



Cultural Patterns Related to Women in *The Dove's Necklace*

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Abstract

In recent years, gender issues have become crucial because they reflect the cultural structures of society. This study focuses on gender issues in Saudi literature, using Raja Alem's 2016 novel *The Dove's Necklace* as a case study to delineate the cultural patterns associated with women's bodies.

This study is also a cultural critique of the morals, behaviours and practices of individuals in this particular society and how women resist these cultural patterns. The society Alem presents in her novel is influenced by patterns acquired from historical, cultural, and social contexts. This study focuses on the elements of fear of shame, patriarchal authority, symbolic violence and the conflict between masculinity and femininity.

Alem convinces her readers that the historical and cultural context of this community is biased against women, using various techniques to portray cultural patterns that belittle women in society – primarily the inequality between men and women. Alem also portrays troubled family relationships to highlight the negativity of cultural trends. In the novel, Alem uses letters written by the protagonist Aisha to depict a civilized woman who makes a desperate effort to change men's perspectives regarding women rather than confining herself to an ancient cultural pattern.

Keywords: Saudi literature, Gender, Mideast Feminism, Symbolic Violence.



الملخص:

في السنوات الأخيرة، أصبحت القضايا الجنسانية حاسمة؛ لأنها تنعكس على الهياكل الثقافية للمجتمع. تركز هذه الدراسة على قضايا النوع الاجتماعي في الأدب السعودي، باستخدام رواية طوق الحمام لرجاء عالم (٢٠١٦)، كدراسة حالة؛ لتحديد الأنماط الثقافية المرتبطة بالأجسام النسائية. تعتبر هذه الدراسة - أيضاً - نقداً ثقافياً للأخلاق والسلوكيات، والممارسات للأفراد في هذا المجتمع بالذات، وكيف تقاوم النساء هذه الأنماط الثقافية.

وتخلص الرسالة إلى تأثير المجتمع الذي تقدمه عالم (٢٠١٦) في روايته بالأنماط المكتسبة من السياقات التاريخية والثقافية والاجتماعية. وتركز هذه الدراسة على عناصر الخوف من الخجل، والصراع بين الذكورة والأنوثة، والسلطة الأبوية، والعنف الرمزي .

تقع رجاء عالم قراءها بأن السياق التاريخي والثقافي لهذا المجتمع متحيز ضد المرأة؛ وذلك باستخدام أساليب مختلفة لتصوير الأنماط الثقافية التي تقلل من شأن المرأة في المجتمع - لا سيما عدم المساواة بين الرجل والمرأة. والكاتبة تستخدم أيضاً العلاقات الأسرية المضطربة لتسليط الضوء على سلبية الاتجاهات الثقافية، وتقدم (في روايتها) خطاب عائشة لتصور امرأة متحضرة، تبذل جهداً يائساً لتغيير وجهات نظر الرجل فيما يتعلق بالمرأة، بدلاً من حصر نفسها في نمط ثقافي قديم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب السعودي، الجنوسة، العنف الرمزي .

1 Introduction

Feminist literature, and more specifically the field of gender studies in literature, highlights how people define themselves and how they are evaluated by the people who live around them. In many cases, gender in literature is closely associated with women's activism against gender oppression, studies on equality for women and reviews related to how people perceive and treat the female body (Lombardo & Meier, 2016, p. 20). Gender studies in literature have been spearheaded by several authors, including Simone de Beauvoir, Alice Walker and Audre Lord, among others (Rich, 2014, p. 58).

In her book *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir (2010) suggested solutions to end oppression of women. She noted in particular that class struggle and a socialist government were necessary to solve many of the problems societies were struggling with at the time (de Beauvoir, 2010, p. 89). De Beauvoir was particularly interested in the reality of sexual difference and the equality of gender.



According to Avery (2006), the cultural dimension plays a critical role in determining gender roles as well as elements related to ethics and sexual differences and how those issues influence individual roles and relationships within a community. This relationship is significant and is the focus of this work. The representation of gender in literature will be explored in an analysis of modern Saudi literature, specifically *The Dove's Necklace* by Raja Alem, using a cultural criticism approach. This will be achieved by examining (1) cultural patterns and stereotypes associated with the body of women, honour and potential shame; (2) masculinity, femininity and parental power; and (3) symbolic violence and cultural patterns.

