



The Power of the Saudi Woman's Novel: From Silence to Empowerment

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of an extended history of Arab women's silence in general, and Saudi women's in particular, in the field of literature, this paper seeks to introduce the development of the Saudi female novelist's voice and its progress. It traces the improvement of the Saudi female novelist chronologically, demonstrating how writing is an essential tool for self-identification and self-expression. An analysis is made of how novels by Saudi women writers have changed through recent decades and how Prince Mohammad Bin Salman's 2030 Vision initiative might be said to have empowered these voices expressed in fictional words. It introduces the significance of Saudi female novels and how they create new fictional environments that uncover the inner strength of women and highlight their individual and collective empowerment. This paper demonstrates how Saudi female novelists have been fully aware of the significant influence of novels as one artistic means of expression. Today, they can openly express their previously unspoken thoughts and feelings. Moreover, the paper addresses the important implications of their writing, i.e. the remarkable progress achieved in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

1. INTRODUCTION

There have been centuries of male literacy in Saudi Arabia, but it is specifically a late twentieth-century or new phenomenon for females. The reason for such a delay in the appearance of Saudi women writers, in comparison with their Arab Egyptian, Levantine, and Moroccan counterparts, is a conservative culture. Saudi Arabia has a culture that is fundamentally conservative and traditional. Its social atmosphere is highly reserved, and women are marginalised. Such marginalisation was a social problem, never a religious one. The marginalisation of women's education, for example, was one of the prevalent attitudes in Saudi culture until the 1950s and only started to change when a group of educated middle-class men petitioned the government to establish schools for girls. These men thought it was essential to integrate women into the country's development and therefore believed it was important to educate women because they would better contribute to the family and the harmony of the

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marriage (Baki, 2004). According to scholar Sarah Yizraeli (2012), the first government-funded school for women was opened in 1960. The General Presidency for the Education of Girls established the first women's college in Saudi Arabia in 1970. Since then, gradual calls for national development have increased, and Saudi women have begun participating in more programmes.

Consequently, education has opened new doors for Saudi women to participate in the growth of their country beyond the borders of “the traditional confines of marriage and motherhood” (Al-Munajjed, 1997, p. 6). It is important to note that Islam has never neglected the teaching and learning of women. It requires it and regards it as an equal duty of both men and women. Many verses in the Quran call for the awareness of knowledge, such as: “Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given knowledge, by degrees. And Allah is Aware of what you do” (Quran, 58:11). King Faisal managed to convince tribal Bedouins of the importance of formal schooling for women (Huyette, 1985, p. 74). He and his wife, Iffat Al Thunayan, supported women's education.¹ His wife pushed enthusiastically for women's education in Saudi Arabia. She believed that women have the right to educate themselves in science, language, and other subjects. The King and his wife were committed to educating girls and established the first girls' academy in 1956, located in Jeddah and named Dar Al Hanan [The House of Affection]. This name was inspired by the Quran's commandment to care for girls (Lacey, 1981, pp. 56-68).

By the turn of the century, his Royal Highness King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz, a reformist, had adopted policies that encouraged women to work towards employment in the industrial fields, similar to those of men. Thus his Royal Highness the King sent a clear message that the country could not advance economically and socially without the help of women (Mills, 2009). King Abdullah is labelled as the ruler of change. He “has a strategy: He's trying to empower women as much as he can” (Onsman, 2011, p. 525). In 2005 he established and launched the King Abdullah Sponsorship Program (KASP). The programme is available to all Saudi students regardless of gender and enables them to travel overseas for higher education opportunities and experience (Taylor & Albasri, 2014). This opened new windows for many Saudi elites, particularly for educated women. The Saudi woman has developed a broadened perspective by living abroad and integrating with different people, cultures, and worlds. Then came the reign of his Royal Highness King Salman Bin Abdul-Aziz in 2015. With the new 2030 Vision initiative of his Royal Highness Prince Mohammad Bin Salman, the country has become recognised as a country with a promising future, leading its people to modernisation and driving greater female autonomy and empowerment.

