, with different typographies that strike the reader's attention. Each chapter is numbered on the basis of its sequential order: 1, 2, 3, etc. Accordingly, the first chapter bears the number "1" and the last chapter the number "50". The novel ends with a section that does not obey the structure of the chapters. Placed after the last chapter of the novel, its title is "Between You and Me" (*Girls of Riyadh* 312). Such a division into numbered chapters abides by the convention that governs the articulation of classical novels. However, this apparent conformity is immediately subverted by the very structure of the chapters themselves. Indeed, each chapter is made up of three distinctive parts: an e-mail header, a fragment and a narrative sequence⁴, all invested with distinctive functions. The e-mail headers of all the chapters of the novel have the same structure and are composed of four rubrics, as can be seen in the example below taken from the first chapter:

To: seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com
From: "seerehwenfadha7"
Date: February 13, 2004
Subject: I Shall Write of My Friends. (*Girls of Riyadh* 1)

In each chapter, the first rubric is about the recipients of the e-mails; they form a mailing list, more specifically a yahoo mail group: "seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com".

The paratextual section preceding the first chapter provides information about conditions of subscription and unsubscription:

To subscribe, send a blank message to:
seerehwenfadha7et_subscribe@yahoogroups.com
To cancel your subscription, send a blank message to:
seerehwenfadha7et_unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com
To contact the list manager, send a message to:
seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com



The second rubric of the e-mail headers is about the user name of the narrator in the novel: "seerehwenfadha7". The narrator is both the creator of the mail group and the sender of the e-mails. The subscribers are the narratees. The term "narratee" was coined by Gerald Prince (1971) through a calque of the French term *narrataire* coined by Roland Barthes (1966: 10). In fictional narratology, to borrow Genette's terminology (1991: 66), the term "narratee" refers to the explicit or implied person or audience to whom the narrator addresses the narrative (Abrams and Harpham 2015: 234). It is the fictive entity to whom the narrator addresses the narrative. In *Girls of Riyadh*, the narratees are virtual entities; they are all members of a virtual community since they meet online.

The alphanumeric characters "seerehwenfadha7et" which form the narrator's user name, as well as the name of the mail group, shed light on the narrator's purpose. Rajaa Alsanea provides clues about the Arabic term "seereh", which means "memoirs" or "story"; and "wenfadha7et", formed from the Arabic word "wenfadhahet" - with a substitution of the letter *h* with the number 7 - which means disclosed or exposed⁵.

The third rubric concerns the date the e-mail is sent. The fourth and last rubric is the subject of the e-mail, which serves as a title for the chapter. "I Shall Write of My Friends" is the subject of the e-mail in chapter 1; it is also the title of the first chapter. The proximal person deixis "My" and the term "friend", which connotes close social relationships, make of the narrator an intradiegetic one.

Of all the four rubrics quoted above, only the first and the second ones do not vary. The date and the subject of the e-mails vary according to the time and the events of the story narrated. In each chapter, the e-mail header introduces a fragment entirely in boldface. The length of the fragments varies: the length of the fragment of chapter 1 exceeds three pages, whereas the fragment of chapter 2 holds in just seven lines. In each chapter, the fragment is followed by a long narrative sequence, which is actually the story narrated, the stories of the narrator's four friends.

The fragments are discussion forums between the narrator and the narratees, as they are also a space where the narrator gets a feedback about her narrative from the narratees; and where she makes comments on the narratees' reactions. As early as the first fragment - the fragment of the first chapter - the narrator clearly exposes her purpose to the virtual narratees. In so doing, she invites the virtual community to join her in "one of the most explosive scandals and noisiest, wildest all-night parties". She proposes to be their "personal tour guide" in the revelation of a new world, as she says: "a world closer to you than you might imagine. We all live in this world but do not really experience it, seeing only what we can tolerate and ignoring



the rest" (*Girls of Riyadh* 1). The narrator warns the virtual community that it requires courage to listen to the truth she is about to tell on the World Wide Web:

To everyone out there
Who has got enough inner courage to read the naked truth laid out on the World Wide Web and the resolve to accept that truth, with of course the essential patience to stay with me through this insane adventure (*Girls of Riyadh* 1).

The narrator specifies that it is by means of e-mails that she is going to tell the story: "*it's to you that I write my e-mails*" (*Girls of Riyadh* 1).