Traditional women lack open minds and combativeness, making it difficult to challenge the rules and the men around them (Dhahir, 2016, pp. 127–142). *The Dove's Necklace*, however, reveals the unexpected language of Saudi women who broach taboo subjects such as gender and sex (Alem, 2016). Alem's courage has helped women express their reality and what is expected of them from society. Therefore, this novel is rich in observations of gender and culture, highlighting many cultural patterns that help us understand the reality of women. These insights prompted the choice of this novel for analysis. There is an urgent need to understand gender relations in a society considered to be one of the most conservative in the world, as well as the gap between cultural and gender studies in literature.

1.1 Research Aim

This paper aims to reveal gender issues regarding images of women that have been presented in Saudi literature by focusing on Saudi novels using cultural criticism. First, cultural criticism will be briefly outlined, and the present state of gender and images of women in Saudi novels will be discussed. The cultural patterns relating to women's bodies will be analysed.



1.2 Research Objectives

The goals of this study are to:

- Examine how concepts and perceptions of gender are represented with Saudi literary works, and how such perceptions may infer historical and institutional barriers that may limit gender equality.
- Embrace the female perspective of the authors to infer relationships between environmental factors specific to Saudi Arabia, and the formation of internalised biases that may perpetuate gendered stereotypes, even in the absence of male discrimination.
- Explore how the perceptions of gender roles manifest as aesthetic differences between the characters, and how this construction of femininity impacts the perceived image and role of women in Saudi society.

1.3 Research Questions

This study focuses on the presence of gender in modern Saudi literature by answering the following questions:

- What is the role of cultural criticism in uncovering patterns of culture that may hinder gender equality?
- What cultural patterns associated with women's bodies does Alem address in her writing?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is intended to enrich the body of academic work regarding gender issues affecting and stereotypes of Saudi women and to highlight the role of culture. The question of how culture sustains the unequal treatment of different groups of people based on gender is a link between gender studies and cultural studies. It also contributes to cultural studies and cultural reviews, especially regarding relationships with women and the new shift towards the empowerment of women. This study examines how social and cultural factors have shaped cultural patterns in Saudi Arabia and influenced society's view of women's bodies.



2 Methodology

The purpose of this section is to introduce the research methodology for this study of the portrayal of women in Saudi literature. This research examines the work and ideas of Raja Alem regarding Saudi women. Both descriptive and analytical approaches are employed to analyse the contextual and textual aspects of Alem's novel *The Dove's Necklace*. The cultural patterns are first highlighted via a critical reading of the novel and explaining how its different sections each relate to the focus of this study. The thematic structures of Alem's novel are considered using an analytical approach, while her narrative is assessed using a descriptive approach. Using these two approaches to examine its themes and cultural structures enables interpretations of *The Dove's Necklace* as a feminist novel. Finally, appropriate explanations of the novel through the lenses of cultural dimension and cultural criticism are provided.

3 Cultural Criticism and Literary Phenomena

As highlighted by Berger (1995, p. 2), the critique of cultural influences should be considered an activity rather than a standalone discipline: it comprises interpretive theories and disciplines, media analysis, philosophical thought and popular culture, as well as literary and aesthetic theory and its criticism. Cultural criticism is a dynamic web of discourses within the culture of event production, over and above its interpretation. Critiques of culture assert that it is not a product but a process, and it is not a fixed definition but a lived experience. Additionally, cultural criticism is part of theories such as Marxist, social, psychoanalytic, anthropological and sociological criticism. Cultural studies consist of gender-related topics, literature, social subcultures, social movements and general media. Cultural studies and literary studies ought to be treated the same, considering that the latter is committed to literary object conception, which is then repudiated by the former. Cultural studies originate from applying literary analysis techniques to other related materials (Berger, 1995, pp. 2–3).

Cultural criticism focuses on how cultural surroundings influence people and how they propagate those pressures to others, including responding to such pressures with a sense of emergency.



