

## Article

# Is Sadeem Legally Married to Waleed? Islamic Feminism and the Intersection of Culture, Religion, and Gender in *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*

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**Abstract:** Rajā' al-Ṣāni's *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* (2005, *Girls of Riyadh*) is unique not just for depicting globalization and local culture vis-à-vis the woman issue in Saudi Arabia, but for heralding a new trend of 'e-epistolary narratives' in the Saudi Arabian novel. The novel explores issues related to Islamic religious precepts versus Saudi socio-cultural practices and ideologies, especially those related to love and marital relationships as well as the concepts of femininity and masculinity. Most of the reviews and scholarly studies in English have focused more on the novel's innovative narrative style or medium and its portrayal of the taboos of Saudi Arabia rather than on—and oftentimes, ignoring—its Islamic content and persuasion. This article reads *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* as an 'Islamic feminist' text that represents the extent to which al-Ṣāni has internalized the other—modern western culture and civilization—while at the same time seeking to externalize and highlight the authentic Islamic teachings on women's rights and gender relations, which have always been both misinterpreted locally and misrepresented globally.

**Keywords:** Islamic feminism; gender; culture; and religion; *Girls of Riyadh*; Saudi Arabia

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This is chick lit—Saudi chick lit. True to form, Alsanea leads each girl to her own version of a happy ending. Still, in its own way, *Girls of Riyadh* is a feminist book, as it reveals women making choices and dealing with the often severe consequences.

Malena Watrous, *San Francisco Chronicle*

Rajaa Alsanea's Saudi take on *Sex and the City* is an irresistible, and thought-provoking, confection.

Alev Adil, *The Independent*

## 1. Introduction

Rajā' al-Ṣāni's (or Rajaa Alsanea's) *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* (2005, *Girls of Riyadh*) [1] is one of the literary and cultural productions that depict globalization—how global cultures are impacting on one another—and local culture vis-à-vis the woman issue in Saudi Arabia. With its publication over a decade ago, the novel heralded a new trend in twenty-first-century Saudi Arabian novels, with its events unfolding through an 'e-epistolary' mode, via a series of confessional email letters sent weekly, after the Friday prayer, to many people in Saudi Arabia who are subscribed to a yahoo mail group. The focus of this article, however, is not on the novel's style and technique, which have been lauded and critiqued by some other scholars [2–10]. By contrast, the article focuses on the novel's exploration of Islamic precepts vis-à-vis some of the love and marriage-related ideologies and practices that are prevalent in some sections of Saudi society. Most of the reviews and studies on the novel often ignore or downplay

its Islamic content and message by focusing more on either its innovative style or its potentially disruptive attitude toward the Saudi patriarchal—male-dominated—social structure [2–10]. The article thus reads *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* as an ‘Islamic feminist’ text that represents the extent to which al-Ṣānī has internalized the other—modern western culture and civilization—while at the same time seeking to externalize and highlight the ‘authentic’—based, first and foremost, on the expressly stipulated rules in the Qur’an—Islamic teachings on women’s rights and gender relations. The debate on the compatibility of feminism [11,12] and Islam [13–26] is beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, I would like to briefly state here that my use of the term ‘Islamic feminism’ is akin to Margot Badran’s statement that, as a philosophy, a movement, and a practice, Islamic feminism “derives its understanding and mandate from the Qur’an, seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence” [15]. Islamic feminists are Muslim women activists and writers who, in Miriam Cooke’s words, “have a difficult double commitment: on the one hand, to a faith position, and on the other hand, to women’s rights both inside the home and outside” [18] (p. 59). This forms the basis of my analysis in what follows.

