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Objectification of Women in Alhamad's Novels: A Question of De-Humanization or Empowerment in a Post-Islamic Awakening Narrative

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Abstract

This paper reviews the work of the Saudi novelist, Turki Alhamad, who published in a post-Islamic Awakening in Saudi Arabia. The paper contextualizes his writing by defining the concept of sexual objectification in various theorizations of the term including several texts that represent the discourse of the Islamic Awakening movement. His work can be perceived to be de-humanizing of women particularly during the time of its publication in the 1990s and early 2000s when the movement was popular. However, a close reading of his work suggests a multiplicity of discourses in his representation of women. His work can be empowering women taking into consideration Alhamad's non-fictional writings that promote social change in Arab and Muslim countries. Branded as a challenge of social values at the time of its publication, his work can also be interpreted as a precursor to the social shift towards women's empowerment that took place in Saudi Arabia in recent years.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960s, Saudi Arabia went through a period of revival of Islamic fundamentalist values. A literal translation of that socio-political shift in Saudi Arabian society would be the Islamic Awakening Movement or *Aṣṣaḥwah.* This period can be considered to be extremely repressive for the majority of Saudi society especially women and liberals who did not wish to abide by most of the restrictions posed by the dominant class of religious fundamentalists (Al Ahbabi, 2009, p.3). The Islamic Awakening movement draws its doctrine from Sunni teaching of *salaf* or the early generations of Muslims (Ali, 2019, p.125). This movement in Saudi Arabia relies on the guidance of a *Sheikh, Mufti, Imam* or a religious leader who relies on the interpretations of the teachings of *salaf*. Although the Islamic Awakening movement emerged in the 1960s, it was more active against liberal influences in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s (Rihan, 2019, pp.165-166). The term *Awakening* refers to a process of shock that the collective social consciousness has gone through. It alludes to a new awareness after what they view as a period of religious slumber and a response to what is perceived by the religious authorities as a Saudi society that was exposed to Western influences. Indeed, what emerged from that period was a reactionary wave from some Saudi men and women that promoted more restrictions on what women can wear, the relationships between men and women and any display of a lifestyle that remotely resembled a Western one.

When it came to literary production in a post-Islamic Awakening Saudi Arabia, novelists suffered the most. As what was viewed as a Western form of literature, novels, especially those that represented an honest realist image of society were banned and they only

could be published mostly in Lebanon. One of these Saudi novelists who first published his work in *Dar Assaqi* in Beirut to avoid the wrath of followers of *Aṣṣaḥwah* or the Islamic Awakening movement was Turki Al-Hamad. Both a Saudi political analyst and a novelist, Alhamad structured his trilogy *Aṭiaf Alaziqah Almahjourah,* or *The Shadows of Deserted Alleyways,* around representing life in the central region of Saudi Arabia where the movement reached its prime. Alhamad was vilified for his representation of themes that were considered taboo at the time of the novels' publication like sexuality. Paul Starkey, the translator of one of Alhamad's novels, points out in *Modern Arabic Literature* (2006) how confrontational Alhamad's work was to the Islamic movement in the 1980s to the point where his work was banned in Saudi, Kuwait and Bahrain. Starkey reviews the Author's role in revolutionizing the literary scene in Saudi Arabia. He quotes Alhamad who justifies his challenge of the social values in the country by approaching themes like sexuality, Alhamad says in a Radio interview "[w]here I live there are three taboos, religion, politics and sex. It is forbidden to speak about these. I wrote this trilogy to get things moving" (Starkey, 2006, p.155). Alhamad's desire to confront what he perceived as a static culture encumbered with religion inspired a fearless narrative that is meant to reshape the status quo.

This paper will be a review of Alhamad's representation of women, whether as being sexual objects or active subjects. In order to define sexual objectification, Kant's theorization of the concept will be utilized. Also, some writings that were informed by the conservative social atmosphere in the 1980s and 1990s will be reviewed to contextualize our reading and the backlash to Alhamad's work. These writings were produced during *Aṣṣaḥwah*/Islamic revival movement. They denounced such direct representations of sexuality and sexual desire. This methodology of analyzing women's objectification in Alhamad's work within a Kantian framework helps to explore nuances in which Islamic views about the objectification of women's bodies might have parallels with Kant's conservative views about the objectification of women. The exploration of how the objectification of women has foundations in conservative Islamic theorizations of femininity aims to detect how Alhamad's writings were perceived by conservative critics of his work. A close reading of Alhamad's novels will also be used to investigate the nuances that can produce an alternative and empowering image of women which can be a precursor to how women were later empowered in Saudi Arabia. A reading of Alhamad's nonfictional writing about the necessity of social/political change in the Arab world will be used to support this alternative reading.