Cultural criticism involves critiques of individuals' morals, behaviour and practices in the society. According to Surber (2018), cultural criticism may be confused with psychological analysis, but the key differences between the two are that cultural criticism is normative and does not incorporate personal impressions or methodological rigor. It can be used to review how different classes, political beliefs, religions and ethnicities influence the creation and interpretation of a text. Jay (2018) argued that the process also involves a review of the relationships between dominant cultures and their impact on people's behaviour. Jay suggests that examining a text includes exploring the experiences of the marginalised individuals depicted, not simply how the dominant culture is portrayed.

Culture influences gender roles, ways of thinking, and the social and economic behaviour of people in society. Cultural practices are based on the environments in which people are born and live, which shapes their attitude, emotions and reactions, as well as their perceptions of what happens around them (Hsia, 1968). There have been various arguments about gender roles in society. According to Avery (2006), the cultural dimension plays a critical role in determining gender roles as well as elements related to ethics and sexual differences and how these influence individual roles and relationships within the community. Similarly, Barry (2017) argued that cultural determinism involves reality, as represented by different literary theories that explain the assimilation of a person's sociocultural values. These values, in turn, reflect attitudes, mentalities and perceptions as well as behaviours.

Culture can also be revealed by examining the combination of values and gender activities that reflect individuals' sense of belonging. Furthermore, the issues underlying discrimination and decision-making on different criteria are of key interest in understanding sociocultural changes due to the unprecedented evolution of human behaviour. Novels have prompted discussions on gender discrimination as well as the duties of women to their communities. According to Cave (2016), the development of literature was accompanied by different projects, directives, programmes and national regulations that drew attention to primary phenomena, most of which originated from the role of sexual and ethics differences (Cave, 2016).



Frye (1957), maintained that some cultures involve elements that undermine feminists and their role in society. Many literary works represent women as dominated and alienated. Furthermore, this concept of environmental influence is argued to strongly affect how women themselves perceive the role of women, gender roles and responsibilities. Although women subject to a western culture may be conditioned to re-evaluate traditions that reinforce gender stereotypes and expectations, women conditioned within a highly gendered environment subconsciously perpetuate behaviour and social cues that reinforce those perceived roles and differences (Dhahir, 2016). Benedict (2018) found that appreciating the roles of culture and communication shapes the position of women in society, and that religious, philosophical, political and mythical discourses impose norms and values about gender roles.

Literacy and cultural criticism include a considerable number of concepts that are vague and offer little or no interpretations of their conceptual uses. Examples of these terms include discourse, class, tradition, innovation and modernity. These terms are understood through a backdrop of concepts and ideologies which are applied in accordance with ideas, beliefs and attitudes that reflect the dominant culture within a society. In addition, culture includes language theory, with words that are technically defined, although none of these words were firmly established after being transferred from their original theoretical form into the cultural domain.

3.1 Cultural Patterns

Cultural patterns are considered an essential topic in cultural criticism (Al-Ghathami, 2005). They involve the marginalisation of human behaviours, morals and practices within a specific society. Different societies have distinct cultural traditions and social structures that regulate interactions, which influences the behaviour of individuals. Even if there are dominant cultural ideals and values, it is not appropriate to assume that there is necessarily a corresponding cultural coherence in society (Al Lily & Foland, 2014). According to Al Lily and Foland (2014), in many cases, there are competing value systems that determine gender roles among community members. If traditional cultural practices are to be understood as conceptualising societal processes, they must work together to influence the position of women in a society.



Al Mohammed (2018) asserted that in modern society, there are unique thoughts about what constitutes appropriate and correct gender relations, including the division of labour between the genders. Carrington (2014) agreed that in modern society, culture involves institutionalised norms which are constant in different dimensions. Norms and values are considered an aspect of gender culture because they influence people's behaviour (Carrington, 2014).