## 2. *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*: Gender, Religion, and Culture in Saudi Arabia

Since its publication in 2005 and consequently upon its translation in 2007 by Marilyn Booth—in collaboration, willy-nilly, with the author—the novel, *Girls of Riyadh* [27], has won more accolades in the West compared to in the Arab world itself. As Booth has lamented, “the resulting text” of the Penguin-published English translation “with its clichéd language, erasures of Arabic idioms [she] had translated, and unnecessary footnotes, does not reflect the care that [she] took to produce a lively, idiomatic translation conveying the novel’s tone and language, which are crucial to its critique of (globalized) Saudi society” [2]. In view of this frank assessment by the highly respected scholar and translator, I have used my own translations of the extracted parts of the novel in a way that suits my analysis and illustrates my argument much better. While the ‘backyard’ politics that have surrounded the publication of the translation [2–4] are beyond the scope of this study, the many reviews that the novel—in both its Arabic and English versions—has generated in international newspapers and journals are illuminating [2–10]. For instance, Moneera al-Ghadeer notes that “Despite the [technical] weakness of the novel, it [ . . . ] has generated discussions about new writing, the depiction of women, and chatty language, while addressing what constitutes a novel” [5] (p. 405). That “Quotations from world literary texts pervade the narrative” [5] (p. 405) serves to underscore the influence of both the Western and global cultures on al-Ṣānī, as well as highlight the prevalence of the instances of intertextuality in the novel.

The novel tells the stories of four middle/upper-class Saudi girls, all based in Riyadh and in their early twenties: Lamees, Sadeem, Michelle, and Gamra (or Qamra); all of these are pseudo-names. The narrative centers on their respective experiences of love and, in some cases, marriage and divorce. While the analysis below centers on the common concerns of the novel as embodied by the stories of these girls, more emphasis is placed on the experiences of a couple of them who are more relevant to my argument. The novel’s main narrator is the unnamed email sender, who informs the reader about the affairs of her friends—the four major characters—all of whom take a much older Saudi woman, Umm Nuwayyir, as their advisor and mentor. The girls represent some Saudi women’s struggle to survive and to be reckoned with in a globalized, digital age. Unlike many other girls of their generation, in a closed and segregated society, these young women are happy to celebrate Valentine’s Day; they believe in horoscopes as a way of finding a perfect match in their love life and they indulge in reading and watching romantic novels and films. As al-Ghadeer observes, “*Banāt al-Riyāḍ* relies on the fetishization of gender by intentionally creating a voyeuristic scene to disclose the hidden lives of women in Saudi Arabia.” That fetishization involves “Details of romances conducted on cell phones, trysts with boyfriends arranged by complicit neighbours and surreptitious drinking of champagne at wedding parties” [5] (p. 405). These details, among other aspects of the book, “so outraged Saudi officials that the book [remains] officially banned in Saudi Arabia” [6].

At several points, the novel self-consciously declares its content as scandalous. That what we are reading is a scandal that has been exposed is more explicit in the sender's and recipient's email addresses: from <seerehwenfadha7et> to <seerehwenfadha7et@yahooogroup.com>. Through this, the reader is always alerted at the beginning of every chapter in the novel that the *sīra* (or "seereh", *sīrah*)—meaning "a life story"—that we are about to read contains a series of scandals that "infadhat" (enfadha7et)—meaning "has been exposed." As Booth correctly notes, "the verb *infadāḥ* implies exposure of something disgraceful or shameful" [3] (p. 204). In other words, the narrative is about exposing the secret acts of the girls and of the men in their love lives.

Tarek El-Ariss has argued that *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* is, among others, post-Mahfouzian—i.e., Naguib Mahfouz—Arabic writing whose author "emerges [ . . . ] as the *faddāḥ*/ḥa [exposer/scandalizer] who exposes and hacks [socio-cultural and] political models and literary tradition only to be hacked and exposed by his/her own hacking and *fadh*" [7] (p. 510). Not only is the novel banned in Saudi Arabia, the author has also been subjected to varied forms of victimization and threat, both locally and globally, consequent upon her induced interference in the process of the translation and publication of the book in English [2–4,7] (pp. 518–520). The banning of the book in Saudi Arabia is not because it utilizes vulgar language or portrays sexually explicit contents. Rather, it is because al-Ṣāni' voices—through the characters' statements and actions, coupled with the authorial commentary—some serious attacks on the Saudi socio-religious system that remains discriminatory against and oppressive to women, despite the recent government-driven changes to the status quo.