2. The Evolution of the Saudi Female Novelist

Mazzoni (2017) argues that the novel became the modern book of life: one of the best representations of the narrator's experience of the world. He explains that “modern novels consist of stories told in any way whatsoever, by narrators who exist – like us – as contingent beings within time and space. They, therefore, present an interpretation, not a copy, of the

¹ Iffat was born and raised in Istanbul in an uprooted Saudi family; she returned to the Kingdom in 1932. She helped develop progressive ideas in the Kingdom. Travelling extensively, especially in Europe and the United States, she empowered her kin and played a leading role in enlightening women in Saudi Arabia.

world” (p. 1). Thus, writing novels helped female writers to speak about the unspeakable. Women's novels are used as a tool to call for a feminist consciousness. As Puspita (2018) claims, a novel “is created with various purposes regarding the existence of women in various cultural contexts as well as with various women's views of their world” (p. 657).

Novelists present their cultures, values, beliefs, and ideas to others. A female novelist is understandably influenced by her life, and gender issues are inseparable for these emerging writers. The Saudi female novel can be considered a field where stereotypical images of the Saudi woman that have circulated for decades are introduced. However, it is also a field where the power of voice can break these images. It is a tool to break the silence against women's oppression and patriarchal hegemony whilst representing the relationship between the female and the “other” – men and society. Many, if not all, Saudi women novelists convey remarkable insights into the many lives of the Saudi female. This raises an essential question about labelling the novel written by Saudi women. Can it be called a “feminist” novel, and if so, does the feminist novel have a unique vantage point that gives it a way to speak out and treat diverse issues differently from what is written by men? Is this an issue of classification in favour of the feminist novel, or does it increase its problems and obstruct its creative track? Nonetheless, one cannot discuss the Saudi women's novel without talking about the position of the woman in Saudi society in the field of culture, her contribution to society, and her relationship with men both before and after the new millennium with the establishment of the 2030 initiative.²

This paper focuses on those Saudi women writers who have contributed significantly to the development of the Saudi novel. It reflects on the complex role that the socio-cultural context of Saudi Arabia has played and continues to play in the process of the development of Saudi women's writing. It introduces how the Saudi women's novel has been able to break with the traditional view prevailing in Saudi society, and it is now a free and more creative entity. It also introduces three different phases of the development of the Saudi female novel: first, The Silent Age; followed by The Dark Age of Oppression; and finally, The Golden Age of Women's Empowerment.

2.1 First Phase (The 1950s-1980): The Silent Age

The novel is considered a new genre in the Saudi literary scene in the twentieth century. This origin is associated with Abdul-Quddūs al-Anṣārī's (1930) novel *al-Taw'amān* [The Twins]. This work has a moralistic and religious attitude and introduces the theme of pride for the Islam and Arab identity. As for the first Saudi female novel, this emerged 30 years after the first novel by their male counterparts, or the mid–the 1950s. With the beginning of the formal education of girls, Samira Khashoggi (1958) published her first novel, *Wadda 'tu Āmālī* [Farewell to my Hopes], outside the Kingdom, which she wrote under the pen name ‘Daughter of the Arabian Peninsula’, discussing a human reality about eternal feelings and emotions.³ Here one can

² Saudi Arabia has begun a reform programme leading the country into cosmopolitan modernity by promoting the prosperity of both genders. The country is leading major change—social, political, and economic— which has promoted the freedom of speech.

³ Samira Khashoggi is a Saudi Arabian liberal author, as well as the owner and editor-in-chief of *Al Sharkiah Magazine*. Her father Muhammad Khashoggi was King Abdulaziz Al Saud's personal doctor. She was educated in Egypt and was one of the Saudi women who supported the education of girls. She wrote under the pseudonym Samirah ‘Daughter of the Arabian

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notice two significant themes. First is the time difference between the male and female product. They are 30 years apart. This time difference undoubtedly reflects the domination of men on the Saudi cultural scene and the effect of the relative social transformation, which reflects the connection between the novel and such transformation. Second, one considers that Khashoggi (1958) wrote a mature novel in the literary concept at a time when education had not yet ripened in Saudi Arabia. It is important to note that she did not write or publish it in her native country. Like other Saudi female novelists, her other five novels were published abroad in the 1960s and '70s. This is also true of Huda Al-Rasheed (1973) and Hind Baghaffar (1972), who both reflect individual attempts that show the culture of these individuals away from the Saudi traditional cultural context.⁴ Due to the long distance from their local social environment, only the national identity appears, not the cultural identity.