This norm reflects the cultural traditions that were prevalent before the working-class campaign for women gained a strong social and political foothold. In Saudi Arabia, married women being housewives is the core gender pattern, and employment for women is not socially accepted. By contrast, a more fluid distribution of caregiving between the genders is found in many European cultures, where the traditional role of the housewife may not be perceived to carry the same value (Carrington, 2014). In addition, religious affiliation may also explain a divergence in how gender is perceived between different cultures: According to Dhahir (2016), although the coexistence of multiple religious affiliations enabled by a heterogeneous culture may promote a re-evaluation of gender stereotypes, the institutionalisation of a single religious affiliation of a culturally homogenous society may limit its ability to challenge established gender norms. However, cultural homogeneity may be associated with higher levels of gender segregation within an entire society. In addition to the above factors, culture has manifested in many novels as an approach for examining psychology as well as the attitudes of women to determine whether they are comfortable with their position in society.

Most feminist novels were written by women activists with the primary intention of sharing women's experiences as well as encouraging women to stand against their oppression in society. However, in addition to the perceptions of Saudi women about their position in society inferred by literary publications, this is also argued to manifest in behaviours such as choice of clothing (Carrington, 2014). Moreover, as later highlighted by Al-Ghathami (2005) in discussing the significance of challenging the institutionalisation of gender stereotypes, this visual manifestation of gender differences further reinforces perceptions of femininity that allow the segregation of genders to be institutionalised further, and thus limits the perceived possibility of alternative lifestyle choices.



Although the observed manifestation of gender differences may reflect an institutionalisation of gender roles; this may not equate to discrimination or a perceived intellectual inequality between the genders. Moreover, this institutionalised segregation may instead represent prioritisation of equal yet different career pathways according to an equal yet different distribution of strengths and weaknesses. According to Etling, Kelly, Faris and Palfrey (2014), this may manifest as encouragement of women to pursue professions centred around education due to a perceived strength and tendency towards childcare. Men, in contrast, may be encouraged to pursue more managerial roles due to their perceived behaviours and ideal role as the family breadwinner. However, although this gendered model of perceived strengths and weaknesses may explain many divergences in behaviours and institutionalised policy between nations concerning gender equality, this model may not account for influences such as the interchange of behaviours between co-existing groups observed in modern society (Carrington, 2014). Furthermore, to more effectively account for such influences, authors are now working to develop universal theories, although some are focused on culturally poetic aspects to develop particular bodies or texts which define cultural changes and patterns.

Al-Ghathami (2005) emphasised the importance of criticising the discourse and detecting dominant cultural patterns that are defects in the discourse in Arab culture. In addition, the writer focuses on hidden patterns involved in Arab culture that contradict advertisers and hide behind aesthetics and symbols. One such important cultural pattern emphasised by Al-Ghathami is the relationship between historical perceptions of gender biases and how women are disproportionately limited in their bodily autonomy. In addition to this highlighted influence, Al-Baredy (2016) further revealed that the reinforced perceptions of masculinity according to Arabic culture within Saudi Arabian folk tales appear to normalise the inequality of rights between men and women. Moreover, Rabie'y (2017) also discussed hidden patterns in the works of Al-Jahiz, one of the most important Arab writers, highlighting descriptions of Arab culture that reflect valuable cultural patterns. Such hidden cultural patterns include, in particular, masculinity in Arab culture.



3.2 Cultural Patterns Related to Women's Bodies

The Dove's Necklace illustrates how the society of the Lane of Many Heads perceives women's bodies in a cultural context. A careful analysis of the novel reveals how Alem demonstrates that almost all the cultural patterns of the society presented in *The Dove's Necklace* are centred around women's bodies.

Many of the cultural artefacts and trends related to women's bodies mentioned in the story, such as a string of beads or a coloured hair ribbon, are designed to cover, decorate or restrain them (Alem, 2016, p. 51). Alem also argues that culture forbids women from reading certain books, such as those about love. Alem uses these and other aspects of her novel to portray her perceptions of the possible acts of social discrimination against or oppression of the bodies of women and leverages this discourse to comment on the reluctance to challenge social stereotypes and discrimination towards women (Alem, 2016, p. 15).