### 2.1. Love and Happy Marriages: Female Stereotypes

Since the aims of Islamic feminist writers include raising Muslim women's awareness, so they can proclaim their rights and be able to transform their societies [18] (p. 59), *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* can be said, and it claims, to be revolutionary, as further discussed below. Nevertheless, this section highlights its weakness as twenty-first-century feminist writing. The novel represents all its Saudi female characters—major and minor alike—as stereotypically-thinking in terms of love and marriage. This is what Rachel Aspden means by her observation that "Despite official paranoia, *Girls of Riyadh* is more conservative than crusading. Alsanea, like her heroines, barely touches on the fraught context of their reversals in love" [8,9]. As another reviewer puts it, "The major *problem* all the girls face is *men*. Almost all the men are pathetic" [9]; (the emphasis is mine). Just like the girls/women in much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Arabic fiction [28] (p. 78), [29,30], all of *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*'s major characters see a happy marriage as their ultimate aspiration in life. This is a dominant motif in the novel despite the fact that—like the author herself whose ideas they all obviously embody—all the girls are millennials, university-educated, western-exposed, and economically independent through their respective family's wealth or their (post-graduation) personal earnings from employment.

For instance, the narrator describes Lamees as the happiest of the four girls. This is not just because she has graduated from college, but also because she is the only one among the girls who is happily married and is also an expectant mother. As the narrator recounts, the graduation party—a dinner—"took place in one of the top-rated hotels (*al-fanādiq al-ḍakhma*) in Riyadh" [1] (p. 308):

On the day of [Lamees's] graduation everything in her pointed to the fact that among the (all-female) attendees there was a married girl exuding happiness (*tāfiḥa min al-sa'āda*); even Ṭumādīr and Michelle [both also graduation celebrants] did not exhibit one-quarter of [Lamees's] happiness and joy that day. And why wouldn't she rejoice, be happy and joyous? After all, "شيز قوت إيت أول" ["she's got it all"], as Michelle often says. [1] (p. 309).

This extract is a perfect example of the novel's use of globalized language and e-Arabic. The English language phrase—"she's got it all"—is transliterated (using the Arabic script) but not translated into Arabic to help the non-English speaking readers understand its meaning. This is because the novel's most targeted audience is the millennials who are mostly bilingual and westernized. More importantly, the extract illustrates the point that the novel is devoted to the celebration of female

stereotypes. To further expound upon this, one can say that her superlative remark about Lamees's successes—"she's got it all"—also connotes Michelle's own frustrations about love and marriage. Having been born to a Saudi father and an American mother, Michelle does not belong to a typical Saudi family. Nonetheless, she also falls victim to familial restrictions on the issues of love and marriage and, more pertinently, of male deception. She has affairs—albeit literal rather than sexual—with several men, but all of them dump her. Because of this, she decides to give up on men for life [1] (pp. 250–252; 296–302). Lamees's success story, therefore, shows that not all women are oppressed or have a bad experience in terms of love and marriage. She is lucky to have a husband and parents who agree with and support her desires and aspirations. One can say that it is because of the fact that her love life is much less problematic that the narrative does not present it in detail, focusing instead on the openly tortuous experiences of the other girls. All of these explain why Zakaria concludes that "Alsanea widely resists the temptation to make each girl's story a paradigmatic feminist statement" [6].

I have demonstrated elsewhere how some contemporary female writers from the Arabian Gulf have moved away from the stereotypical outlook and landscape depicted in *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* to depicting the postmodern Gulf woman, who thinks and acts independently as a human being rather than just as a female who remains suppressed by patriarchal social dominance [31] (pp. 68–70). In addition to the adoption of non-conventional and fragmented narrative techniques, in the postmodern Arabian Gulf women's fictional texts, love and marriage are reduced to the background and are never the main concern of or trouble faced by their heroines. Examples of texts that portray women's non-stereotypical attitudes towards the issues of love, marriage, and divorce—contrary to the "voyeuristic approach of [*Banāt al-Riyāḍ*]" [5] (p. 405)—include the eponymously-titled short story "al-Yāziya" (2007) by the Bahraini Su'ād Āl Khalīfa and the Kuwaiti Fawziyya al-Sālim's (b. 1949) novel *Ḥajar 'alā ḥajar* (2003, Stone Upon Stone) [31] (pp. 68–70). In Saudi Arabia, one can add to this category, for example, Rajā' Ālim's *Ṭawq al-ḥamām* (2010, *The Dove's Necklace*), and Laylā al-Juhānī's (b. 1969) *Jāhiliyya* (2006, *The Age of Ignorance*), as al-Ghadeer's study has shown [5] (pp. 401, 405).

