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NEW ADULT FICTION IN ARABIA: EXPLORING LIPSTICK FEMINISM AND THE HAREM
COMPLEX IN RAJA AL SANEA'S *GIRLS OF RIYADH*

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Abstract

After the Arab Spring, many young writers emerged in the Arabian Peninsula, who held good education and expressed bold, explicit and daring themes. Saudi Arabian writer Raja Al Sanea, is an example of beauty, brain and cosmopolitanism, with her commercially successful and controversial book '*The Girls of Riyadh*'. She writes the experiences of young Saudi women, in a way which was previously unknown to the native society. In her story, the process of mimicking western lifestyle to a strict Arab society is seen as a symbol of liberal modernization, where exotic things, previously hidden behind thick curtains of the Saudi patriarchy, were made known to the masses. This description of personal sensuous experiences is also seen as a complex phenomenon of cultural and traditional⁷ manipulation.

In this study, an attempt is made to explore New Adult fiction as a piece of literature that propagates sensitive themes of young Arab individuals. In this genre, the pioneer themes include lipstick feminism, fantasy, love and lust, alienation, revenge and vengeance. This paper aims to examine a post-colonial feminist reading of the novel and also attempts to reinterpret patriarchal and imperial ideology that retraces history, as it acts as a unifying factor rather than forming a divide between genders. Hence, this paper highlights Harem complex as a concept of expressing women's sensitivity and sensibilities, as demonstrated through 'lipstick feminism' in the characters of *Girls of Riyadh*.

Keywords: Sensibilities, Arab women, Lipstick Feminism, Romance, Post-Colonial

Introduction

Women's fiction is described as a work which deals with narration of an emotional journey by the main character, which primarily constitutes a plot and a theme. It deals with adult characters, with elements of fantasy, mystery and romance. A new adult fiction literature has a protagonist between 18 and 30 years. It has gained wide popularity in the last decade, particularly in the west and is being also

used by many young Arab writers as well. This genre primarily deals with themes of identity, romance, alcohol, depression, sexuality, struggles, to name a few. Interestingly, it also deals with issues of lifestyle, jobs, career, failure and success. The scholars and writers of this genre define this as an exploitation of a character's life.¹ The Middle Eastern world – after the Arab spring- witnessed a change of literary colors, that flowered with the emergence of young prolific writers like Inam

Kachachi, Raja Alem, Ameera al Hakawati, Tawwaqul and Raja Al Sanea. These writers got popularity with their mixture of social and bold themes, which previously held no place in these societies. As a conservative society, Saudi Arabia has encountered a number of new emergent women writers who are bold, explicit and dared enough to share the hidden world of female fantasies and sexual dynamics to a new height. Today, this phenomenon of expressing a young woman's personal lived experiences can be commonly seen in Arab literary compositions. Arab women in the West are especially putting their pen in this genre, where themes of contemporary debates are the most discussed. Saudi Arabian writer Raja Al Sanea is an example of beauty, brain and cosmopolitanism, with her commercially successful and controversial book *"The Girls of Riyadh"*. She very well demonstrated the praxis of post-modernization and libertarianism with her fearless themes, which echoed women's power and individual instincts publically.

WRITING THE SELF:

According to Al Sanea, the morals of Islam never restricted her, it in fact allowed her to bring herself up in a liberal mindset, she did not forcefully wear the veil rather she wore it by her own choice, because many Saudi women do not wear hijab when they are abroad, as she put it in a way which attracts more attention. It is of a vital interest to know the different styles of wearing the veil as it denotes the social class of the women in Saudi society. Her novel discusses the status of women in the Saudi society with many contradictory and debatable issues. It deals with themes of love, religion, politics, cross-culture, class struggle, westernization and gender construction. She writes the experiences of young Saudi women in a way which was previously unknown to the native society, because of their cultural and traditional manipulations². Al Sanea suggests, that a nation can only be built on love and tolerance, which forms its basis and further allows education and development to strengthen the Saudi society. The depiction of Saudi society as tribal and backward, which is now moving towards modernization on the wheels of young generation, is seen in the narration of Al Sanea's female protagonists, who are well educated and liberal

enough to speak their inner self in their society. The concept of relating western lifestyle to a strict Arab society is a symbol of liberal modernization where a word like hot sex becomes a part of Saudi life, as Al Sanea herself feels to reveal another side of this society to the West³. It gives pleasure to the readers, who enjoy this hidden side of Saudi society in the words of a female author, who could reveal such issues romantically. It has been also argued, that such literary acts which carry these type of gender relations in a society like Saudi Arabia cannot be read outside the capacity of Neo-Imperial and nationalist narratives. **Hence, within the spectrum of feminism(s), the embracing of traditional concepts and ideas of femininity, including the sexual power of women, is a trademark of lipstick feminism. The girl power demonstrated through sensual appeal by Al Sanea is seen as yet another wave of post-modernization in the Arab society.**

PLOT AND CHARACTERIZATION:

Girls of Riyadh, starts with an email, with the subject title "I shall write of my friends", and it further, goes on with the text.