Looking back at the writing of these novelists, it is evident that their works neither realistically address the Saudi social formations nor highlight the Saudi female identity. These early writers introduced emotional themes outside the Saudi context. This highlights the effect of foreign culture on Saudi female novelists during that era. Many critics do not consider the works by Samira Khashoggi (1958), Huda Al-Rasheed (1973), and Hind Baghaffar (1972) as representative of Saudi women's reality and dilemmas. Therefore they were largely ignored or given minimal critical attention, as demonstrated in Al-Wahabi (2005), M. Al-Ḥāzimī (1981), and Al Qaḥṭānī (1994).⁵ Other critics, for instance, Al Ṣamādī (1981), al-Saqqāf (1999), and al-Nu'amī (2009) argued that novels published before 1980 do not belong to Saudi literature except via the nationality of their authors. However, many critics disagree with this perspective. They claim novelists "have the right to select the settings and times for the events of their novels, especially when they possess the experience and knowledge of those places and customs and cultures" (Almarhaby, 2019). Almarhaby (2019) declares, "[al]though we may concede that early Saudi women novelists had limited literary abilities, their representations of the locations where they lived or studied in their novels should be considered a positive aspect of their literary technique" (p. 58). Nonetheless, no female writings were published in this era. This is due to the tribal resistance to female education, which was a major factor in the delayed emergence of the Saudi woman's novel and hindered the development of their social and cultural status. Hence, the Saudi female voice was still stifled.

Education for girls is limited, and this poses some crucial problems. For them, it is limited to religious and some approved private schools. Although King Faisal and his wife

Peninsula'. In 1962 Samira Khashoggi began to head a women's welfare association, Al Nahda, which was based in Riyadh and was the first organisation to target women in Saudi Arabia (Derbal, 2020, pp. 167-192).

⁴ Huda Al-Rasheed (1973) is the author of *Nisaa' Abr Alattheer* [Women across the Ether] (1973). Al-Rasheed is known as the first Arabic female news presenter on Saudi Arabia's Channel One, before becoming the first woman from the Gulf region to join the BBC international radio station in London called Huna London (This is London). As Hind Baghaffar (1972), she is the author of *Albara'ah Almafgoodah* [The Lost Innocence]. Baghaffar is one of the pioneers in writing in the media and literature. She wrote the first Saudi adventure crime novel in 1972.

⁵ See more in Wahabi, A. (2008). *Alriwayah alSuudiah alnisaiah walmutagairat althaqafia. "alnashaah walgadaya waltattawur"* [The Saudi Women's Novel and The Cultural Variables: Origins, Issues and Development]. Egypt: Dar alilm Waliman Publisher.

encouraged girls' education in the late 1950s, and a royal decree was issued in 1960 to establish the General Presidency for Girls' Education to emphasise the importance of education on the socio-economic outcome, the literary output of the Saudi female was limited. This was because women were living under a restrictive tribal patriarchal authority which prevented them from participating in public and social arenas. Those who did write chose to start their literary product with a short story, though they were very few (Al-Sudairy, 2017). Al-Sudairy (2017) writes, "[t]he choice provides a mask for women authors to hide behind and express freely their opinions or what they long for" (p. 56). However, that only came to the surface in the 1980s. Hazem (2018) writes:

Based on Hamdawi's (2010) *Bibliography of Very Short Story in Saudi Arabia*, one can argue that although the short story emerged as a significant form of literature in Saudi Arabia in the 1970s, it emerged as a dominant mode of women's writing only in the 1990s. Stories written by Saudi women in the early stages bear witness to the rapidly transforming social, historical and economic conditions of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, they can be considered important documentation of this evolutionary period in the history of the kingdom. (p. 153)

Thus, women's writing was not inherent in Saudi literature until the 1990s, even in the short form, such as in stories. At the same time, early-stage stories represent valuable evidence of the reality in which Saudi women lived at that time of social changes.

2.2 Second Phase (1980-2000): The Dark Age of Oppression

Since the 1980s, women have been given greater education opportunities, which include studying in foreign institutions. A positive correlation exists between broadened education horizons and a more elevated conscious awareness of basic issues of gender and oppression. Likewise, how orthodox rather than heterodox approaches to Islam dominated social practices. Influential writers emerged in these years, including Amal Shatta's (1980) *Gadan Ansa* [Tomorrow I Will Forget],⁶ Raja Alem's (1987) *Arabaa Safar* [4th of Safar],⁷ Bahiyah Busbait's (1987) *Durah min Al Ahsaa* [A Pearl from Al Ahsaa],⁸ and Safiah Bugdadi's (1987) *Dayaa Walnoor Ubhir* [Loss and the Light Dazzles].⁹ As a result, the female experience has become richer due to the impact of education and the relative social transformation occurring in the country. Sedekka Arebi (1994, p. 356) claims this new era's novelists aim to change the male-dominated discourse about Saudi women.