The narrative sequences in the chapters of the novel are about the lives of the narrator's four girlfriends Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle and Lamees, who all live "*huddled in the shadow of a man*" (*Girls of Riyadh* 2). However, prior to any disclosure, the narrator develops what can be considered a narrative pact with two clauses, both dictated by the virtual environment in which the narrative takes place. The first pact is a pact of confidentiality; she shall not expose the true identity of her friends and of all those who are concerned by the story. The names are therefore not true; however, the narrator warns that this will not have any consequence on the truthfulness of the story, hence the second pact she develops, a pact of reliability: "*I've decided to change all the names of the people I will write about and make a few alteration to the facts that will not compromise the honesty of the tale nor take the sting out of the truth*" (*Girls of Riyadh* 2). Reliability is a key aspect in fictional narrative. The narrator of *Girls of Riyadh* is mindful of her integrity and credibility, and she makes it clear that she is not playing a trick to the narratees, nor to the readers.

The narrator's pact of reliability intrinsically involves a self-reflexive aspect as it denotes a commentary on the narrative itself. This definitely highlights the metafictionality of the novel *Girls of Riyadh*. Indeed, through the narrator's pact, the author Rajaa Alsanea is implicitly commenting on the art of storytelling or the writing technique of fictional narrative. It is in chapter 6 that the question of the unreliable narrator, closely associated with postmodern fiction, is raised at last. The narrator's reliability is put to doubt by some narratees, or e-mail subscribers, who think the narrator is one of the four girls in the story narrated, more specifically either Gamrah, or Sadeem, or else still Michelle:

Many e-mails have come my way that ask me to reveal my true identity. Am I one of the four girls I am writing about in these e-mails? So far, most of the guesses have veered between Gamrah and Sadeem. Only one guy thinks I'm likely to be Michelle, but then he said he wasn't sure since Michelle's English is better than mine! (*Girls of Riyadh* 41).

In questioning the narrator's identity, the readers of her e-mails raise a doubt about her integrity and, accordingly, about the reliability of her narrative. This installs in *Girls of Riyadh* the aspect of postmodern fiction known as the unreliable narrator.



Alsanea's treatment of her narrator is reminiscent of Fowles's in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969). Indeed, just as in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, the narrator of *Girls of Riyadh* identifies herself as the author⁶. She is a narrator-writer, and she comes up with authorial commentary in the fragments. The Internet legitimates authorial intrusiveness, as internet forums are meant to be a framework for communication.

Alsanea's narrator exists within the confines of her narrative and, sometimes, even enters it through her interaction with the female protagonists, who are her friends⁷. The intrusive narrator is standard in many Victorian novels (Holmes 1981: 188). Fowles imitates this convention in *The French Lieutenant's Woman*; in *Girls of Riyadh*, however, the intrusiveness of the narrator is of another kind. She does not appear in the narrative sequences, but she clearly relates in the last section of the book that she has been in contact with the protagonists all along the narrative. As a case in point, she often got help from Michelle, who provided her with information and details for her narrative: "*Michelle was really bowled over and told me she had no idea that I had such a knack for storytelling. She often helped me recall certain events and she corrected details I remembered unclearly...*" (*Girls of Riyadh* 312). As for Gamrah, she does not welcome the narrator's e-mails in a positive way. Indeed, she gets angry with the narrator when she learns from her sister about the revelation of her own story: "*Gamrah blew up at me and threatened to cut off all ties – Michelle and I both tried – but she was afraid people would find out things she and her family didn't want them to know*" (313).

Michelle's help regarding certain events and details partly reveals the narrator's access to the inner lives of the protagonists and evokes the convention of omniscience in fiction. The issue of the omniscient narrator is clearly raised when some narratees ask the narrator how she knows about the notes Sadeem has written in her scrapbook. Deferring her answer, the narrator confesses in the last section of her narrative, entitled "Between You and Me", that Sadeem had put at her disposal her sky-blue scrapbook: "[...] *she surprised me one day (after my thirty-seventh e-mail) with a really precious gift, which was her sky-blue scrapbook. I never would have known about it if she hadn't given it to me*" (*Girls of Riyadh* 313).

4.2. Hybridity of Genres, Eclecticism and Intertextuality

Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* would undeniably be shortlisted, if there ever were a selection of prose fiction works that are likely to constitute good evidence for Hudson's characterization of the novel genre as "[the] most elastic and irregular of all the great forms of literary expression" (Hudson 1963: 130). In *Girls of Riyadh*, the narrative is done through a series of weekly e-mails, which reminds of several serial works published in periodicals, magazines and newspapers in 18th or 19th century England by Addison, Steele, Dickens, Eliot, Hardy, etc.