It is easy to dismiss some of the depictions of the non-stereotypical female characters in these texts as fantasy, impossible, or utopian. But the fantasy of today might be a reality tomorrow. To corroborate this, for instance, a critic/reader could have contended in 2007—when it was published—and described the reason as to why the heroine of "al-Yāziya" is adamant on getting a divorce from her *liar* husband as unrealistic and utopic. But several outrageous real-life stories of divorce-seeking Gulf women that have taken over the media in the past few years now make such contention untenable. For example, just as in the case of the fictitious Bahraini al-Yāziya, a Saudi woman in March 2018—as posted on Twitter and covered by other news media—wanted her marriage to be dissolved. Her reason was that her husband *lied* to her that he was traveling abroad on an official assignment whereas he had gone to marry a second wife, secretly [32,33]. In a related story in September 2018, a woman in the UAE sought a divorce from her husband because he secretly copied her female friend's pictures from her cell phone [34,35]. The man admired his wife's friend and he might have been planning to initiate some romance with her; at least, this is what the wife's reaction implies. The point here is that, unlike the above-mentioned Gulf women's texts, *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* does not fantasize with the creation of really-transcendent and non-compliant female characters. Rather, much of the narrative keeps blaming and cursing men for every shortcoming in the girls' experiences of love and romance [1] (pp. 142–143). Inversely, however, the more thematically-engaging feminist fictional works from the region have been much less popular in the West than *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* due to several reasons, including a lack of translation into English as well as inadequate and ineffective publicity and marketing strategies.

## 2.2. Islamic Feminism and *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*'s Call for Change

Over the past few decades, many theoretical and critical models in feminist scholarship have arisen [11,12]. As Valentine Moghadam explains, "feminism is a contested term even in the present, and historical literature is full of kinds of feminists who would surely have had a hard time finding common ground: Nazi feminists and Jewish feminists, Catholic feminists and Islamic feminists, [ . . . ]

imperial feminists and national feminists" [13] (p. 1154). In the same vein, 'Islamic feminism' as a terminology has been highly contested; it has been widely interpreted, appropriated, and applied in varied contexts of Muslim women's existence both at home and in the diaspora [13–26]. Islamic feminism, in Miriam Cooke's words, "is not a coherent identity, but rather a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning. Actions, behaviors, pieces of writing that bridge religious and gender issues in order to create conditions in which justice and freedom may prevail do not translate into a seamless identity." Cooke explains further that "Islamic feminism works in ways that may be emblematic of postcolonial women's jockeying for space and power through the construction and manipulation of apparently incompatible, contradictory identities and positions." [18] (p. 59). Nonetheless, in what follows, I adopt a relatively coherent conception of Islamic feminism and what constitutes an Islamic feminist text.

Throughout the article, I have used the word/term 'Islamic' to refer to what is explicitly stipulated in the Qur'an and (authentic) Hadith (sayings/tradition of the Prophet Muhammad). Here 'Islamic' should not be—though, unfortunately, has always been—confused with the word 'Muslim'—as in, e.g., 'Muslim feminism'—which ordinarily refers to the person, action, thinking of a Muslim/group of Muslims and the customary beliefs and practices in Muslim communities across the world [13–26,36–38]. Consequently, I would like to contend that it is not enough to label a text Islamic feminist just because it was written by a Muslim woman, and that vague references to the Islamic religious precepts, ethical values, and scriptures do not automatically make a text Islamic: this is the situation with many fictional works of Gulf women that usually allude to the scriptural sources of Islam to support their argument on the status of women in society. Of course, as expected, many of these fictional texts reflect upon the Islamic background of their authors and of the societies they depict. Nevertheless, works that do not really engage, primarily, the Qur'an and Hadith by providing direct quotations from them and offering some discussions thereafter should not necessarily be labeled Islamic. What Cooke refers to as a "double commitment"—to Islam and to women's rights [18] (p. 59)—should be overtly reflected in a truly Islamic feminist text. In other words and as Badran puts it, an Islamic feminist text should be one that, "push[es] the limits of the earlier discourse in thinking out-of-the-box but not out of an Islamic context" [17]. This is precisely what *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* espouses.