A dominant male discourse theme was evident with the publication of *Wahaj min bian Ramad Alsineen* [Glow from the Ashes of Years] by one of the best Saudi women novelists,

⁶ Amal Shatta is one of the most significant Saudi female novelists in the second phase. She has written four novels.

⁷ Raja Alem was born in 1970 in Makkah. She has won many prizes, the most recent of which was in 2005 – the Arabic Women's Creative Writing Prize. Some of her works have been translated into English and Spanish.

⁸ Bahiyah Busbait was born in 1967 in Alhafoof in Saudi Arabia. She won many prizes in writing short stories.

⁹ Safiah Bugdadi wrote this novel with an educational vision; however, it did not receive the attention of writers and critics due to its literary weakness. Bugdadi was preoccupied with writing books, as she published five books on various religious topics.

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Safiah Anbar (1988). In this narrative, the heroine appears as an educated Muslim in a modern setting who forms a relationship with an educated man refusing to travel to the west when she decides to study there.¹⁰ Because she refuses to continue without achieving her goal, which is marriage, the relationship does not last. The heroine becomes highly proficient in her studies and proves to westerners that the Saudi female is serious and able to excel professionally and personally. She is heroic for, amongst other reasons, pursuing a career in the sciences. According to Anbar (1988), identity means research, knowledge, self-affirmation in front of the “other”—men or society—and self-criticism. This is represented in the heroine’s demand that society be more flexible in dealing with orthodox Islamic theories to modernise it and reduce extremism.

Since then, the novel genre began its rise in status in Saudi literature, examining new technical styles and themes while emphasising the dark age of oppression. Consequently, the late 1980s continued with this progressive growth and expansion. While the 1980s was the decade of abundance in fiction, the following was the decade of quality and mastery. Almeahidly (2020) writes, "Saudi women's novelists of the 1990s have made tremendous strides, entering the literary scene in ever-increasing numbers and distinguishing themselves with the richness and diversity of their novels' themes and styles" (p. 1). Another common theme in the Saudi novel is the vulnerable, voiceless female who is contrasted with the dominant male voice. This theme is represented in Khashoggi's (1973) later novel *Qatarat min Al-Dumu* [Drops of Tears], in which voiceless women struggle against patriarchal hegemony. Khashoggi (1973) shifts to a Saudi social context in which she tries to move to a new prohibited thematic area that tackles emotional themes with taboo issues. Significantly, the development of Saudi women’s status and their calls for rights were delayed by rigid patriarchal traditions on the one hand and by extremist Islamic teachings on the other. Almarhaby (2019) explains:

The expression of women's issues and concerns at this time, such as the right [to] education, forced marriage, and emotional issues such as love and the relationship between the two genders, was considered offensive and was prohibited by society's social restrictions. (p. 107)

In other words, with such restrictions, their artistic talents were prevented from expressing their beliefs and feelings on personal issues. Despite this, novelists like Khashoggi (1973) challenged those social limitations. The emotions dominating the Saudi female novel are the flood of feelings, self-questioning, and fear of the future. Female degradation and segregation remained a central theme during this decade. Therefore, the novel of this era can be considered a revelation or outlet for social problems without giving attention to the fiction’s plot, which is attributed to cultural influence and literary maturity. Although many cultural and intellectual changes were devoted to raising awareness of the importance of better recognising women and their gender roles and identities, the patriarchal hegemony prevailed as a core narrative.

¹⁰ Safiah Anbar grew up in a house of thought and culture. Her father, the writer Abdul Hamid Anbar, was the first to introduce translation into the Saudi press and the first to establish a literary club in Madina, which was called at the time The Lecture Club.