The ongoing scrutiny of detective Nasser al-Qahtani represents the contradictions inherent in the different perceptions of women presented in the novel. Upon the discovery of a young woman's corpse in the Lane of Many Heads, everyone refuses to recognise it due to the shame of her nakedness (Alem, 2016 p. 15). Alem also describes how women in the Lane of Many Heads find themselves squeezed and oppressed in the struggle between those who want to maintain historical customs and those attempting to destroy it in the name of modernity (Alem, 2012, p. 51). Although the inhabitants of Lane of Many Heads ensure that female bodies remain covered continuously and are unable to express themselves by any visible means, Alem focuses on the issues of women who push to find their identity: Alem's representation of a female body in *The Dove's Necklace* is her declaration that women in society are subject to social neglect, alienation and domination.

As one example, Umm al-Sa'd's body angers the inhabitants of the Lane, leading them to condemn her for having 'broad shoulders, [a] flat chest and a masculine frame', which diminishes her femininity in their eyes (Alem, 2012, p. 117). These words represent the perceptions of the people living in the Lane, who expect that a woman will be marginalised unless she has what they consider a feminine biological shape.



Further evidence of the oppression of women in this society is through the emails that Aisha sent to her German boyfriend, such as the following transcription (subject to translation from the original Arabic source text):

Do you see? Where can I find the words to explain it to you? I never came to you as an individual. I was a sheet of white paper covered in ciphers, the eyes of the Lane of Many Heads. You were an elephant stomping on the sheets . . . no matter how hard squeezed me in your arms to extricate only me . . . three bodies emerged: one starved and mad thirsty, second that had been encoded with years with this is forbidden, that's forbidden that's allowed. (Alem, 2012, p. 226)

The women living in the Lane of Many Heads are voiceless and lack the freedom of association, to the extent that girls cannot mix with their male age-mates when they reach puberty in order to 'preserve' their bodies (Alem, 2016, p. 67). Aisha's letter to her German boyfriend offers a glimpse into the life of a girl imprisoned in a basement by a father who restrains her from using any 'masculine' object. However, when she obtains an object traditionally associated with masculine-oriented tasks, she uses it to dig out through the wall in search of her freedom. Aisha shows how desperate she feels and how she sees the world her father has confined her in when she says she is surrounded by male language despite not having a man to meet and communicate with. Her father also refuses to give her food on a masculine 'plate', sending it to her instead on a feminine 'saucer'. He never allows her to eat lamb; she is instead restricted to female cows' meat (beef). Aisha points out that as a girl she must stay at home until she gets married: On the one hand, it is a man who deprives her of freedom, and yet on the other hand, a man is also her dream of freedom.

3.3 The Cultural Pattern of Honour and Potential Shame

The society Alem presents in her novel is influenced by cultural patterns acquired from historical, cultural and social contexts which relate to the body of women. One of the most important of these patterns is the fear of shame and loss of honour: Any woman who reveals parts of her body becomes a disgrace to her family (Alem, 2016, p. 20). In the complications experienced in identifying the female corpse, Alem demonstrates that everyone denies knowing the victim for fear of sharing her shame.



Alem also accuses Arabian society of being less concerned with the possibility of solving a murder than the disgrace the murdered woman caused her family. This is exemplified in Detective Nasser, who himself witnessed his father kill his mad sister for returning home without any clothes when he was a child (Alem, 2016, p. 20). His father did not question why the girl was naked; instead he struck her in the head with a coffee pot and gave the cause of death as an asthma attack:

As if possessed, he wrapped her up and dragged her into the house. Shoved her through the door, and with the same movement tore his robe off, getting to her feet when his father saw her and flung it aside in disgust. Fatima was seized with the first thing he could find, a coffeepot: whack. Nasser had never been able to shake the sight of the coffeepot spout piercing Fatima's forehead, the channel of blood that suddenly spurted out over her face and neck, his father's threatening finger: 'Your sister died of an asthma attack'. (Alem, 2016, p. 20)