Girls of Riyadh involves two environments: a fictional one and a virtual one. The story is narrated to internet subscribers, who appear to have a dual role: narratees and social media forum participants. Therefore, it is a blend of traditional narrative and chat on internet forums. The virtual environment guarantees anonymity and leaves the door open for socialization between men and women, running counter the sociocultural norms in Saudi Arabia. In the fragment of the second chapter, the narrator turns down men's invitations for further acquaintance:

First, I have a little message for the following gentlemen: Hassan, Ahmad, Fahad and Mohammed, who made my day with their earnest e-mail with their earnest e-mail enquiries.
The answer is: Uh-uh! Forget it guys... no, we cannot get to know each other (*Girls of Riyadh* 15).

The pervasiveness of the technological environment is illustrated, among other examples, by the way Lamees teaches Gamrah how to use technology to communicate when the latter divorces with her husband Rashid in Chicago and gets back to Saudi Arabia with her baby. Although she lives with her family, she is socially isolated, almost quarantined. The Internet, e-mails and online chats are the only way of communicating with her friends. Online socializing turns out to be a lifebuoy, a window on the outside world.

The narrator resorts to a technological metaphor to describe the male gaze that the bridegroom Rashid, Gamrah's father, her uncle and her four brothers cast on the women present in the home during the celebration of Gamrah's wedding: "Rashid plowed toward the stage along with Gamrah's father, her uncle and her four brothers. Each man tried to download as many female faces as he could onto his mental hard drive..." (*Girls of Riyadh* 10). Onomastics further reveals the pervasiveness of the technological environment. As a case in point, one of the characters in *Girls of Riyadh* is called Sultan Al-Internetti, thus named after the Internet⁸. It is a highly symbolic name in the novel. In Arabic, "sultan" means "force" or "power"; therefore, the name Sultan Al-Internetti literally means "the force of the Internet" or "the power of the Internet". The name also means "the sovereign of the Internet" because the word "sultan" also refers to "sovereign". There is another character with a symbolic name in the novel: Nasser Al-Clubs (*Girls of Riyadh* 186). As expressed by his name which evokes membership, he is a member of the mail group.

By sharing the stories of her four female friends on the web, the narrator endows the novel with a less formal tone, which recalls gossips, confidences and other conversational features. Placed after the last chapter of the novel, the section entitled "Between You and Me" connotes confidence or confession (*Girls of Riyadh* 312).



While thematizing history and politics in the narrative, notably through the issues of traditions and laws, Rajaa Alsanea plays with the codes of postmodernism. Indeed, playfulness as a game of reading and writing is an aspect of postmodern aesthetic theory. Postmodern writers play with the genres, with the codes, with language, and so on. In addition to the language of technology, the novel includes, among other examples, Arabic words, French words, and translations of Koranic verses. It is a Koranic verse that serves as an epigraph to the novel: "*Verily, Allah does not change a people's condition until they change what is in themselves.*" QUR'AN, SURAT AL-RA'D (The Chapter of Thunder), Verse 11.

The novel's epigraph fulfills a genuine proleptic function as it is an appeal to women in Saudi Arabia to stand up firm and change their condition. In the novel, a few fragments are introduced by Koranic verses which serve as epigraphs as well. The fragment of chapter 17 is a case in point (*Girls of Riyadh* 115):

Have We not laid your chest open for you, and put aside your burden for you, that burden which weighed heavily on your back even as it exalted your mention among people? For with hardship comes ease; indeed, with hardship comes ease.
– *Qur'an*, Surat Al-Sharh (Chapter of Easing), verses 1-8

*Hadiths*⁹ are inserted in the narrative. The epigraph to chapter 12 is a hadith (*Girls of Riyadh* 85):

I asked Aisha "Prophet Mohammed's wife", what did the Prophet – peace be upon him – do in his home? She said, He was occupied in the vocation and service of his family.
– *The Hadith collection of Al-Bukhari*, verse 676.

Girls of Riyadh involves what Thomas Russan calls "*postmodernism and the parody of argument*" (1995), that is to say here an argument which makes explicit reference to another argument, functioning thus as its palimpsest. In Rajaa Alsanea's novel, playfulness is also achieved through parody, as in the following parody of a Koranic verse: "[...] *from the desert we all come and to the desert we shall all return*" (*Girls of Riyadh* 2). This argument made by the narrator is a parody of the following Koranic verse:

"Verily, we belong to Allah, and verily to Him we shall return."
– *Qur'an*, Surat 2, Al-Baqara (The Cow), Verse 156.