As noted earlier, most of the reviews and studies that have been published in English have focused more on the novel's innovative style and portrayal of the taboos of Saudi Arabia than on its Islamic persuasion. I argue that the novel is more Islamically-grounded and nuanced than has been previously acknowledged and more so than most other fictional texts by Gulf women, including those that are mentioned in the article. Al-Ṣāni' wants her thoughts and claims in the novel to be seen as Islamically justified, by making the text replete with direct quotes from and frequent references and allusions to Islamic scriptures. These are featured as epigraphs, in-text, or at the end of some of the chapters in the novel, as illustrated below. The author is trying to prove with these religious quotes that the prevailing socio-cultural practices in Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis the woman issue are more patriarchally constructed than Islamically prescribed.

In an assessment of the challenges faced by Islamic feminism, Badran explains that:

As egalitarian Islam gains ground it is increasingly being assailed by Muslim conservatives whether they are religious leaders, self-appointed community spokesmen, or followers of political Islam (Islamism). This is happening in both old Muslim societies in Africa and Asia and in the new communities in the west by those who perpetuate a patriarchal version of Islam which they claim to be the true Islam. Meanwhile, most non-Muslims, including progressives, buy into this interpretation, regarding Islam as intrinsically patriarchal. Thereby they contribute to problems for women through their ignorance. [16]

Many critics of Islam do not know the exact Qur'anic contents and rules on women and gender issues. In the same vein, many people (Muslims inclusive) who claim to know cannot differentiate between what the ultimate authority in Islam—the Qur'an—says and what is *claimed* to be Islamically prescribed in most of the classical and modern works on Islamic law and jurisprudence, the biographies



of the Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslims—otherwise known as the *Sīra* and Hadith tradition—as well as the Qur’anic commentaries. Unfortunately, many people seem to rely more on these sources, which are either secondary or tertiary in relation to the Qur’an; in fact, some of them have either had their authenticity disputed or accused of being male-oriented and misogynistic by modern/contemporary scholars [13–26,36–43]. This is what *Banāt al-Riyād* is trying to correct—in line with the Islamic feminist intellectual project—by appealing to the Saudi people to think and act from the perspective of the Qur’an and authentic prophetic tradition rather than rely on male-dictated Arabian customs and ideologies.

On the representation of religion in *Banāt al-Riyād*, one reviewer states: “Interestingly, faith is also not very prominent [in the novel]: there are the religious routines to get through (prayer, Ramadan), and, of course, all the rules to obey, but few seem to expect much from [G]od, or religion generally” [9]. This statement is correct but only with regard to the characters’ actions and behaviors. On the contrary, al-Ṣāni’a—aptly represented by her narrator or the so-called authorial voice—seeks to foreground religion and Islamic religious thought. She speaks for Islam. Her frequent quotes from and references to the Islamic scriptures imply the novel’s emphasis on religion as a misnomer for describing some of the prevalent cultural practices in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, Aspden’s concluding verdict is that “[I]n the end, *Girls of Riyadh* is more a love letter to America than a poison pen to the Saudi establishment” [8]. On the contrary, I would say that the novel performs both functions. Based on its language and some aspects of its content, the novel is rather like a sermonizing tract addressed to the Saudi patriarchal establishment. For instance, one finds that, statistically, the novel consists of fifty chapters and fourteen of them (i.e., 28%) begin with an Islamic epigraph in the form of a quote from the Qur’an or Hadith. As noted earlier, many Islamic quotes are also used in the narrative, either embedded in the characters’ thoughts and expressions or in the authorial/narrator’s commentary. That the novel is religious in tone, as it is contextually, can be further buttressed by its use, on several occasions, of the usual Islamic sermonic method. Most prominently, just as it starts with a Qur’anic verse, discussed below, the text also ends with the popular statement with which Muslim preachers—in line with the prophetic tradition—often end their *khuṭba* (sermon/speech): “Subḥānak Allāhumma wa-biḥamdik, ashhad an lā ilāha illā ant, astaghfiruk wa-atūb ilayk (All glory and praise be to you Allah, I bear witness that there is no god but You, I seek Your forgiveness and unto You I repent) [1] (p. 319).