Although it is illegal, honour killings are still committed to 'cleanse the shame' (Mahadeen, 2013, p. 90). In Alem's novel, even though Fatima's aunt decides to reveal the truth to the authorities, the family is still shamed when they learn that their neighbour had undressed their daughter – but not because a father murdered his daughter (Alem, 2016, p. 20). The community of the Lane of Many Heads accepted the fact that a father had killed his daughter to protect the family's honour because it aligned with the cultural pattern. In Arab culture, men consider themselves responsible for the sovereignty and dignity associated with protecting women's bodies and integrity (Zaqzouq, 2017, pp. 19–21). Moreover, this is why men engage in wars to defend a perceived sense of honour following a specific loss or event but discriminate against women from infancy. Fathers in Arab society once had the option of getting rid of their daughters for fear that a girl could grow up and lead the family into shame, which is intolerable and is considered to reflect the behaviour of the entire family (Mahadeen, 2013, p. 91). Furthermore, Alem's portrayal of a nude woman may also reinforce the observed reaction to the dead women noticed by the other character, as this represents a violation of her family's honour (Alem, 2016, p. 16), that is, the woman's family felt a severe loss regardless of the context, even if the act of exposing her nudity was unintentional:



An older man with an orange beard broke through the commotion with his cane. His liquid blue eyes settled on the woman's nipples, each looking pertly one terror only: 'May my daughter Azza never have a body like this, shameless even in death!' (Alem, 2016, p. 16)

Some scholars assert that in the conservative Arab culture, it is expected that a girl's hymen should be ruptured only by intercourse with her husband on her marriage night, and thus her intact hymen serves as a sign of pride or honour to her family (Al Mohammed, 2018, p. 92). Virginity remains highly regarded because a woman is expected to serve as a means of reproduction and male pleasure: it is thus a source of shame if she is no longer a virgin before she is married (Hegazy & Al-Rukban, 2012, p. 109). It is also thought that ancient Arab societies allowed a family to bury a woman alive if they feared that she would bring shame to them; this perspective extended to pregnant women attempting to induce miscarriages 'if they [knew] that [the] foetus [was] female' (Al Mohammed, 2018, p. 92).

3.4 Cultural Patterns of Symbolic Violence

Bourdieu described symbolic violence as the expression of physical power in symbolic form in 'routine social life' (as cited in Mitchell, Jones and Fluri, 2019, p. 45). Alem depicts the presence of symbolic violence against Saudi Arabian women by creating a state of imbalance which makes a woman's body appear inferior unconsciously (Alem, 2016, p. 128). She also expresses the belief that women in the Middle East might strongly desire to flee from violence following their experiences in their countries. Scholars describe these forms of violence as 'legal violence', which are normalised but have emulative injurious effects if codified in law (Mitchell et al., 2019, p. 45). Legal violence comprises structural violence, which reflects the institutionalised discrimination and inequalities women are subjected to. Such situations occur when society keeps women vulnerable, marginalised and poor (Mitchell et al., 2019, p. 45).

Alem depicts Arabian historical and cultural contexts as working against women and carrying with them symbolic violence, which is used to subordinate women in society.



First, the cultural elements in the Lane of Many Heads have institutionalised the idea that the female body appearing in public is a disgrace and thus should remain hidden (Alem, 2016, p. 128). However, due to the presence of symbolic power, women find themselves unconsciously upholding the same idea. Alem posits that perceiving a woman's body as shameful is prevalent not only among men but also among women, who are ashamed of their bodies and want them covered. For instance, the imbalances between the two sexes in the novel leads to a conversation between Aisha and Azaz which states that the character unconsciously propels symbolic honour:

I had to monitor my body so that I could hide it. It is [embarrassing] to see [it] transforming into an adult woman. I did not want my teachers, who were all women, or my mother to see my shame. (Alem, 2016, p. 128)

In her criticism of the cultural laws that define the social positions of men and women, Alem argued that they have enabled women to remain subjective and obedient to historical and cultural patterns. Aisha's revelation about the relationship between her mother and father is an accurate representation of a culturally constructed relationship between men and women (Alem, 2016, p. 110). The men in this community deal with women as objects whose main purpose is to get married, which is also the daily motivation of the women themselves (Alem, 2016, p. 249). For instance, Yusria, Khalil's sister, suffers from the fact that she is unmarried and getting old. She feels isolated and shunned, and therefore spends her life in Hajj Silahdar's home for the destitute to care for the aged and sick (Alem, 2016, pp. 158–159). Assuming that marriage is the only role available to women in Saudi, Yusira says:

Khalil used to terrorize me by saying 'I can picture you as a silent bride in one of those cages for dead women!' And here I am, a spinster. I never married and never even went out into the world, and I'm waiting here in my cage for my funeral procession to set off. Death and I know each other pretty well after all this time. (Alem, 2016, p. 163)

This cultural tradition presents the female body as useful only for reproduction and men's sexual pleasure. For example, Khali tells Ramzeia that she is 'only a toy to play with' and therefore requires that she is submissive and obedient (Alem, 2016, pp. 220–225).