2. SEXUAL OBJECTIFICATION IN ISLAM

Before I trace how the concept of sexual objectification might be interpreted in Islamic law, a definition of the term *objectification* is due. Having first been theorized by Immanuel Kant in *Lectures on Ethics* conducted in 1784-5, the term refers to the heterosexual desire of a man for a woman that limits her to be perceived as an object. Kant states that the "desire of a man for a woman is not directed to her as a human being; on the contrary, the woman's humanity is of no concern to him, and the only object of his desire is her sex" (Kant, 1997, p.156). This theorization of the man's desire for a woman that extracts her humanity and leaves the woman as a mere object of his desire is the basis of what is termed as sexual objectification. A woman is seen as a mere body, a shape and a texture for a man's pleasure according to Kant's theory. To support his conceptualization of the woman being considered by a man as an object when sexual desire is involved, Kant uses prostitution as an analogy to explain how humans can be perceived as objects when it comes to sexuality. Kant states, "if [man] makes himself the object of another's desire, then he is disposing over himself, as if over a thing, and thereby makes himself into a thing by which the other satisfies his appetite… since the other's impulse is directed to sex and not to humanity, it is obvious that the person is, in part, surrendering his

humanity" (Kant, 1997, p.157). Kant's insistence on describing the receiver of the sexual desire here as an *object* and a *thing* is supported by his claim that as a receiver of that desire, the person surrenders his/her humanity when they sell their body for sex. When the person, however, does not sell their body, only to be perceived by a man in a sexual way is to be reduced to a thing/object of desire for the observer. Humanity is depleted in the presence of sexual desire and s/he is objectified.

Both the Kantian and Islamic views of sexual objectification of women emphasize the function of morality in society. Kant's theorization of a woman as an object of desire might be read in conjunction with the Islamic conceptualization of the woman's body as an object of desire that needs to be covered. But, the purpose of this reading will be limited to some texts that were published in the 1980s and early 1990s by authors that influenced the Islamic Awakening movement at the time. This will give us a better understanding of the context in which Alhamad published his work and reveal what kind of challenge Alhamad took in his writing about women. These conservative Islamic writings had similar perceptions when it came to the direction, claim and effect of sexual desire.

Generally, in *shari'ah*/Islamic law, casting a sexual gaze that is instigated by desire is denounced. To control the sexual gaze, Muslims are instructed to take three prophylactic measures. The first is mental when men are women are told to lower their gaze. The second measure to control sexual desire and prevent the effect of the gaze is for women to wear what is called a hijab or veil. The third measure is for the complete separation of men and women. Although the first measure was clear enough, the second and third were not. Both went through many interpretations and controversies and were observed differently as a part of Islamic law throughout the history of Islam. Some of the interpretations of these measures were so extreme that a professor of Islamic law in 2010 suggested that men and women should be separated in the Holy Mosque in Makkah by demolishing parts of the mosque and building separate areas of worship segregating women (Geel, 2016, p.358). All these interpretations revolved around preventing the sexual gaze of men from falling on women. The location of that gaze when it comes to the body was contested between those ultra-conservative interpretations that promoted the entirety of the woman's body as a site for the sexual gaze and those that thought that parts of the woman's body like the face and hands or even hair can be exposed.

But since our main focus in this paper is on the period of Islamic Awakening in the 1980s and 1990s when Alhamad's work was published, the interpretation of the hijab and separation between men and women at that particular time will be reviewed by reading two representative texts of the period. This is to detect, first, how their conceptualization might overlap with the Kantian framework of sexual objectification and how this is what conservatives saw and reacted to when they read his work. Second, to explore how Alhamad's novels can be considered confrontational post-Islamic Awakening texts. These two books that outline a methodology to control the sexual gaze and desire representing the conservative traditions promoted by the Islamic Awakening movement are *Dress Code and Beauty in Islamic Law* [*Allibas wa Azzinah fi Ashari'ah Alislamiah*] (1985) by Mohmmad Abdulaziz 'Amru and *A Case for Alhijab from Quran and the Teachings of Prophet Mohammad [Risalat Alḥijiab fil Quran wa Assunnah]* (1991) by Abdulgader bin Habib Allah Assindi. 'Amru's book is considered to be a book that addresses gender-specific dress codes in Islamic law as well as what is considered acceptable in Islamic law when it comes to beauty and grooming. In the introduction of his book, 'Amru states that his book was a reaction to "the deafening screams of those who call for women's liberation … So, advocates of Islam who are protective of their nation must rise up to protect women from all these threats, advise them and show them the right way" ('Amru, 1985, p.6). This approach to women's rights that runs throughout the book reflects the popular attitudes of the Islamic Awakening movement in considering any call to

women's rights as a threat to the unity of society and the structure of the family that demands that women are kept at home, separated from all men except their fathers, brothers, nephews, sons and husbands.