"Ladies and Gentlemen: You are invited to join me in one of the most explosive scandals and noisiest, wildest all-night parties around. Your personal tour guide- and that's moi- will reveal to you a new world, a world closer to you than you might imagine. We all live in this world but do not really experience it, seeing only what we can tolerate and ignoring the rest. To all of you out there."⁴

As a ground-breaking best seller and controversial novel, the starting words makes a stir and breaks the social taboos in the Saudi conservative society. In the novel, the author gives details of four female childhood friends namely, Lamees, Sadeem, Gamrah and Mashael. They are attractive young students with fashionable and modern attitude, belonging to posh families who are looking for true love amid their traditional family values. They were also victims of failures, in their lives in some way or the other. Lamees is successful and Sadeem is struggling in relation to her fiancé,

Waleed. Next is Gamrah who is married to Rashid, Who had a secret girlfriend which Gamrah later comes to know, and it eventually led to their divorce. Lastly Mashael loves Faisal, but they could not marry.

Al Sanea tries to interpret Islamic teachings in favour of women when she allowed women to choose their actions and values liberally specially, while planning for their life partners and disclosing their individual experiences. She is a critic of the Saudi society which does not allow women to have equal rights in matters of social and civil status. She writes the experiences of these young Saudi women who are looking for relationships that fosters love, trust and conviction within marriage as well as outside marriage contrary to the traditional norms of the society⁵.

According to her, the morals of Islam never restricted her which allowed her to bring herself up in a liberal mind-set. It is of a vital interest to know, that the different styles of wearing the veil denote the difference in the social class of the women in Saudi society. In other words, the elite class women, the middle-class women and the lower class rural women, who wear separate patterns of the veil in their respective societies. The novel *Girls of Riyadh*, discusses the status of women in the Saudi society with some contradictory and debatable issues. This novel is a series of emails, which were sent to the subscribers of an internet group, by an anonymous woman who is also the narrator.

As the novel develops, the narrator replies to the messages which were received in the group. This line of questions and answers, replies and interrogations, reveals the private lives of the individual's towards their romantic sexual desires. It breaks many conventions of writing Arabic, as described by its translator Marilyn Booth, that it's a "question of how an Arabic work becomes an English literary work, and of what trends are left out as the novel is again woven."⁶ Although, Al Sanea herself claims to be the translator of her work in English, which reflects her cosmopolitan personality, who is fluent in English and Arabic, at the same time. The English version has been reviewed and read by people who do not know Arabic, which leaves very

less space for literary manipulations. They assumed the repression of women in Saudi society as actual facts and encourage the female characters of the novel as ambassadors of women's liberation and emancipation. They view Al Sanea as one of the few brave voices in the Saudi wilderness who can speak about the realities of women's lives and their aspirations. This novel offered a gateway for debates among the Inter-Muslim communities, and also about the contemporary life in Arabia. Sometimes a book, an author, a theme and the setting, become the representation of a society which is evident in the work of Al Sanea, where the poles of East and the West, Modern and Medieval, and Muslim versus Western women are intersected.⁷

Further, the narrator elaborates the lives of many individuals without focusing on a single issue, however, it also deals with the inner lives of many young modern Saudi girls who are educated and use sophisticated materials for maintaining their lifestyles. Al Sanea herself states that the girls don't represent every other Girls of Riyadh, but they do represent many.⁸ This novel reveals the realities of womanhood which should not be taken as a shameful expression in respect to religion and culture, though it still criticizes the gender relations, social constructions on women and religious practices that are prevalent in the Saudi society. In a description in the novel, the character Rashid who is western educated marries Gamrah without meeting her earlier, even not at the time when the contract of marriage was signed between their mothers. This forced arranged marriage could not last for long when Gamrah returned to her parents, after she found that Rashid, was having an affair with a Japanese woman. He then sent the divorce papers to her which seems as if he already wanted to get rid of her. It now describes the suffering which Qamrah goes through after the divorce, when she was unable to sleep properly and her whole family was a shame in their society. In the life of Sadeem, there was a tragic story going on when she lost her first and second love. She then prevented both of them. On the other hand, Mashael fell in love with Faisal and ask him to marry her but he refused to do so because of his family's higher status. She wept and eventually left away with her other boyfriend who was a

wealthy person but she was not interested in marrying him also. This novel criticizes the Saudi society when Mashael's father rejects her marriage to Matti because of religious differences, as Matti was an American.

