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SOCIAL AND CULTURAL AMALGAMATION OF ARABS IN SELECT MIDDLE EAST FICTION

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to read the select Middle East fiction with the objective of identifying the process of social and cultural amalgamation of Arab from their conservative tradition to the liberated present. It focuses on Saudi Arabian writer Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*, Jordanian author, Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan: A Novel*, Palestinian novelist, Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*. It can be argued that the people in the Middle Eastern countries are circumscribed within the conservative tradition, which can be seen in every family and the society as a whole. This has understandably led to formation another culture by the process of assimilation. In fact, Middle East writers have arguably attempted to highlight the crisis, dilemma and complexities of Arab people in their adaptive host land through their fictional works.

Keywords: Middle East writers, Identity, Conservatism and Liberalism

One of the pertinent issues in Middle Eastern studies is the status and perceptions of Arab lives in socio-cultural context. Most of the intellectual approaches to Arab focussed mainly on the traditional and conventional status of Arab in home land and host land. This perception of Arab writers can be arguably reflected not only in the Orientalist approaches to the Middle East, but also in the writings, including fictional writings of Middle Eastern writers. In fact, many fictional writings are consciously or unconsciously document the transition of Arab identity from traditional stature towards cosmopolitan and liberated. The present study is an attempt to closely read select Middle Eastern fiction with the objective of identifying the transition of Arabs from their traditional past to the liberated present. This article takes the reference from three major fictions in Middle East English writing, Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*, Laila Halaby *West of the Jordan*, Susan Abulhawa's *Mornings in the Jenin*.

Rajaa Alsanea was born in Kuwait to Saudi parents. Her father was an editor and journalist for the information ministry in Kuwait. Alsanea enjoyed liberal way of life since her parents were liberal and treated men and women equally in terms of using their rights and duties. Alsanea received her bachelor's degree in Dentistry from King Saud University in 2005. At the age of eight, her family moved back to Saudi Arabia and became entangled with the ultra-conservative social system. Intending to build up a medical career, Alsanea started writing *Girls of Riyadh*

during her medical college education. She got immense help and support from her family especially from her sister Rasha. It took six years to complete the novel and finally, Alsanea published *Girls of Riyadh* in 2005. A number of copies of the book were sold through the black market due to the ban of the novel in Saudi Arabia. The book immediately reached its bestseller status after the removal of the ban from Saudi government. Global readers widely accepted the book and it reached far and wide.

Alsanea portrays primarily four characters in *Girls of Riyadh*; Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle and Lamis. All four characters are from Riyadh. They study at the University of Riyadh. They have similar upbringing and social circumstances around them. The first half of the novel explains the sequence of struggle under the patriarchal hegemony. In which post-marital complications are a recurrent theme in the novel. It appears that passivity is instilled or programmed in the mind of Arab women at an early age. One of the reasons for this is the fact that the Saudi community is often looked at as role models among the Muslim world.

In fact, four girls portrayed in *Girls of Riyadh* by Alsanea are merely an objective representation of the Arab community. They neither represent Arab womanhood nor reject their representation of Arab womanhood. However, their Arab identity formation was visible until they redefined into the cosmopolitan social structure. Their resistance against patrilineal hegemony in socio-political and cultural

Institutions was a sheer challenge in Saudi Arabia. Alsanea condemns the fact that her characters belong to the elite family and always revolve within the city of Riyadh. At the same time, the position of women in other parts of the country, especially interior localities, is still unexplored and will be arguably contaminated by the rigid patrilineal system.

All the four women characters portrayed by Alsanea are united by their strong friendship to each other. Each one of them suffers the bitter experience of life except Lamees, who was brought up in a cosmopolitan ambience. Her relationship was according to her personal choice. After marriage, she goes to Canada to pursue her degree in medicine. Lamees is presented as a person with a kind heart. She takes care of Gamrah to teach the basics of computers and the internet. This helping mentality makes Lamees more established and independent to think freely without any external assistance. Lamees, Gamrah, Michelle and Sadeem exchange the bond of friendship and love each other.

Alsanea significantly highlights Gamrah as the main character in the novel. *Girls of Riyadh* starts with the marriage of Gamrah. She is going to get married soon. Elder male members in the family predetermined her marriage without her admittance. They do not consider her choice to select a life partner. Alsanea clearly depicts the story of Gamrah as a hyphenating women identity in the novel. She is the picture of passive and docile at the initial part of the novel. She was unable to speak in a loud voice. She fears the patriarchal norms and conditions of society. That is why, she was forced to get married to Rashid. In fact, the patrilineal system made a strong decision in her life. It has a reflected impact on the public platform as well. "Boys 'number' girls in shopping malls and on the highways, throwing business cards or scraps of paper into car windows. On international flights, people queue for bathrooms to change into or our prescribed Saudi dress" (Eithway 182). This is the best example of unequal consideration that men and women receive from Saudi Arabia. It can be visible in the shopping malls, public parks and public transport system.

Laila Halaby made a huge influence among the Jordanian community by her literary contributions. The present thesis goes under the scrutiny of her famous work *West of the Jordan*, won the PEN/Beyond Margins Award.

Halaby was born in 1966 in Lebanon. She had hybrid parentage, a Jordanian father and an American mother. At the early childhood itself, she migrated to America along with her parents. She started education and continued there in America. She was a passionate traveler and lived in different parts of the world. She settled mostly in Arizona. Her educational qualifications include an undergraduate degree in Italian and Arabic, two Masters in Arabic literature and counseling. At present, she works as an outreach counsellor for the University of Arizona's college of public health.