In his book, 'Amru goes into detail in analyzing the laws of hijab according to interpretations of Quran and the teachings of the prophet Mohammad which are the two major sources of Islamic law. When he attempts to define the word hijab, 'Amru describes it as "an object that separates two bodies" (p.116). This suggests that when the object that separates the two bodies is removed then one of the bodies becomes the object of the other's gaze and desire. 'Amru proceeds in describing the hijab as a "prophylactic that helps men with casting away their gaze…and covers the bodies that excite hidden desires" (p.117). The purpose of the hijab as a precautionary measure, according to 'Amru, is to control the sexualized gaze and stop it from reaching the object of male desire and prevent the female body from exciting the sexual desire in the first place when it is no longer becomes the object of that gaze.

The focus on women as objects of desire can be detected in justifying several laws relating to the dress code for women in 'Amru's book. The Kantian expression *object of desire* emerges in translating this statement "a woman is created for sexual gratification that is why she is an object of desire" ('Amru, 1985, p.195). Although the author uses the term *maẓannah* and not *mawqi'* which directly translates to object. The Arabic word *maẓannah* means where something is thought to originate. So, in a way, men's desire is directed towards a woman's body and that body becomes the location where the desire of men is formed. In another instance where the body becomes the location of desire due to the male gaze, 'Amru reviews the law of when a female child should wear hijab and cover her body. The author writes "when a girl comes of age to the point when she's watched and desired, it is time to cover her '*awrah*" (p.198). The definition of '*awrah* is different relating to men or women. An adult male's '*awrah* that needs to be covered from all people's gaze except his wife's is from his bellybutton to his knees while a woman's '*awrah* that needs to be covered from the male gaze constitutes of her whole body except her hands according to ultra-conservative Islamic law. This association of the male desire and the gaze that is cast through looking sets the girl as an object of male desire when she comes of age according to 'Amru. It is when she is desired sexually that she needs to be covered to protect her from the male gaze lest she becomes an object of desire.

Another book that represents the conservative values of the Islamic Awakening movement was published as a magazine article and then developed and published as a book six years before Alhamad's first novel Al'*adama* (1997). Abdulgader bin Habib Allah Assindi's book *Risalat Alḥijiab fil Quran wa Assunnah* [A Case for Ḥijab from the Quran and the Teachings of Prophet Mohammad] (1991) is solely dedicated to the importance of wearing the *hijab*. Assindi's definition of the hijab in his book is similar to 'Amru's book because both belong to the Hanbali ultra-conservative approach to the interpretation of the Quran and the prophet's teachings. While 'Amru defines a woman's '*awrah* as what should be covered by the hijab according to the Hanbali interpretation which is basically her whole body "including her nails", Assindi also has the same conservative approach to what constitutes a hijab that covers a woman's body ('Amru, 1985, p.69). Assindi dedicates six pages of his book to refute the authenticity of a prophet's saying reported by his wife Aisha that states that a woman can uncover her face and hands (Assindi, 1991, pp.18-23). Assindi's passionate refutation is inspired by what he believes about women to be the "origin of all lusts" (Assindi, 1991, p.10). Associating sexual desires and lust with women suggests a similar pattern to the Kantian views about women as objects of desire. Evidence of the objectification of women in Assindi's rhetoric can also be read in how he excludes women from humanity. This is evident when he states that women are a "substantial and arduous test from God for a human being" (Assindi,

1991, p.10). Assindi completely excludes women from humanity because he perceives them as a test for humanity which entails that only men are considered humans who are tested by how far they can resist the lure of women as objects of lust and sexual desire.

The idea of women as a commodity is found in both Kant's and Muslim conservative's views about women. For instance, this concept runs through both Kant and Assindi's book. Papadaki comments on Kant's views about prostitution when a woman sells her body to men suggesting that "[c]commodification for Kant necessarily leads to objectification. Once a woman offers her body for a man and allows him to use it for sexual purposes in exchange for money, she has made her whole person…'a thing on which another satisfies his appetite'" (Papadaki, 2007, p.335). A similar idea about women as a commodity can be located in Assindi's book when he describes women as "a commodity in the hands of unjust oppressors who advocate for adultery and for women to put away their hijab and be promiscuous" (Assindi, 1991, p.18). Assindi associates women who do not wear the hijab with adultery and promiscuity.