Moreover, Al Sanea reveals the hidden social realities of the contemporary Saudi society by presenting these four female friends, who are modern and striving in a place where women are always in the backseat, they challenge the prevalent norms and tries to bring the change in the Saudi society. These female models experience a collision of national, social and modernist values, and the uncertain future goals which this young generation has to achieve. They defend Islam, at the same time also detest its teachings as a hindrance in their modernistic approaches to performing new gender roles. Further, Lamees and Nizar while working in the hospital fell in love with each other and got married. The relation of love which young people experiences are felt, when both the gender come across each other, but in a society like Saudi Arabia, there is no way where such encounters take place as there is a strict gender segregation in the public life. Nevertheless, the only place where men and women work together is in the hospital, which allows male and female to have contact with each other and build a relationship. It is a reason why there are very few love marriages taking place in Saudi Arabia, however, today's young generation is finding ways to build contacts with opposite gender, especially by means of internet and social media. This new wave of love relationship, has been very well touched by Al Sanea that has broken the prevailing taboos in a gender-segregated Saudi society, which now has allowed certain relationships to get noticed. She boldly talks about the relationship of having pre-marital sex, lesbianism and homosexuality. The relationship of Arwa and Nuri, creates an important theme of developing a narration of explicit sexual behaviourism which was previously untold in the literature of Saudi society. An example of mistreatment with the minority community of Shias is also felt in Rajaa Al Sanea's plot making, in the characters of Fatima and Lamees.⁹

THE HAREM COMPLEX;

In Oriental culture, a 'Harem' is a place of a women's abode, where women's sensibilities are represented and expressed in exotic narrations. As modernization progressed, the traditional concept of Harem is reformed and portrayed as a symbol of subjugation. In present times, Harem is represented not as a symbol of backwardness but rather a cultural heritage and a symbol of objective traditionalism. Therefore, the Harem complex is evidently seen in the portrayal of Saudi society where Al Sanea believes, that no matter how much the traditional mentality exists in their society, which restricts women to move ahead in their lives with their own choices, there is always the scope of improvement for the betterment and modern development of women in her society, which can also break the existing 'Harem mentality' of their people. The story further, depicts the concept of relating western lifestyle to a strict Arab society as a symbol of liberal modernization, where a word like hot sex becomes a part of Saudi life, as Al Sanea feels to reveal another side of this society to the West.¹⁰ It gives pleasure to the readers who enjoy this hidden side of Saudi society in the words of a female author who could reveal such issues romantically.

Subsequently, such literary acts which carry these type of gender relations in a society like Saudi Arabia, cannot be read outside the capacity of Neo-Imperial and nationalist narratives. It has shifted the marketing strategies which has allowed themes of such novels to become popular, for those who further demands more such publications in their indigenous society, which also challenges western texts with more concentration of textual contents. The content and the language such as English, has become a platform for novels like *Girls of Riyadh*, to score large popularity and a high demand in the global book market. The publishing industry which is facing a decline, by threats like piracy, readership, local taboos and illiteracy, the only way to enhance this industry is to choose literary ideas which are cosmopolitan and bold in nature.¹¹ Moreover, Al Sanea has herself presented her society to the readers in a way to make a link between Arabic and Anglophone narratives. She has raised many genres in a single avenue of Arab region, which has also provided a global approach, using the English in a

pop fiction market.¹² The Neo-Oriental desires put up by the author and a feminist instinct as a memoir has created pressure on the author as well as on the translator, who is the same individual. It has drawn readers to view the Arab world in a modernistic realm, and as a 'mimic' of the characters in *'The Sex and the City'* in Arabia, where Riyadh becomes a 'celebrity', and the 'ladies' frames the Muslim hybridity. The text allows Muslim women, who are considered as homogenously powerless, in becoming powerful, having built strategies for marketing their works, and at the same time exposing their society with a scandalous attitude. The 'Harem complex' in the Western world gives a special authority to the Arab women to write themes of such stature and appeal the masses, to hear the female voices of the Arab, who are equally capable of producing literary blockbusters. From *Banat Al-Riyadh to Girls of Riyadh*, the titling is also a marketing strategy to encourage readers to give the author credit in shaping content, context and characterization.