2.3 Third Phase (2000–Present): The Golden Age of Women's Empowerment

A significant leap in the evolution of female Saudi fiction occurred in the new millennium. A continuous impact has been made through greater access to education and broader cultural exposure to alternative social systems. Emerging voices like Qumashah al-'Ulayyan, who published two novels in 2000: *Untha Al-Ankaboot* [The Female Spider], which won the Arab Creators Award in Sharjah (Al-'Ulayyan, 2000a), and was translated into English, and *Biat Min Zujaj* [A House Made of Glass] (Al-'Ulayyan, 2000b).¹¹ Saudi female writers introduced negative representations of society and male gender identities in particular. It is as though novelists of this era are putting men on trial more seriously than ever. He is represented as a cruel, hegemonic father who forces the old form of religious oppression on his wife/wives by pushing his daughter to marry an old, wealthy sheikh. Men, in this context, are represented as unpredictable and cruel. It is worth emphasising that the female protagonists are the judges and critics, allowing the author to situate females' dialogue, psychology and personalities as central. There is a reversal of roles, and the male voice is minimised or silenced.

The growth of Saudi female voices in this era is also attributable to some business and industry factors for consideration. The marketing and publicity of female authors is a new and emerging practice worth noting. It suggests that the Saudi female novel has become outstanding to an unprecedented extent in the narrative product. Between 20 and 25 novels have been published annually since 2003 (Attaweel, 2020). This growth can be considered an elevation of consciousness from understanding the Saudi woman's imposed inferiority. The Saudi female novelist has constructed a gender consciousness that helped develop an audacious and confrontational feminist perspective. A literary renaissance has emerged as a result. Since 2003, the female narrative has become unprecedented in Saudi Arabia. Such prosperity is demonstrated by Asma Al-Ahmadi (2020) in her condensed book *Ishkalliat Althat Asaridah fi Arriwayah Anisaiah Asuudiah min 1999-2012* [Problems of the Self Narrator in the Saudi Female Novel from 1999 to 2012]. This 800–page book is solid evidence of the rise of the Saudi female novel, its prosperity, and the multiple difficulties experienced on literary, artistic, and social levels.¹² Al-Ahmadi (2011) introduces many outstanding Saudi female novelists whose names emerged during the time period specified by the writer, such as Omaima Al-Khamis, Badriah Al-Bishr, Zainab Hifni, Lyla Al-Jihan, and many others.

The female novelist's access to this new position means she has begun to think of the world with an open mind. This view takes her out of the role of the victim to a role commensurate with her great biological role, characterised as being powerful. In particular, it

¹¹ *Untha Al-Ankaboot* [The Female Spider] (Al-'Ulayyan, 2000a) is about a miserable Saudi Arabian reality through the story of an unhappy girl who lived in oppression and injustice throughout her life, as did her sisters and her mother before her. The writer presents this story in an interesting style that is not devoid of romance and influential tragedy, and places the reader in front of a reality that happens daily and in abundance, but it is behind closed doors, so the reader does not know its impact and the extent of the tragedy in it unless someone shows it; *Biat Min Zujaj* [A House Made of Glass] (Al-'Ulayyan, 2000b) is about a father who pushes his daughter to marry an old sheikh because of his wealth.

¹² It is worth noting that this book has won the Sheikh Zayed Book Award, which is one of the most important international literary awards.

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is the role in which writing novels and reading them paves the way for self-realisation. The presence of women in the Saudi novel, whether in their capacity as a writer or as a character, is attractive and is a considerable achievement. Her presence in fiction exceeds, to some extent, her presence in real life. For example, *Sitr* [Covering] by Raja Alem (2005) and *AlUrguha* [The Swing] by Badriah Al Bisher (2010) introduce a world revolving around the concerns of the Saudi woman and the uprising of Saudi women against social extremism and women's feelings, dreams, and problems. Both novelists narrate the Saudi female's inner personal and social world and, directly or indirectly, they depict the details of the female's suffering, problems, and powerlessness resulting from life's complications. It was not possible to ignore the role of their female characters. In short, the female voices throughout these novels announce an attempt by Saudi women to demand their rights, an ongoing issue that stimulates women's empowerment. To many, the attempt is an honour, even if they fail. Some critics perceive that the female novelist can beat her male counterparts in issues related to women. Judith Kegan Gardiner (1980) argues that the differences in experience between men and women are apparent in their writing. Gardiner (1980), in her essay "On Female Identity and Writing by Women", gives examples of the characteristics of women's writing that differ from men's writing: "recurrent imagery and distinctive concept ... for example, imagery of confinement and unsentimental descriptions of childcare" (p. 178). By contrast, "male fiction often splits characters into disjointed fragments, while female characters in novels by women tend to dissolve and merge into each other" (Gardiner, 1980, p. 185). Ultimately, writing novels can be considered one of the most significant projects in which women writers seek to affirm their personal and cultural existence in society.