More importantly, the first set of words with which the novel’s main text begins is a portion of a Qur’anic verse which says: “Verily, Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change their own condition.” For this, the author provides the appropriate reference: “*Surat al-ra’d*”—which is chapter 13—“verse 11” [1] (p. 9). Even without the author linking it to its historical root and rationale (otherwise called *sabab al-nuzūl*) and exegetical interpretation (*tafsīr*), the message of this Qur’anic statement or principle is crystal clear. What the author intends to prove by citing it as her first adopted statement in the novel should not go unnoticed. Here, the keywords are ‘change’ and ‘agency’, which is implied in the clause “until *they change* their *own* condition” (the emphasis is mine).

While there have been varied socio-philosophical conceptions of agency [44], the Qur’anic concept as enshrined in the verse in question here can be explained from the point of view of a definition that says that agency is “the power people have to think for themselves and act in ways that shape their experiences and life trajectories” [45]. Thus, the Qur’anic verse implies that human beings have—or are given by God—the power, authority, and freedom which they can use at their discretion. The Qur’anic statement “reflects a general and universal law” and it “implies that in order to put an end to all misfortunes and miseries” and to improve on one’s unpleasant state of affairs, “one must turn to a revolution from within, a revolution in thinking and in culture, a revolution in faith and in ethics” [46]. It was based on this principle—the spirit of change coupled with personal/collective agency—that the Prophet Muhammad changed his own generation in seventh-century Arabia, as detailed in many parts of the Qur’an and attested to by biographical and historical sources including, for example, those by the so-called “Last Orientalist”, Sir W. Montgomery Watt [47,48].

As noted earlier, ‘Islamic feminists’ are Muslim women activists and writers who “have a difficult double commitment: on the one hand, to a faith position, and on the other hand, to women’s rights both inside the home and outside” [18] (p. 59). These women are “question[ing],” in Moghadam’s words, “the exclusive right of [the male] clerics and [faqih]s to interpret the Islamic texts and to define and implement Islamic jurisprudence” [13] (p. 1159), a phenomenon that has been extensively illustrated and scrutinized by other scholars [14–26,36–38]. Consequently, *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* can be considered an Islamic feminist text for its double commitment to Islam and women’s rights in Saudi Arabia through its engagement with Islamic scriptural texts as a basis for disapproving some of the gender-biased socio-cultural practices of that society.

By citing the verse in question here, al-Ṣāni‘ intimates her readers from the very beginning with the main message of the novel that Saudi Arabian women want a change in their social status and that such change will *not* happen *until* and *unless* the people in that society—women and men, clerics and laymen, the leaders and the led—are ready and strive to make it happen. This is why the author—through the narrator/email sender—informs the readers/recipients and the supposed critics that the act of telling the “tabooed” stories of her friends is meant to serve as a ‘wake-up’ call for the Saudis. In her prefacing comments on chapter seventeen, she refers to her actions as a self-conscious call for a social revolution in Saudi Arabia:

Whatever the result [i.e., Saudi people’s positive and negative reactions], it is certain that these strange letters [i.e., weekly emails] have sparked off a *revolution* within our society, which is not used to the [exposure of scandalous] matters such as these. [1] (p. 118; emphasis mine)

On another occasion and in a reaction to the widespread condemnation of her action, the narrator declares that “all [Saudi women] admittedly unite on one goal, which is *al-islāḥ* (reform)” [1] (p. 68).