An interesting analogy that can be perceived in both the Kantian and even feminist discourse, as well as the ultra-conservative Islamic Awakening movement's perception of women as sexual objects of desire, emerges when comparing women to food. Papadaki points out that Kant compares women to lemons and steaks in the sense that they are consumable objects. She also cites Catherine Mackinnon, the feminist scholar, who describes the objectification of women in pornography and compares them to cups in the sense that men use them as objects in which they can empty their sexual desire. Papadaki comments on these metaphors "for Kant…and Mackinnon, then, objectification involves treating a person as an object (a mere sexual tool), in a way that leads to the reduction of the individual in question to the status of a thing for use (a lemon, a steak, a cup)" (Papadaki, 2007, p.340). The same discourse comparing women to food or food-related items to highlight their potential as consumable objects is also present in conservative Islamic discourse. This can be exemplified by a text that is shaped by the rhetoric of the Islamic Awakening movement and published online in 2002 after the publication of Alhamad's trilogy in the 1990s when the Islamic Awakening movement was still influential. In her article "Oh Flower: Selections about Modesty" (2002), the female author, Umm Sumaiyah laments how some women gave up the hijab and tried to warn them against the consequences of this choice. It is important to note here that the expression *Umm* before a name in Arabic is used to mean (the mother of…). When the author uses this form to identify herself in her article, she is emphasizing her role as a mother even when she writes. She uses the association with motherhood to endorse Islamic Awakening values that encourage women to dedicate themselves to motherhood and domestic life. Umm Sumaiyah writes,

> a woman who takes off her hijab has sinned against God Almighty. She gives up honor and modesty and exposes herself to the worst of wolves thinking she is the most beautiful woman in their eyes. Little did she know that she is like uncovered candy, exposed to swarms of creatures and insects. A proud, clean human will never take this candy. (Umm Sumaiyah, 2002, p.2)

The same rhetorical pattern in comparing women to food that appears in Kant's and feminist theorizations also finds its way into this ultra-conservative Islamic Awakening discourse. Although Umm Sumaiyah does not deploy this metaphor to include all women and limits it to women who are exposed to the male gaze by not wearing a hijab, she is more graphic in building that metaphor that associates women with food. Umm Sumaiyah's article indicates the depth of the social impact of the Islamic Awakening movement. The extremely conservative atmosphere of the movement shaped society in a way that posits a woman's body as a site for the sexual gaze hence it should be covered to protect it. If gazing at that body is suspected of being a sexual exploitation of it, then the direct description of the sexual act is

considered to be even more of a taboo within this society and this is exactly what Alhamad tried to challenge in his narrative.

3. ALHAMAD'S LOVE TRIANGLE

Within a conservative society sculpted by the Islamic Awakening movement, Alhamad started to write about love and lust, amongst other themes. Alhamad published his trilogy in the late 1990s. His trilogy *The Shadows of Deserted Alleyways*, which is the main focus of this article, is a work that challenges the Islamic Awakening movement. It consists of three novels. The first novel *Al'adama* (1995), is set in the middle of the 1960s and 1970s. It's a narrative about Hisham Alaber, a young man who is inspired by Jamal Abdul Naser's political reformation in Egypt. So, Hisham joins the secret branch of the communist Arab party, Alba'ath, in Saudi Arabia. The novel ends with Hisham's move from a neighbourhood called Al'adama in Dammam, a city in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia, to Riyadh to attend university in the capital of Saudi Arabia.

While the first novel in the trilogy introduces a young man's passion for politics, the second book initiates him into the pursuit of sexual pleasure when he is involved with several women. *Ashumaisi* (1996), the name of an area in Riyadh, is set in the 1970s. In the novel, Hisham experiences the prime of his sexual activity after his move from his parent's house. Moving from his maternal uncle's house and then moving in with a friend, Hisham meets Rugaiyah, the prostitute and Suaiyer, his neighbour.

While *Ashumaisi* crosses the lines of what is considered to be socially acceptable in the representation of sexuality especially during the prime of the Islamic Awakening movement, the third novel *Alkaradib* (1998) questions fundamental parts of Muslim's theological beliefs. Hisham raises these questions about the nature of God and his relation with man and Satan after his imprisonment as a conclusion of a politically, socially and religiously controversial narrative. In a prison in Jeddah, in the Western region of Saudi, Hisham expresses his doubts after he is detained and tortured by what is called the "establishment" due to his affiliation with Alba'ath's branch in Dammam and Riyadh (Alhamad, 2009, p.218).

Sexual objectification of women in Alhamad's novels emerges in how he places his female characters within a boundary of sexualization. Lust and sexual desire for having sex with women and the detailed description of a woman's body and curves appear in several instances in the trilogy. In the first novel, *Al'adama,* Hisham mentions how he goes to the market "to spy on women's huge asses that jiggle with the slightest movement" (Alhamad, 1997, p.243). In *Ashumaisi*, there are more references to women's bodies and curves and Hisham's desire for their bodies. For instance, when Hisham was looking for women in the market a woman caught his eye. "Her face wasn't pretty. But she was a fleshy lady who had massive butt-cheeks separated by a crack so wide and deep that it keeps those cheeks in a constant wobble" (Alhamad, 2009, p.129). When Hisham was looking for his married neighbour Suaiyer after he saw her having sex with her husband, she reappears on the roof "wearing a very tight slip that could never contain her curves or hide the clearly visible and protruding parts of her body" (Alhamad, 2009, p.55). In another instance, Hisham describes her body when she "sat on her legs and the flesh on her knees and thighs was so stretched that they started shining under the faint light that spilt through the window" (Alhamad,2009, p.80-81). All these descriptions of the female body amongst many more, especially in *Ashumaisi*, set women as objects of sexual desire. In the Kantian sense, they detail parts of the female body that are associated with a male sexual gaze and pleasure and focus on the physical part of her existence and marginalize her personality.