Similarly, when fifteen-year-old Jamila marries Aza's father, Mzahim, he perceives her as a sexual device to obtain a male heir (Alem, 2016, pp. 239–240). Alem gathers evidence to show that cultural patterns steer observable symbolic violence towards women, as when Mzahim views Jamila as an inferior creature and is only capable of relating to her as an object whose purpose is satisfying his sexual needs. This attitude is shared by all of the male inhabitants of the Lane of Many Heads. Aisha reveals the hypocrisy of the society, which on one hand thinks that women are 'virgins and untouchable' and on the other hand imagines [them] as sex dolls' (Alem, 2016, p. 52). Her marriage to Ahmed demonstrates the cultural norms which steer the male oppression of women because he divorces her after two months of marriage for no reason but later wants her back after two years as if she is an object.

4 Conclusion

This study addresses the issue of gender in Saudi literature, focusing on Raja Alem's *The Dove's Necklace* – a cultural critique of the morals, behaviours, and practices of individuals in society. Alem depicts cultural attitudes towards women's bodies and demonstrates how women resist these cultural patterns. In examining this discourse, the perceptions and observations about gender equality inferred by the characters do appear to provide a channel through which the author is able to passively suggest her observations while retaining compliance with expected social norms, attitudes and behaviours in relation to the role of women in the society Alem depicted.

In *The Dove's Necklace*, Raja Alem reveals the desire of Saudi women to resist traditional oppressive culture and express their feelings openly. This enables the author to use characters such as Aisha to show the other side of Saudi women and push for cultural change by depicting women with the courage to express themselves freely and talk about sensitive subjects such as sexuality and sexual desire. Moreover, the differentiation of this character perception when compared to the cultural protocol present in society strongly suggests that Alem's novel suggests a radical shift in thought towards female empowerment and sexual autonomy.



In addition, the author succeeds in convincing her readers that society's historical and cultural contexts are intrinsically designed to undermine this autonomy and use institutionalised manifestations of gender as a form of symbolic violence.

Alem's discourse could be interpreted as further reinforcing the recognised pressures present within the cultural climate of the society. For example, in this literary work, the conditioned roles of men and women are formative to how all members of a society perceive gender relations. The author's contentions are filtered through her own calibrated articulation, and may suggest that these, and similar views from other authors, are manifestations of internalised misogyny within the female authors themselves.

However, in observing how the author articulates this contradiction and systemic injustice, the preservation of traditional gendered expectations may suggest the authors not only calibrate their expression in expectation of the Saudi reader but also due to the possible perception that certain gendered norms and differences are in-fact productive in maximising female autonomy and reducing the institutionalisation of masculine behaviours. Although Alem does not take women out of their traditional domestic roles, she uses a different approach to represent what the relationships between members of troubled family look like. Moreover, the author strives to favour the stability of the equitable – yet traditionally gendered – family relationship by constructing a picture of a failed traditional family institution through depictions of unhappy and unstable family members trying to uphold and live with traditional cultural norms.

By contrast however, the discourse observed in *The Dove's Necklace* is an illustration of how cultural transformations can affect and contradict the modern model of a family and that the traditional husband-wife relationship may perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes. For instance, the introduction of Aisha's letters establishes the presence of a woman who had rediscovered herself and wanted men to learn about the modern world, rather than to remain confined to the old traditional patterns.

Overall, the works of this author – despite calibrating her discourse and articulation whilst mindful of her Saudi audience – could be considered as a participant in the feminist movement.



The Dove's Necklace even alludes to an impending change to gender relations in Saudi Arabia that echoes a similar revolutionary tone when compared to other feminist publications.

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