As this is a story of progress, as shown above, there is a significant leap in the evolution of female novels in Saudi Arabia in the new millennium. There has been a blossoming of new female names in the literary field. Saudi female writers found power in expressing themselves and women's issues by writing novels to reach a broader readership. For example, Rajaa Al-Sanea (2005) in *Banat Al-Riyadh* [The Riyadh Girls],¹³ Badriah Al-Bishir (2006) in *Hind Walaskar* [Hind and the Soldiers],¹⁴ Oumaima Al-Khamis (2006) in *AlBahriat* [Sailors],¹⁵ Warda Abd al-Malik' (2008) in *Al-awba* [Return],¹⁶ and Samar al-Mugrin (2008) in *Nisa' al-*

¹³ The idea is summed up in the story of four girls from the wealthy class in the Saudi capital, who were named Qumra, Lamis, Sadeem, and Michel (Mashaël), who became friends and revealed their secrets via the Internet, and sent fifty emails, addressed to well-known Yahoo Group groups, called "Sira". The four girls are looking for love: Qumra is a divorced woman after discovering her husband's infidelity; Sadeem is left by her fiancé after she surrendered to him in a moment of distraction and desire to leave her after a warm night, then suspicions take him away, believing that she did it with others before him, As for Mashaël, her lover could not marry and his relationship with her failed, because he complied with his mother's orders, refusing to marry her son to a girl whose mother is an American. Lamis was more fortunate than them, and played a role in helping them, recounting their experiences, and establishing good relations with them.

¹⁴ Al-Bishir's short and poignant novel is of a woman named Hind, who grew up in the vicinity of the military. As she tries to fight for her independence and right to self-determination, Hind is threatened from all sides by the military.

¹⁵ Al-Khamis' novel is a feminine tale that connects two main characters as two maternal incubators seeking to escape from the dominance and violence of masculinity.

¹⁶ Al-Malik's novel is about the injustice that befalls women socially and sexually, as many

munkar [Women of Vice].¹⁷ Their works have reached maximum readership but also attracted criticism, particularly Al-Sanea's (2005) *Banat Al-Riyadh* [Girls of Riyadh]. Al-Sanea's (2005) novel is witnessed as a revolution in women's literature regarding content and form. She won the Arab Booker Prize because of the new content that introduces new images of Saudi women with different individual perspectives of what they declare as social concerns and traditional and religious matters. She introduced a harsh anti-clerical attitude which caused public outrage. Her work ascribes to the new female vision that is credited to the Saudi female writer (Al-Sanea, 2005). Like many of her counterparts, she is characterised as a liberal author in the Saudi literary scene. Her novel reshaped Saudi women's novels in terms of themes and narrative technique; for example, much of the content is in the form of emails. She chose to rebel against not only patriarchal oppression but also against the restricted conservative patriarchal society as a whole. She tackles diverse and taboo themes relating to gender equality, discrimination, female desires, sexuality, and issues that clash with society's religious teachings. For these reasons, such novels were harshly criticised in Saudi Arabia because they do not conform to the dominant social and religious discourse. But their novels were translated into English, broadening their readership across cultures.

For novelists such as Al-Sanea (2005), fiction in the new millennium can now be understood as a politically expedient move that can aid women to face and cope with the authoritarianism and domination that prohibit independent civil society organisations and that promote religious conservatism. The Saudi female novelist seeks to move away from the circumstances of the ancient traditions of high walls to another world similar to what women are looking for (Al-Sanea, 2005). She aims to change the male hegemonic convictions so that society may reconsider many of the views and perceptions imposed on her for decades (Al-Sanea, 2005). Nonetheless, many Saudi female novelists use the third person pronoun, which reflects the female's inability, as Al-Ahmadi (2011) claims, "to get rid of the complexity of fear which prevents her from making herself an entity to speak for herself" (p. 125). She views the female novel as a record that reflects human pain and women's pain in particular. She sheds light on the Saudi women's novel, hinting that it became the most suitable art for the woman novelist, reflecting her problems and issues. The specificity of Al-Ahmadi's (2011) book appears in its search for the marginalised self. It raises its issues away from classification and prejudice against one gender and another through the language of a woman. It is worth noting that Al-Ahmadi (2011) chose to limit her study to between 1999 and 2012 because the Saudi female novel witnessed its prosperity in this period in particular, as was previously mentioned. But the questions that arise are the following: do such novels reflect the reality of Saudi women, or are they exaggerated? Do they mirror the general image or only that of a minority? Whatever the case that these difficult questions pose, the novel became a field full of unspoken words, a space for the externalisation of inner feelings. It is also a place for recognition, and as Mandawi Al-Rasheed (2013) argues, these novelists are "seeking recognition and a voice in writing" (p. 176). The Saudi female novelist's presence became evident with the development of socio-economic, socio-cultural, and socio-political transition factors. Contemporary novelists such

ignorant men control them, often husbands and sometimes fathers, and also sometimes ignorant women, even relatives.