In a more obvious reference that suggests the objectification of the female body, the sexual organ is referred to as a shape. Hisham refers to Suaiyer's and Rugaiya's "triangle" referring to the pubic area, leading to the vagina (Alhamad, 2009, p.80-51). Substituting the name of the female organ with the name of a shape reestablishes it as an object, separated from the rest of the woman's body. The way Alhamad articulates this idea limits these female characters to their sexual organ and marginalizes their feminine identity. Alhamad's love triangle in that sense becomes a reference to a human organ as an object of sexual desire rather than a triangle of human connection and love.

Further evidence of the objectification of women in Alhamad's work is delineated by associating the female body with food and devouring. When the narrator tells the reader that Hisham "is ready to devour any female right now", the female body is reduced to something that is consumable because it is sexually desired (Alhamad, 2009, p.76). The sexualization of the female body that is represented as food is emphasized, as reviewed above, in the discourse about the objectification of the female body in the theoretical frameworks of Kant and the conservative discourse of the Islamic Awakening movement about covering the female body so that it could not be consumed by the male sexual gaze. Although Alhamad's reference in the quotation is not limited to the gaze of Hisham who consumes the bodies of female characters by looking at their curves and desiring them sexually, his reference here compares the sexual act itself to devouring. So, sexual objectification here surpasses the gaze and desire into the consumption of the female body by using it sexually to satisfy the male desire.

However. Hashim's views about the blinding desire for women are reformed later in the narrative. In prison, Hisham is involved in a debate about class division and social equality. Some argue that Marxism is the solution, while others think that Islam is. But Hisham interrupts the discussion by saying "when we have sex, we do not have it with an animal. This would be considered unnatural… We have sex with a woman, any human. We don't ask if she's bourgeoise or proletarian. Is she Muslim or Christian, Arab or Non-Arab? … All we know and feel when we have sex is that she is a woman" (Alhamad, 1998, p.53). Even when her humanity is directly referred to in this quotation, emphasizing her gender limits her to a heteronormative role regarding sexuality and jeopardizes the perception of the woman as a human. Overlooking aspects that make her unique as a human like her political affiliations or even religion hint that women are represented in the narrative as mere objects of desire.

4. ALHAMAD'S WORK AS A CONFRONTATIONAL NARRATIVE

The narrative in *The Shadows of Deserted Alleyways* constitutes what I would call a post-Islamic Awakening narrative that reacts to the regulating authority of the movement. In his book *Novelists and Experiences: A Reading of the Works of Ibrahim Abdulmajid, Ahmad Ibrahim Alfagih, Ilias Khuri, Turki Alhamad, Salwa Bak'r, Wasini Alaraj and Yusuf Algaid,* Muhammad Ezzedin Tazi reviews the works of several Arab novelists. In his review of Alhamad's work, Tazi writes:

> Alhamad's novels do not present a narrative devoted to the development of events. It is a review of the characters' cultural background which is inspired by the author's own views. The culturalization of the narrative serves to deepen the intellectual dimension within it. However, it's not beneficial when the narrative is only a vehicle for displaying perspectives and positions (Tazi, 2018, p.181).

Indeed, Alhamad sacrificed perfecting the creative details of his narratives and concentrated on building characters with opposing views and perspectives. Lacking any nuance or even proper development and growth, the characters are in a static mode of loyalty to their political

and religious views and affiliations. They are a reflection of different positions in society that do not attempt or negotiate any of the conflicts within the Saudi society. They only represent the conflict and attempt to challenge it rather than rewrite it or try to create ways of resolving it. Although Tazi's reading does not discuss Alhamad's work from a religious perspective, this particular view about Alhamad's narrative technique is important because it summarizes how religious members of society in the 1990s reacted to his work as a confrontation of their beliefs and values.