Therefore, the 'haremization' in *The Girls of Riyadh* by Al Sanea demonstrates how the feminine tendencies of Arab women compare itself equally with the western feminist approaches, as the natural and social framework of womanhood are similar in both the societies. This work also demonstrates, how people are readily accepting uncommon, explicit and enticing themes by Arab women authors. Such works are in large demands, which is evident in its huge translations in other languages, and the banning of such works has, after all, increased its popularity locally. It argues that the global influence of mass media has developed the dormant minds of Arab women, who can now use the internet as a vehicle to share their inner feelings in their respective societies. Today, A young 21st-century woman, who lives among her friends, who is intelligent and motivated can easily share what her friends are missing, and also courageous enough to expose her real identity through media writings such as e-mails and chat rooms. In the words of Al Sanea, she needs small spaces on the web so that she can sit cross leg and narrate. It is a phenomenon which is taking place in all of Arabia where young Arab women authors are writing through new platforms,

using new styles in the cyber world. It is also a work which has many themes concerning women and hybridity, Oriental feminism and Harem effect, in the lives of Saudi women's self-representation that deserves an instinct attention. It has been argued by the author that the gap between the reality and expectations is to be unveiled so that a negotiation of commonality should be established between public and private space.¹³

In this way, 'The Harem effect', is evidentially highlighted in a society which is illiterate, veiled and oppressed, and the Harem, thus becomes a place from where women began to peep outside of their abodes and start experiencing an ultra-modern culture in their own world. The need for western people to change their perception is encouraged, when the subjects of such kinds are amplified by literate women such as Al Sanea. The clash of urban and rural class, within the same region depicts the socio-economical differences in the Arab society. The elite urban women are now having a bold voice in struggling and negotiating with the Western scholarship, culture and media, in changing their society. The author thus becomes a mediator between the West and the Orient, in negotiating the two worlds together, and also between the two divergent classes in their own native society. It also makes an attempt for the Arab women to come closer and discuss their personal issues and at the same time, exercising their representation to the outside world, so that they can be listened with a patient mind and with a sisterly heart. It is now been established by writers like Al Sanea, that literature, can be as important as a phenomenon on to change the social stratum of a society, and simultaneously, it can also provide an alarming response from outside in relation to developing common relations which have always been an area left untouched in the Saudi Arabian society. Another representation of a modern Harem is depicted through fashion and lifestyle, particularly the Oriental fashion, which portrays a traditional women's lifestyle that compares itself with western progressive culture. The contemporary oriental fashion clearly voices the code of sensuous women with colourful gowns, jewellery and textiles that add to the imagination of the Oriental look.¹⁴ These Oriental designs are now a

big market in the world which does not really belong to the Orient but rather labelled as Oriental¹⁵. Here, the author, redefined the Oriental picture of women in the Arab societies as the same material figures who are still clad with Oriental attires, looking out of their harems, in search of a horizon where they could match with the western woman.

CONCLUSION:

Lipstick feminism argues that a woman can be empowered socially, psychologically and politically, just by putting sophisticated cosmetics and sensually-appealing clothes. It embraces the ideals of womanhood and the sensualities of a woman, by redefining the cohesion of traditional and modern values together. Similarly, in her characters, Al Sanea has presented the same ideals of womens' sensualities, traditionalism and modernity, as a cohesive ornament of femininity. Therefore, the Lipstick femininity and the Harem complex presented in the novel reflects a coming of an age of the young Arab women in the Middle Eastern societies. The genre of New Adult fiction as a bearer of modernist cultural themes pertaining to the Arab women with such bold subject (in context with the Arab society), are read very curiously, especially by the western scholars. It has created a new window in the Arab world, from where a new feminine figure can be seen, who is equal to her western counterparts, struggling with complex life's issues, but now has a voice which can be heard and read. This 'effect' in relation to fashion is a dynamic process, and it acts as a stimulus for the fast-changing social progress. In pursuit of new literary styles, to make a difference and attract attention, authors create a popular image of characters, who comes with attitudes and behaviours that resemble to western societies. This is also the case with 'Oriental Fashion', which is nowadays of colonial superiority by the West, who has always seen the Orient as inferior, where the body, dress and background, can be easily identified by a viewer. By looking at the novel through the lens of Post-Colonial feminist approach, it can be asserted that an Oriental women has the same aspiration and wild dreams of modernization and sophistication that the present technological era has to offer. Likewise, Raja al Sanea has used "Lipstick Feminist" literary

approach to give her girls a, 'Lipstick Oriental' platform, through which the rhythm of female anthems like "Girls just wanna have fun" and 'Vogue' can be easily heard. In this way, Raja al Sanea has beautifully presented the case of modern young women who have no boundaries of religion, geography and society but rather represent a common culture of progress, modernism, liberalism and sisterhood.

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