¹⁷ Al-Mugrin writes a bold novel attacking society and revealing violations to women as she provides monitoring of some cases in prison.

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as Wafā' Abdurrahman, Zaynab Ḥafnī, Layla al-Uḥaidib, and many others have raised issues concerning society and demonstrate imbalance, inequality, and duplication between the characters in their fictional worlds.

An important fact about state-sponsored support for emerging female authors is evident in 2013 when the Saudi Literary Club in Riyadh published *Khitab Al-Riwaya al-Nisaiyya alSa'udiyya wa Tahawwulatih* [The Discourse of the Saudi Women's Novel and its Transformation] by Sami al-Jam'an (2013). It traces the path of the Saudi woman novelist's speech from the first published novel of Samira Khashoggi (1958) until the end of 2009. In another major study entitled *Al-riwāya al-nisā' iyya al-Sa' ūdiyya: Kḥiṭāb al-mar'a wa-tashkīl al-Sard* [The Saudi Women's Novel: Feminist Discourse and Narrative Formation], Juraidī (2012), introduces how "Saudi female novelists have utilised new professional narrative techniques to explore their issues and the political factors that have motivated them to shape their narrative setting" (Almarhaby, 2019, p. 87). This study, as Almarhaby (2019) explains, "is considered valuable in Saudi literary criticism because it constitutes a serious attempt to examine and critique the artistic structure of the Saudi female novel over the full 55 years of its existence to the study's date". The Saudi female novel provided a landscape to stir the Saudi female consciousness, and this support was furthered after the Vision 2030 initiative of 2016. This established a new start for Saudi culture as one of the most important drivers of national transformation towards human development. It also seeks to develop the culture sector in the Kingdom by establishing incubator centres for creativity, providing platforms for creators to express their ideas and ambitions, as well as by creating a cultural industry concerned with art, theatre, and cinema.

Hence, one can say that Saudi female novels have begun to introduce stories that venture beyond the borders of culture and traditions, where freedom and rights pervade the scene but do not exclude female suffering and anguish. Saudi female novels initially reflected suffering under the weight of tribal norms and patriarchal domination. Nidaa' Abu Ali (2018a), a contemporary novelist, represents this type of narrative in a daring and innovative manner.¹⁸ This is evident in two of her works: in the first, *Dill wa Mira'ah* [Shadow and a Mirror] (Abu Ali, 2018a), she is not satisfied with presenting a single model that reflects the ideology of her society, but she goes beyond. She refines the rebellious female characters through their conflict between traditional structures and the actions of the newcomer and their effects on the values of Saudi society. The author infiltrates the characters, monitors their thoughts, feelings and beliefs, and transformation, and narrates in the language of reality, not hidden behind phrases. This gives her work credibility and depth in addressing the phenomenon of society with both negatives and positives. In her other work *Khiraaf Alburg Alzuzaji* [The Sheep of the Glass Tower] (Abu Ali, 2018b), the author creates characters with complex psychologies, and they too are embedded in a patriarchal society full of hypocrisy and superficial relationships. The novel highlights the interaction of both genders under the pressure of intimidation in the workplace and fear of the unknown. Furthermore, she demonstrates, through dialogue and controversy between the assumed roles of women and men in a mixed-gender work

¹⁸ Nidaa' Abu Ali is a Saudi writer, novelist and diplomat, born in 1983. She received a master's degree in strategic studies, focusing on combating terrorism, in 2009, in Singapore. She has worked as a political researcher at the Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism, and at the Centre for Middle East Studies in Singapore.

environment, a new image in Saudi society, which provides an integrated picture of what she wants to convey, which, in that context, is innovative, daring, and bold.