Alhamad's representation of women's bodies and sexuality did not comply with the regulating authority of the Islamic Awakening scholars. It defied the perfect image of pure society as envisioned by the authorities of the movement. Sexually objectifying descriptions of women's bodies, sexual relations out of wedlock, drinking and the existence of prostitution in Saudi Arabia were all considered taboo (Alhamad, 2009, pp.39-40-157). But Alhamad attempted to confront these taboos in his trilogy. In a scene that was considered very graphic for the conservative society of the 1990s, Hisham arranges for meeting Rugaiyah the prostitute,

> Rugaiyah took a cigarette and started to inhale the smoke deeply. Then she sucked the smoke once and moved closer to Hisham and stuck her lips to his and sent the smoke inside his mouth…He felt like the first human created on Earth when nothing was forbidden or prohibited. Rugaiyah relaxed completely and looked like a dark, Middle-Eastern Aphrodite, Abdulrahman walked away and everything fell onto everything else… and there was the flood.
>
> …He remembers how he was disgusted by Ruygaiyah and her fascinating triangle last time…He was very embarrassed by Abdulrahman's comments on Rugaiyah's howling during the flood (Alhamad, 2009, pp.33-34).

This scene tackles many ideas that are considered taboo in Saudi society like drinking, prostitution, having sex out of wedlock and even smoking, especially by women. All are forbidden by Saudi '*Ulama* (the committee that issues laws regulating the lives of Muslims).

5. WOMEN AS CONTESTED TERRITORY

An example of the conservative critique of Alhamad's work is published in two editions of almost the same book with different titles. The older version of the book was published online in 2003 entitled *Turki Alhamad in the Scale of the Followers of Sunnah* [*Turki Alhamad fi Mizan Ahlu Sunnah wal Jama'ah]*. Another version of the same book entitled *An Islamic legal View of the Writings and Novels of Turki Alhamad* [*Naẓrah Shariah fi Kitabat wa Riwayat Turki Alhamad]* was published as a book in 2011. In both versions of the book, AlKharashi demands the prosecution of Turki Alhamad for what he perceives as writings that disregard Islamic law and beliefs and break the laws of the country that follows *Salafi* Islamic Shariah law. The author insists on labeling Alhamad as a disbeliever or *Kafir* in his book (AlKharashi, 2011, pp.296-298).

In relation to sexuality and objectification of women in particular, Alkharashi objects to the representation of male characters that are constantly pursuing and gazing on women in the novel. Ultra-conservative perspectives seek to protect women from that objectification through the concept of hijab and separation between men and women in most spaces. The sexualization of women and portraying them as adulteresses in the capital of Saudi Arabia suggests the failure of the Awakening movement's guardianship of society. It also suggests the failure of hijab's ability to protect women from being sexually exploited by male desire, as is the case of the prostitute that wears the hijab in the novel. The reaction to the unwillingness to compromise with the values established by the movement is shown when Alkharashi comments on Alhamad's representation as

> an attempt to topple down social ideals in which people firmly believe. He tells us that a human, one who claims virtue and idealism is merely an animal in the pursuit of his pleasure even when he tries to surround himself with an aura of honor and virtue and that these fake auras, that people surround themselves with when they live together in a society, are merely a cover and mask behind which they harbour all kinds of sins and moral failure (AlKharashi, 2011, pp.235-236).

After he cites some examples of what he perceives as sins and moral failures represented in the trilogy like adultery, drinking and prostitution Alkharashi insists that one of the greatest flaws in Alhamad's writing is jeopardizing the reputation of the city of Riyadh and the men and women there. According to him, this entails the failure of the teachings and moral guardianship of the Islamic Awakening movement and its leaders. He writes,

> What fascinates me is his insistence on representing Riyadh as a city of many sins and vices like Bangkok or…or… these cities, well-known to sinners! It is like he is implying that this city, the bases of our country, its capital and the origin of virtue and the home of honest men and women, is only one of the morally corrupt cities that people know and despise (AlKharashi, 2011, p.239).

Alkharashi's passion about the suggestion of men who seduce women in Riyadh and the existence of sexuality out of wedlock or adultery in the capital of Saudi Arabia does not stem from his protectiveness of the city. It rather stems from a territorial zeal for the protection of the women and morals of the city where the Islamic Awakening movement was most prominent. Women as objects of desire in Alhamad's novels become contested territory of the liberal Alhamad and the conservative Islamic Awakening author.

6. EMPOWERING AN OBJECT (OF DESIRE)

In spite of evidence of the objectification of women in Alhamad's narrative in the trilogy where women are represented as objects of male desire, there are textual and contextual signs suggesting the empowerment of women in the narrative. These fragments of narrative that constitute a reversed objectification when the woman becomes the object of desire are informed and shaped by the religious and social terrain in Saudi Arabia. These signs emerge in the text when women are suggested to be the initiators of the sexual encounter. For instance, in earliest stage of Hisham's relationship with his married neighbor Suaiyer, "she grabs his hand quickly and forcefully and pushes him into the room in which he saw her for the first time. Without introductions she throws herself on him and starts to kiss him violently" (Alhamad, 2009, p.80). After they have sex Suaiyer declares to Hisham that she knew he spied on her and her husband and tells him "I knew you were there. And I knew I will have you" (Alhamad, 2009, p.81). A closer look at the language that her character uses implies that she is not only the initiator of the sexual encounter with Hisham, she is suggesting that she saw him first and planned to have him as a lover. In other words, the male becomes the object of desire in this situation.