Standing as epigraphs in some fragments, quotations from the Greek philosopher Socrates, the American writer Mark Twain, and the former American First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, to name but these ones, install intertextuality in the novel. In the first chapter, the subject of the e-mail is "*I Shall Write to My Friends*". Such a discursive statement is not only the opening line of a



poem by the Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani, but also a refrain in that poem. The narrator reproduces the poem *verbatim* in the novel. Here are the first four lines:

*I shall write of my girlfriends,
for in each one's tale
I see my story and self prevail,
a tragedy my own life speaks.* (*Girls of Riyadh* 3)

The novel also includes songs by various well-known artists, among which the Lebanese singer Julia Boutros and the Kuwaiti singer Nabil Shu'a'il. The title of the novel *Girls of Riyadh* itself is borrowed from the famous Saudi singer Abdul Majeed Abdullah:

*Girls of Riyadh, O girls of Riyadh,
O gems of the turbaned fathers of old!
Have mercy on that victim, have mercy
On that man who lies prone on the threshold.* (*Girls of Riyadh* 22).

The eclecticism that characterizes the narrative pattern of *Girls of Riyadh* connotes postmodern culture and reflects the nature of the virtual world in which the narrative takes place. Transcending gender, the narrator sets *eighteen* as the minimum age for membership in the virtual community, though she knows that the minimum age of majority, hence of responsibility, is twenty-one in some countries. Her dig at Saudi Arabia, which gives a hint that the minimum age for responsibility is six for boys and after the first menstrual bleeding for girls, foreshadows satirical criticism of the sociocultural realities of her country:

To all of you out there
Who are over the age of eighteen, and in some countries that'll mean twenty-one,
though among us Saudis it means over six (and no, I don't mean sixteen) for guys
and after menarche for girls (*Girls of Riyadh* 1).

4.3. Rejecting Modernism and Deconstructing Classical Canons

In the fragment of chapter 10, the narrator posits that she is subjected to a lot of criticisms for quoting lines by the late poet Nizar Qabbani. The reason why she quotes the Syrian poet is the simplicity, eloquence and uniqueness of his poetry, which cannot be found in modernist poetry. Modernist poets fail to touch or influence her:

I quote Qabbani for a simple reason: There isn't anything out there today that could compare. I've never read any modern poetry that has the simplicity and the clear eloquence of his. I have never felt even slightly moved or influenced by those modernist poets who compose a qasida of thirty lines in which they talk about nothing! (*Girls of Riyadh* 68).



Social thinkers such as Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and James G. Frazer, to name just these, have been prominent intellectual precursors of modernism; they had questioned the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion, and morality, and also traditional ways of conceiving of the human self (Abrams and Harpham 2015: 226). In *Girls of Riyadh*, the psychoanalytical theories developed by Freud are ridiculed and derided as they fail to provide any sort of explanation. In the novel, Sadeem is shocked by Waleed's betrayal. After the signature of their marriage contract, Sadeem has yielded to Waleed's advances by accepting to sleep with him just to please him, as the wedding was supposed to be celebrated pretty soon. They were just waiting for Sadeem to take her exams at the university. The theories of Freud Sadeem has read fail to provide the faintest hint of explanation regarding Waleed's treacherous and cruel behaviour:

After reading Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, Essentials of Psychoanalysis, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality, On Narcissism and Totem and Taboo, Sadeem gradually realized that Freud, with all his totems, tomatoes, cucumbers and green salad vegetables, was not going to be much help in solving her problem! Sigmund was not able to yield any explanation of why Waleed had left her (*Girls of Riyadh* 76).

In the classical epistolary novel, the narrative is more often than not conveyed entirely by an exchange of letters (Abrams and Harpham 2015: 254). A letter is by definition a mail and the other way round. In *Girls of Riyadh*, e-mails are the medium whereby the narrative is conveyed from the beginning to the end. It is an epistolary novel of a new kind, a "virtual epistolary novel" so to speak, as e-mails stand for the virtual counterpart of letters in the classical epistolary novel. Furthermore, in the classical epistolary novel, a letter is addressed to a single recipient; in *Girls of Riyadh*, however, all the subscribers are recipients of the e-mails sent by the narrator.

Girls of Riyadh is characterized by an interactive narrative. The narrator makes the readers of her emails, or else the narratees, collaborate in the shaping of her narrative, through the feedback she gets from them. This further anchors Rajaa Alsanea's novel in the epistolary genre. The narrator is sometimes subjected to criticisms regarding the way she handles the narrative. In chapter 9, the narratees or e-mail subscribers have different appreciations of the way Rashid treats his wife Gamrah in the story. While some of them condemn Rashid's misconduct, others complain about Gamrah's passivity. A third group complain about the topic or subject-matter itself:

A lot of angry e-mails came my way last week. Some were angry at Rashid for his cruelty. Others were angry at Gamrah for being so passive. And the rest - and that was most of them were - angry at me for talking about the sun signs and the Ouija board and reading coffee cups which not so many believe in (*Girls of Riyadh* 64).



