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**UNIVERSALITY IN CONTEMPORARY REALITY:
ENVISIONING/ (RE) VISIONING POSTMODERN LITERATURE**

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TOWARDS ARAB WOMEN IDENTITY: CONTRADICTING CULTURAL HEGEMONY AND MODERN ARAB WOMEN WITH THE REFERENCE OF GIRLS OF RIYADH

Dr.G.Sheikh Abdul Wahab

Associate Professor, Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, The New College, Chennai

K.Faiz Abdulla

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, The New College, Chennai

Religion plays a vital role in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Majority of Saudis emulate norms and religious regulation in their personal and public life. Both faith and belief undoubtedly are choice based individual freedom. However, social laws and customs are absolutely privileged to each individual irrespective of their religious and gender status. It is inborn prerequisite, equally privileged to whole human being. As far Saudi community is concerned, conservatism and patriarchal supremacy often juxtapose women identity in their public life. A significant number of provisions segregate women from the main stream of public life.

Rajaa Al-Sanea, highly influential contemporary novelist, from Saudi Arabia, explicitly draws attention to changeable female characters in modern Saudi Arabia. When Saudi government introduced women education scholarship in 2005, majority of Saudis were against it, As part of women education scholarship Al-Sanea was one of the beneficiaries, and able to achieve higher education in abroad. Till then, getting basic education for women was a troublesome task. By profession she is a dentist and by passion she wanted to be a literary figure. She grew up in a family of physicians and quite often aghast of possibility for being a writer.

In *Girls of Riyadh*, Al-Sanea addresses in the form of transcribed emails. In its narrative, emails are sent each Friday. And those emails radically expose modern Saudi women self in a controversial tone. It is controversial in the sense; all major characters in this novel breaking societal stereotypes existed in Saudi Arabia. In addition, this novel spotlights women with illicit drinking, women posing as men in order to drive cars, homosexuality, pre-marital sex, clandestine dating etc. Due to the effect, Arab mass lead the revolts against their regime. She hopes that legitimate rights are restored to all those deprived and still believes that Saudi Arabia is on reforming track to which recent participation of women in the Shura Council and the Municipal council chance to induce their social rights.

One of the Saudi journalists defended against *Girls of Riyadh* on the account of social issues existing in the kingdom for a long decade. In her words 'It is our tradition not to talk about the ill of our society. We know there are problems in our society. But the general reaction is to be quiet. We have been taught from an early age that if we talk about the ill of our society, people will laugh at us'. *Girls of Riyadh* originally published in 2005, but immediately banned in Saudi Arabia due to its controversial impact.

The novel begins with Gamrah Al-Qusamnji. Her family was originally from Qasim, a city known for its ultraconservative and strict character. Gamrah mother firmly believes 'a woman is to man as butter is to sun'. Furthermore Gamrah also been socialized in a way, where her father always dominated on her mother. Likewise her married sisters also treated inferior with the male hypocrisy and societal stereotypes. Her mother preoccupied about the aftermath complications of marital relationship between men and women from her own experience. In fact that is the reason she authentically exhorts that, women are subjected to suffer and submissive to her husband just like butter melted under the hot sun. Both mother and daughter were connected each other in several aspects. Before Gamrah marriage into Rashid, she has been advised some psychological tips by her mother, while approaching her husband. Despite of her conventional background, her fear towards customs and conservative norms often make sensitive even in minute point of life.

Unlike her friends Gamrah was not able to get higher education. Therefore Gamrah dreamed much after marriage. But unfortunately the very immediate experience after marriage, her dreamed fortune started to count in reverse. After a detailed inspection Rashid decided to marry her. He was about to resume his P.hd in America even after marriage. But for Gamrah whatever the little freedom she used to enjoy before marriage has been totally restrained in her post marital life. Rashid turned away from the presence of Gamrah and put some

restrictions on her. Rashid and Gamrah had a blissful chemistry each other at the initial stage of their marriage. But there was no stability in their relationship. At the time of their marriage Gamrah was denied to sign in marriage register. Sheikh (religious head) insisted only men can sign in register whereas women cannot mark her signature in this mutual bond. Instead she can use finger print.

In connection with Rashid's higher study both Gamrah and Rashid left Saudi immediately after their wedlock. It was rather a new world for Gamrah. She truly realized the air of freedom. People can sing, dance, and chat freely. Wearing veil created an annoying atmosphere in their public life. As part of their culture, Gamrah used to wear hijab. But rather than making them comfortable and secure, wearing veil irritated the public life in America. Gamrah aspired to learn driving. But Rashid never promoted for that. Driving for women widely banned in Saudi Arabia, as early education denied. Al-Sanea annoyed by the strict rules that govern social life of women with patriarchal prejudices. In one of her interviews she has mentioned that Saudi government once introduced women education in the near past even though people were against it. Likewise driving ban soon takes away and same mass protest will be there from public.

In the effect of all these ignorance Gamrah wished to go back her own hometown. She stayed there for sometimes, but Rashid didn't call back her. This silence of ignorance unfolded in their relationship. Ultimately delivery of divorce letter from Rashid was marveled. 'Neither Gamrah nor her mother didn't understand why he was so much annoyed'. What was the source of the constant irritation and tension? That seemed to have overcome Rashid. Gamrah started to do anything for fruitful success of their marriage, but the ultimate result was not seen success. One more significant aspect Gamrah came to realize that, without a large dowry, a girl cannot be top in the husband family.

'Why would he marry me, if he didn't want me'? She was desperately interrogating this question from the bitter experience of this relationship. Even though there were no visible disparities between Rashid and Gamrah, their relationship parted within short period, but at the time of divorce, she was in the early stage of her pregnancy. Gamrah was unable to tolerate this difficult stage of life. At some point she never believes that she is going to divorce. On the one hand she has been ignored by Rashid and on the other side societal prejudices was a throbbing dilemma especially for girls after divorce. Al Qusmanji girls never

get divorced. So naturally she has been encountered many questions in this regard.