Other instances in the novel grant women a substantial part in the initiation of the sexual encounter. Even his cousin Moudi, who is represented initially in the narrative as the epitome of innocence and virtue and who is not an object of Hisham's desire, surprises him by a "sudden move. She removes the veil covering her face. She approaches him and plants a quick kiss on his cheek" (Alhamad, 2009, p.203). Both women, as well as Rugaiyah the prostitute, are the initiators of the encounter. While Moudi's actions cannot be described as sexual, nevertheless, she initiates the action and starts kissing him. Hisham becomes the object of her desire. In another suggestion of women's power as initiators who instigate the sexual gaze in *Ashumaisi*, Hisham contemplates how some bored housewives are gazing through the windows in the morning so he decided to "engage in an adventure with one of the gazing women especially during the morning hours when the houses are full of women searching for an adventure"

(Alhamad, 2009, p.159). The women in this sentence are the initiators who deploy the sexualized gaze making the men objects of their desire

This view of the reversed objectification of women and objectifying the man instead has its roots in religious and social views of women as seductresses. Although the idea of a seductress is reliant on the role of the male gaze and women as an object of desire, the idea of initiating the sexual encounter gives power to women. In my previous reading of the rhetoric shaped by the Islamic Awakening movement about women, I suggest that women are dehumanized by limiting them to the role of being potentially an object of male desire. The idea of women being a "test" for men, as dehumanising as it may be, gives the power of initiation of the sexual encounter to women (Assindi, 1991, p.15). The power of initiating the sexual encounter given to women as seductresses can be seen in several parts of Alhamad's narrative. It reflects common social and religious views about women. When Hisham struggles to find a house in Riyadh because no one is willing to rent an unmarried man he concludes that "fear and worry about the unmarried men is because women could not be trusted" (Alhamad, 2009, p.108). In other words, the fear of men and not giving them a chance to approach women is actually the fear of women as seductresses will make the men their objects of desire and approach them first by allowing themselves to be the objects of male desire.

The narrative about women as seductresses and initiators who deploy the gaze rather than be objectified by it has its rules in religious narratives about women. Narratives about Adam's seduction leading to his fall from heaven and Joseph's seduction by the wife of his master found in the Holy Quran influence the narrative about women in Saudi Arabia. In the story of the seduction of Adam by Eve and when Prophet Joseph was seduced, women emerge as the ones who sway men into sin (*The Quran*, 12:4-101, 20:115-123). These narratives informed how women are perceived in a country that relies heavily on religious text in the interpretation of everyday matters. Alhamad's narrative in its confrontation of the public's beliefs negotiates these narratives about women and femininity through how Hisham responds to seduction. In an allusion to Joseph's response to the seduction of his master's wife, Hisham remembers how he reacted to Nourah, his lover in Dammam. When she was about to surrender her virginity to him and she was "ready to give him everything…But he stopped himself in the last moments from taking the chance and crossing certain boundaries" (Alhamad, 2009, p.148). Although like Joseph, Hisham prevents himself from engaging in a sexual encounter with the woman due to religious and social considerations, the chance was granted by Nourah. She is empowered in the narrative by being an instigator. Rewriting the narrative in Hisham's story suggests that Joseph's story could be every man's story who is targeted by a woman as an object of sexual desire.

Women's monstrosity in Alhamad's writing can also be viewed as an empowering representation of women. Although the concept of monstrosity as conceptualized by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* refers in a way to how women are perceived as the othered abject, women's monstrosity in Hisham's drunken stupor is threatening.

> By drinking the second glass, a weird image passes through Hisham's mind that made him forget all else. His mother's eyes, Suaiyer's stomach, Nourah's lips, Rugaiyah's backside, and Moudhi's hand all come together into a weird sight that genuinely terrified him. Suaiyer's stomach would explode suddenly and blood spatters on Rugaiyah's backside and Moudhi's hand. Then, Suaiyer starts to lick the blood off of Rugaiyah's back … Red tears stream from his mother's eyes and her face morphs into a lifeless and extremely white wax mask. Nourah's lips swell up so much that they take over her whole face while she approaches him laughing hysterically trying to kiss him. He runs. But she follows him, still laughing (Alhamad, 2009, pp.178-179).