She has an exceptional narrative skill and public acceptance in her literary career by bringing two novels into her career: *West of the Jordan*, and *Once in a promised land*. Bacon press published both these novels. Besides fiction and poetry, she also writes stories for children. She follows American experience in her writing. *West of the Jordan* was mainly on the account of her American experience. The novel discloses the life of four cousins, who grow up under different circumstances. There are mainly four women characters in this novel; Hala, Mawal, Sorayya and Khadija. Hala has grown up in Arizona. At the beginning of the novel, she visits her grandmother. She realizes that she still has a strong bond to her nation.

She escapes from the traditional walls of Jordanian society. She moved and settled in America mainly intended to get a good education. She imbibes American culture and lifestyle and adapts a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Hala often comes to compare her educated status into other family members. Hala's father did not give good support for reading books from outside of school texts. He used to take her away from books and extra reading. Her sister Latifa still grows up to the expectation of patriarchal conventions and traditions. By assimilating new ideas of cosmopolitan liberation, Hala came to realize her individual identity, which shaped without the interference of any external forces. In fact, Halaby's portrayal of character Hala simply follows cosmopolitan liberation from the rigid structure of the society.

West of the Jordan brings another character Khadija, who was one among the four cousins. She is the worst affected and suppressed character highlighted here. Khadija was under the control of her strict father and brother. She was unable to bear the brutal attack of her

father. She was passive and iractive due to the fear of her father. The burning fire of resistance resides in her, but unable to protest against the authoritative domain of her father and brother mainly because of the fear. Her brother harassed her and mistreated her before her father. The fearful image of the brutal father always haunts Khadija in different fields of her life. Khadija is the third cousin portrayed among the four cousins. Her family also settled in America. Khadija breeds in America and painstakingly assimilates American culture. That is why the irony behind the American settlement is that they still preserve traditional values and customs in America. It follows her fathers' lineage. Her family continues the traditional mindset while approaching American modern culture. Khadija's story reminds the brutal face of patriarchal domination over the inferior section of society. Through this father-daughter relationship, the cruel face of patriarchy such as violence, hatred and ignorance accentuated by Halaby.

Soraya's character in *West of the Jordan* draws attention to various adaptive stages of womanhood in host land. Her mother expects her daughter to be an ideal Arab woman. Soraya was asked to be obedient and submissive. She has to fulfil the expectations of her mother, which was highly conservative. Sometimes, her mother compared Soraya with other Jordanian girls' ideal conventional qualities. In her eyes, so-called ideal qualities are simply good enough. "My sister and cousin are the way my mother wishes, I was and she is always comparing us and telling what good girls they are and how I am just a headache". (Halaby 25). When she opposes the wishes of her mother, then it will be a headache forever in the family. Soraya feels more attached to American culture than Arab culture. She evaluates that freedom is the necessity for a woman like her. It disturbs the integrity of her family and the attachment of her mother towards her.

Susan Abulhawa is a Palestinian American writer and a strong activist for Palestinian children welfare. In order to formulate Palestinian domestic conflict and chaos, there is a suitable work written by Abulhawa, titled *Mornings in Jenin*. It also enlightens women's position in the midst of Israel Palestine conflicts. Susan Abulhawa was born to refugees of six-day war in 1967. War complications make the Abulhawa family disassembled and dislocated from their land. The developmental stages of Abulhawa's

personality fragmented in different places. She resides in Kuwait, Jordan and East Jerusalem before the final settlement in the US. After the publication of *Mornings in Jenin*, she published her second novel *The Blue Between Sky and Water*. It is widely sold and translated into nineteen languages. Abulhawa was the founder of the Playground for Palestine. It was an NGO that promotes Palestinian children by building playgrounds in Palestine and UN refugee camp in Lebanon. Her active involvement in several campaigns against Israel imperialism paved a new way of activism for an Arab writer.

In this novel, Abulhawa portrays the life of a young girl, Amal. She was brought up in the midst of suppression. Palestine and Israel war in its background of the story, which completely annihilates native inhabitants from their homeland. The fear and anxiety of these native folks especially women folks clearly depicts through the perspective of a young girl, Amal. It also inhibits the inability of this young girl to resist gender discrimination and traditional stereotypes, which patriarchal society used to impose over the younger generation. Patrilineal hegemony of culture, family and religion plays a crucial role in the development of Amal. Soon Amal realized that the current situation in their homeland is not convenient for girls both internally and externally. Especially a girl like Amal has lots of limitations since she lost her parents. She was under the control of her uncle and auntie. Indeed, she was taken care of very well by her uncle and Auntie. However, the entire family system was against all kinds of rights and privileges of a girl's wish.

In *Mornings in Jenin*, Amal's journey begins with her orphanhood. Immediately after the demise of her father, Amal decides to move away to get an education. There were serious discussions taken place regarding the marriage of Amal in her uncle's house. Being an orphan girl, she will have no powerful voice rather than simply obey the order. She soon realizes that living in conflicted dystopian Palestine is not a hectic task for women while comparing to the encounter of traditional stereotypes and patrilineal hegemony that she faces, because a Palestinian woman is comparatively distressed over the traditional flow of the society. In fact, Amal's decision was to run far away and tried hard to get a scholarship to continue her study in the US.