The narrator is even the target of condemnations from conservative men who accuse her of tarnishing the reputation or image of women in Saudi Arabia:

Men have written to me saying: Who authorized you to speak for the girls of Najd?! You are nothing but a malevolent and rancorous woman deliberately attempting to sully the image of women in Saudi society (*Girls of Riyadh* 32).

With the idiolect that characterizes her as early as the opening pages of the novel, and which shows that she is far from being a submissive woman, the female narrator replies with a sarcastic tone:

And to them I say: We are only at the beginning, sweethearts. If you are mounting a war against me in the fifth e-mail, then imagine what you will be saying about me after you have read the many e-mails to come! You're in for a ride. May goodness and prosperity come to you! (*Girls of Riyadh* 32).

The narrator's rejection of classical novel genres such as romance further illustrates the deconstruction of aesthetic normativity as it does legitimate the emergence of a new paradigm in fictional narrative:

To all who have
Grown weary of the "Me Tarzan You Jane" brand of romance novels and have gotten beyond a black and white, good and white evil view of the world (*Girls of Riyadh* 1).

In classical novels, there is, in general, one male or female protagonist – a hero or heroine – cast into the arena of life, struggling to overcome problems of life. *Girls of Riyadh* presents four heroines grappling with the realities of their sociocultural environment. Furthermore, the narrator presents her virtual narrative experience as an adventure: "this insane adventure" (*Girls of Riyadh* 1). This gives a hint about the nature of the story as well as the nature of the novel. In view of that, *Girls of Riyadh* can be read as an adventure novel, but a "virtual adventure novel". Indeed, the narrator's virtual experience with the narratees is a story within the whole story of the novel, albeit a dialogical interaction of fiction and reality.

CONCLUSION

With its internet-mediated narrative, Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* illustrates the notion of "techno-fictionalization" or "technology writing". With a narrative entirely based on a weekly exchange of e-mails, *Girls of Riyadh* shows how the novel, which is the latest genre to develop as well as the largest and the fullest of all the modes of artistic expressions, still has the wind in its sails in terms of creativity. *Girls of Riyadh* also reveals how the novel is consubstantially endowed with a protean nature as it easily adjusts to the changing social and artistic circumstances.

Gemma Ventura and Agnès Garcia-Ventura (2013) have demonstrated that Alsanea's novel is a subversion of the sociocultural order through the breaking down of normativity. This research paper has shown that this subversion can be



extended to the structure of the narrative. As a matter of fact, Alsanea definitely breaks down structural normativity and comes up with an aesthetic paradigm that absolutely deconstructs the classical canons, and that is closely identified with postmodern aesthetic theory.

Rajaa Alsanea resorts to 21st-century mode of communication, notably internet forums or chat rooms; in so doing, she introduces the reader to a contemporary alive fictional present that absolutely abides by the reality of the time. Her literary creativity lies in the fact that she subordinates aesthetics to ideology by giving voice to women, through a female activist as narrator, who adopts a narrative method that echoes the subversion of prevailing sociocultural norms in Saudi Arabia.

Notes

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1 - See Isam M. Shihada. 2013. "Breaking Silence in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*", in *International Journal of English and Literature (IJEL)*, vol. 3, issue 2, June 2013, 59-74.

2 - George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) deals with the issue of government surveillance and totalitarian control of the people through technology, symbolized by the famous slogan "*Big Brother is watching you*" which appears many times in the novel. This is one example among many others in fiction.

3 - Rajaa Alsanea's novel was first banned in Saudi Arabia. Following the great success the novel met with after its publication - seven reprintings within two years and translations into more than twenty languages - the government of Saudi Arabia finally allowed the book to be sold in the kingdom (Ventura and Ventura 2013: 1).

4 - We propose this terminology.

5 - See Glossary of Names (*Girls of Riyadh* 317).

6 - It would be a mistake, however, to equate the narrator of *Girls of Riyadh* narrowly with *Rajaa Alsanea*. Although the narrator makes, at times, first-person commentaries about the story, she is not Alsanea's real "I".

7 - Holmes recalls that the narrator of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* identifies himself as the author and, from the start, does not exist within the confines of his narrative, although he does enter it briefly as a character at two points (Holmes 1981: 184-185).

8 - In the section "Glossary of Names", Rajaa Alsanea comes up with an etymological explanation: "*Sultan Al-Interneti: of or relating to the Internet*" (*Girls of Riyadh* 318).



9 – *Hadiths* are collections of the sayings and daily practice of Prophet Mohammed.

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