Further significant novels of this epoch include Rihab Saad's (2019) *Alf Imra'ah fi Jasadi* [A Thousand Woman in my Body].¹⁹ The theme of the injustices that women are subjected to is described by the author as the result of “societal ignorance”. The author demonstrates an important counter to oppression and ignorance through how the characters adapt. In addition, Atheer Al-Nashmi (2020) published her romantic novel entitled *Ahbabtak Akthar Mima Yanbagi* [I Loved You More than I Should], which revolves around a bold love story.²⁰ Many romantic voices in this new decade have also emerged, like Rathath Almas' (2021) in her electronic book *Khuthni Bihuthnak* [Take in Your Arms]. The romantic, sentimental novel is considered one of the most important works in which the Saudi woman novelist ignores society's problems and the world's political problems. This is escapist fiction based on love and adventure.

The Saudi female romantic novel begins as a platform for discussing social issues or revealing previous emotional failures, dealing with taboos in style lacking any creative imagination or novelistic plot, and ending with a diversity of themes and techniques to keep up with the times. The levels of these novels range between exceptional and fragile, with weak plots. The social nature portrayed in the Saudi female novels will not change, as it exists in many literary works in other societies, whether western or eastern, which preceded Saudi Arabia in empowering women. Even with social transformation, feminine affairs will always be one of the major themes in novels written by women. Social and gender issues will not vanish. However, the voice of the female novelist has become stronger and louder. One can confirm that the rapid transformation has helped push the wheel of writing creativity forward and empowers women with new, influential, loud voices. Contemporary Saudi female novelists use literature to shed light on various issues from their perspective; each has a distinct colour and style, and most, if not all, introduce social and gender issues, standing by the female figure with both pride and anger. This natural female trait highlights how her emotions drive her. Moreover, they are addressing challenging socio-cultural issues that contest patriarchal society by tackling new themes – the clashes between the past and the present, traditions and modernity, the West and the East, extremism, radicalism, and Islamism. More research is suggested here.

3. Conclusion

The Saudi female novel has achieved cultural gains by moving in parallel with the progress that is happening socially. This is partially due to substantial changes being made through the Kingdom's Vision 2030. Within the new transformation occurring in Saudi Arabia, the images and voices of Saudi women in the field of creativity, product, and knowledge have promoted

¹⁹ Saad is the first Black Saudi woman novelist.

²⁰ Al-Nashmi is distinguished by her high culture and unique literary style, especially in some of her novels which talk about the meaning of friendship, love, and passion. *Ahbabtak Akthar Mima Yanbagi* [I Loved You More than I Should] (Al-Nashmi, 2020) is a romantic novel that revolves around a young Saudi girl named Jumana, a student who traveled outside Saudi Arabia in search of knowledge. There, while she is studying abroad, she meets a young man named Aziz who ‘kidnaps’ her heart and controls her feelings and she falls in love with him.

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participation and engagement. This has created a new social consciousness and voice for Saudi women. Yusif and Alaswat (2011) asserts, "One should be fascinated by the awareness and culture which creative women have in their discourses, a matter which embodies a different social language aiming at the interpretation of the world existence towards more human and liberated contexts" (p. 2). Therefore, from that point of view, one can say that in the previous stages, the creativity of the female Saudi novel was being suffocated in the space of relief rather than creating space to represent objective issues about women's reality. This paper has demonstrated how progressive growth in Saudi female participation in the cultural product sectors has steadily increased compared with a relatively conservative previous century or generations. The common thread in this discussion emphasises the theme of the escape of females from a domesticated reality toward alternative spaces where they become actively engaged in the search for freedom and equality. Accordingly, there is a challenge and critique posed by Saudi creators against the patriarchal norms and the authority and restrictions of their conservative society. The emerging and expanding voice of the Saudi female author highlights the dramatic change marked by once being silenced and repressed to now becoming proclaimed, liberated, and even loud. The enthusiasm of the Saudi female novelist in raising the Saudi woman's voice and increasing the product of Saudi female novels is highly welcomed in this new age of empowerment. Unfortunately, Saudi fiction is not widely read outside of Arab countries because they are written in Arabic, and the craft of Saudi fiction has gone virtually unrecognised around the globe. Al-Rasheed (2013) highlights that a major impediment facing researchers is the "limited historical knowledge about and current research on Saudi women" (p. 33), explaining that most research on the country has focused primarily on history, politics, oil, and Islamism. This study aims to highlight a transformation occurring in Saudi fiction with the further intention of expanding dialogue and communication about what is regarded as the Saudi literary canon.

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