She never wanted to be another woman of failure. Since such a stereotype was already existed, Rather than inclining submissive to such stereotypes, she explored newfangled technologies of communication, where all her buried stresses set free by engaging new way of friendship in internet and social networks. For a girl, surfing internet and spending in shopping malls were absolutely contrary with the existing social structure in Saudi Arabia. In order to chassis Gamrah's individual identity, Al-Sanea portray transformation of a passive character in to solid and stubborn women by breaking both written and unwritten norms in Saudi Arabia.

Likewise Gamrah, her close friend Sadeem was also under the troubles of marriage. She was good in her studies. She made new records of shining grades in her academic achievements. Sadeem had a proud voice while talking about Waleed, her fiancée. They were officially engaged but wedding ceremony didn't take place. Sadeem was submissive to Waleed. Immediately after the blissful night camp Sadeem was eagerly waiting Waleed's phone call. She wondered, 'does religion defined a sort of boundary in the mind of young man from conservative Najd family'. Since she hadn't done anything wrong in previous night with her fiancée, but he is not picking at least once or ring back her. This silent state long lasted almost three weeks. Finally Waleed answered all of Sadeem questions in the form divorce letter. Sadeem kept all her secret done with him in last night. Due to her engagement, half of university subjects were failed. Sadeem denied her choice of love at the beginning stage of their relationship.

Rashid and Gamrah parted each other after their marriage likewise Sadeem and Waleed on the other side parted each other after their engagement. Al-Sanea shows contemporary Saudi girls and their post marital complexities. Both girls here were submissive to their husbands. In fact without having an authentic reason, they get divorced. They have only limited access of outer world and divorced girls treated as outcast status in society. Moreover if getting divorce for a woman is difficult, yet giving divorce is quite normal for men. Consequently this unequal privilege itself treated both young girls as passive creature. Their tender voice couldn't make any evolvment rather than obeying or adhering traditional customs of society. Both family and society make girl hyphenated from the main strata of society.

But Al-Sanea never puts a full stop in the life of these girls. Like a phoenix, Gamrah and Sadeem set on their wings to learn their own self by exploring friendship. They are familiar with internet and other social network, where new dimensions of friendship and relationship start to explore. Being described both Gamrah and Sadeem as a symbol of rock-solid citizens in the stronghold of Islam; Al-Sanea reveals a world where women hide more than their desires under their long black abayas. Gamrah is going to Lebanon for cheering 'tinsmithing' session: a makeover procedure that begins with a nose job and ends with a chemical peel. Even though cosmetic surgery is forbidden in Islam, but everyone does it, AlSanea says 'girls have nose jobs and boob jobs and older women get facelifts.' On the other hand, this is a complete vision of breaking tradition. A sequential portrayal of characterization in the remaining part of novel is Michelle and Lamees. Both young girls resume their education. But their encounter with pre marital affairs causes mysterious identity clashes. Michelle falls in love with Faisal. Although their love was gained a noblest charm in a way, but at the same time Michelle was under certain conditions, put forward by Faisal family. Faisal Mother was curious about class and status in society. That curiosity was often disturbed for Michelle's hybrid parentage. In their view, only inherited beliefs and traditions shape a sophisticated person from across the generation. It was society riddled with hypocrisy, dragged by contradiction, and her only choice was to either accept those contradictions or leave the country to live in freedom.

In its unique social setting, Arab cultural norms make its people unlike any others. Because of the societal customs, Faisal becomes submissive against fighting his love towards Michelle. He was not ready for revolution for love. His personal preferences never lead him to reach Michelle. Being a man himself Faisal couldn't escape from this burden of customs. So it's beyond her limit for women to fight for her personal rights. Consequently, a large number of women alienated from all public sectors also. Their right to education, right to vote and right to select partner etc., denied by patriarchal or religious dominated conventions in society.

In her view Aysha Taryam says that 'Much of atrocities that are committed towards Arab women occur partly because the victim does not know that she has the basic right for her education to be necessity not a privilege. She receives, if it is financially possible, after her brother has been educated'. This inherited system continues across the Middle East particularly in Saudi Arabia. As far

the girls of Riyadh concerned two major girls face this challenge of male superiority throughout their life. Both Gamrah and Sadeem were blindly ignored from their husbands. Furthermore no family wanted to get its explanation whether it is right or wrong.

Some time, religious conventions also contradict in their public life. There is a slight influence of west in their lives. Being an Islamic country, Saudi Arabia officially has two celebrations. But somewhere in the novel women celebrated Valantain's day. The idea mainly imparted in their life from television channels broadcasted from Egypt and Lebanon. Alsanee consistently attempts to raise Arab girls as not the heroine of traditional folk tale, but as the icon of modernity. Finally they gather a great strength over superior customs and run away to abroad for breathing the air of freedom.

All the major characters in this novel finally release their tension in foreign land. Though this has been an approach for a long period, but later it came to exist in practical sense. Recently some provisions relaxed for women in Saudi Arabia by allowing driving license for women. They started to recreate system gradually.

In fact fundamentalism in any fields hardly juxtaposes against advanced liberal notions and stubborn personal identity. Confidence and superiority are the major elements used by fundamentalist. Once they find it is easy to provoke people in their own will, a kind of superiority overshadowing over the minor section of society. The girls portrayed by Al-Sanea awfully disdained all types of alienation. Rather than obeying and submitting, they find freedom in an ultra modern contrivance. Perhaps the influence of west inspires them in a way, but dominantly sharpening their own self in a prestigious way.

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