The threat of a fragmented monstrous femininity that includes Hisham's mother in his vision marks his attempt to escape the force of femininity. Fragmenting the women in his dream is the fragmentation of his desire of them as potential sexual objects. What constitutes his masculinity as a man who follows women for sex and love is destroyed by their threatening disfigurement. This reference to women's monstrosity suggests its role in Kristeva's theorization of subject formation for "the advent of one's own identity demands a law that mutilates" creating the woman as the abject other (Kristeva, 1982, p.54). The deformation and threatening mutilation of the women in Hisham's life is a part of the formation of his identity by escaping their power as objects of a desire that controls him. The confiscation of the power of the initiation of the sexual act, and women's threatening emergence in Hisham's dreams are all a rewriting of the subservient woman who can only perform her role at home. In order to revise women's role outside the home, Alhamad had to rewrite women within the home and sexual life.

7. ALHAMAD'S WRITING AS A PRECURSOR TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN SAUDI ARABIA

Alhamad has been an advocate for cultural reformation in the Arab and Islamic world. In his book *Arab Culture Confronting the Challenges of Change* (1993*)* Alhamad proposes that Arabs must reconsider the framework of their culture's movement towards reformation in order to develop politically and culturally. He writes "every progress in history was proceeded by an epistemological revolution that changed the framework of values and conceptions and popular perceptions in that historical period or that society" (Alhamad, 1993, p.64). The only problem of the potential to change and social progression in the Arab world according to him is that all theorizations of development are closely related of Arab/Muslim values when there should be a split between culture and any attempts to change (Alhamad, 1993, p.67). However, Alhamad seems to have modified his discourse about the extreme departure from Muslim values on the way to a cultural progress in *I Speak of the Human: Reflections on Cultural Action* (1998). In this book he proposes that "the slow accumulation of alternations within the details of reformed values will find their way into fixed structure of conservative values. It will expand its horizon and give it new additional meanings without jeopardizing the core of the value" (Alhamad *I Speak of the Human*, p.291). Alhamad in his fiction clearly grapples with conservative values and tires to resist them promoting the social change that he calls for on various domains of social life in Saudi Arabia.

Women's right to education in Saudi Arabia stood as the central domain of their empowerment and gateway to total economic independence. Although women's education was socially accepted by the time Alhamad's novels were published, Alhamad attempted to show how limited women's rights were in the 1960s. In *Ashumaisi*, Moudhi laments that "if my father let me finish my education, I would have been like you today…But thank God… I can read at least…I have finished elementary school" (Alhamad, 2009, p.10). Raising the issue of women's education in the first pages of *Ashumaisi* and how it is controlled by the patriarchal social system in the country shifts it from a social issue to a political one. The author alludes to the fact that women's education and economic independence needs to be removed from the grip of a patriarchal society into the political sphere that will grant rights back to women. This was the reality in Saudi Arabia because conservatives objected to women's education and it had to be mandated by the government in 1961 (Rather, 2018, pp.84-85). With the establishment of institutions of women's education and colleges for women, rates of women's education increased rapidly in different regions of Saudi Arabia from the 1960s onwards. With the "massive influx of petrodollars in the 1970s and early I980s" the government invested further in women's education which provided them with more career opportunities (Prokop,

2007, p.84). Scholarships to study abroad in international universities in several countries were offered to Saudi women and an estimate of 35.000 women enrolled in these institutions (Drury, 2015, p.1). This investment in Saudi women's education reformed the social terrain in Saudi Arabia and women were able to excel at work outside the home. Recent years in Saudi Arabia have witnessed progress in which policy changes have opened up new career paths for Saudi women. Saudi Arabia's policy change emerged through royal decrees that reshaped political and social life. For instance, a Royal decree in 2011 by King Abdullah stated that only women are allowed to sell lingerie in shops providing women with over 40.000 job opportunities (Lippman, 2012). This gradual introduction of women into the job market was meant to convince conservatives with the necessity of women to join the workforce in sales. More progress came in 2013 when one fifth of the seats in the Saudi Consultative Assembly would go to women (Alshoaibi, 2018, pp.30-31). Vision 2030 for Saudi Arabia was a government led social and economic reformation initiative that led Saudi society into new territories that challenged conservative values that restricted women with its facilitation of women's acquisition of the right to drive and the incorporation of women into different aspects of the country's economic life. Due to the vision, women's joining of work force was increase to 22-30% and the "Global Gender Gap Report" stated that Saudi Arabia was experiencing the "largest strides" when it came to gender equality due its Vision 2030 policies (Alshoaibi, 2018, pp.133-134).

The role of Alhamad's confrontational fiction in reforming perceptions of women could be perceived to be de-humanizing of women due to various theorizations about the objectification of women. However, as shocking as it may be to Saudi society at the time, his writings challenged the status quo and promoted his vision of social change. His writing could be viewed as a precursor to the necessary empowerment of women despite what was perceived and represented at the time to be an objectifying and offensive representation of women Alhamad's work can be considered to be a map of the social change in Saudi Arabia depending on the context in which it is read.

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