### 2.3. Is Sadeem Legally Married to Waleed?

One of the most intriguing—albeit pitiful, considering the manner of its ending—aspects of *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* that situate it within the Islamic feminist framework is the story of the love (and marital?) encounter between Sadeem and Waleed. Sadeem experiences love with several other men, including a British man she meets in London and two other Saudis, one of whom is her maternal cousin named Ṭāriq, who she eventually marries and with whom she later finds happiness [1] (p. 318). It is mainly through the narrative of her affair with Waleed, however, that the author opens a religious and cultural debate. Featured largely in chapter five, the debate revolves around an Islamic jurisprudential position, which most contemporary Muslim countries have been unable to unequivocally address and resolve convincingly: the apparent gender inequality embedded in several aspects of their family law.

Beginning, most notably, in the Arab world with Qāsim Amīn’s (1865–1908) two famous books, *Tahrīr al-mar’a* (1899, The Liberation of Women) and *al-Mar’a al-jadīda* (1900, The New Woman) [49], since the nineteenth century, many intellectuals, male and female alike, have partaken in the debate on the status of women in classical Arabic-Islamic literary and religious discourses, especially in relation to the modern experience [13–26,36–43,50–52]. For instance, in *Beyond the Veil: Male–Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* [36], Fatima Mernissi seeks:

to reclaim the ideological discourse on women and sexuality from the stranglehold of patriarchy. She critically examines the classical corpus of religious-juristic texts, including the *ḥadīth*, and reinterprets them from a feminist perspective. In her view, the Muslim ideal of the “silent, passive, obedient woman” has nothing to do with the authentic message of Islam. Rather, it is a construction of the ‘ulamā’, the male jurists-theologians who manipulated and distorted the religious texts in order to preserve the patriarchal system. [53]

*Banāt al-Riyāḍ* contributes to the debate through the story of Sadeem who meets Waleed through a family-arranged process. That they both love and accept each other indicates that theirs is not a forced

marriage [1] (pp. 36–37). Evidently, both are compatible in terms of the social and economic status of their families. After their engagement (“*al-milka*” or “*al-qirān*”, p. 38), their relationship gets more intimately romantic to the extent that “Waleed’s love for Sadeem [begins to] incite jealousy in the rest of the girls” [1] (p. 38)—her female friends mentioned above.

One of the instances of gender inequalities in Saudi society is represented in the scene of Sadeem’s engagement to Waleed. Through the omniscient third-person narrative mode, the reader is told that “Sadeem was forced to thumbprint on the huge register book (*al-daftar al-dakhma*), after her protest to sign on the paper has been ignored and her request disallowed” [1] (p. 39). Because her mother died when she was a little girl, it is her (maternal) aunt who stands as the bride’s mother. Trying to justify the refusal of the bride’s signature on the engagement register, the aunt subtly scolds Sadeem: “My daughter, press your thumbprint (on it) and that’s all. The shaykh said you should thumbprint not sign. Only males are (allowed) to sign” [1] (p. 39). As shown in this statement, the people are quoting and referring to their shaykh (Islamic cleric) as their source of information on religious matters rather than the Qur’an and the Hadith.

This practice is not new. It has been effective in the perpetration of patriarchal ideologies in Muslim communities since the seventh century, soon after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. A perfect example to illustrate this is a quote by the medieval Muslim jurist Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292–1350) who, together with his mentor Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), has always been the regular point of reference in Salafism [54–57], the ultra-conservative brand of Islam that is deep-rooted in the Saudi religious establishment. Ibn Qayyim is reported to have said that: “The wife is her husband’s prisoner, a prisoner being akin to a slave. The Prophet directed men to support their wives by feeding them with their own food and clothing them with their own clothes; he said the same about maintaining a slave” [58] (p. 52), [59] (p. 7).

As Mir-Hosseini observes, this statement by Ibn Qayyim “reflects classical fiqh conceptions of marriage, [and] goes against the very grain of what many contemporary Muslims consider to be ‘Justice, Kindness, the Common Good and Wisdom’” which, Ibn Qayyim himself affirmed are the ultimate goal of the *sharī‘a* [59] (p. 8), [60] (p. 1). Certainly, Ibn Qayyim was not among the founders of the famous *madhāhib* (schools of thought in Islamic law and jurisprudence) who initially codified the *sharī‘a*. Nevertheless, his ideas, like those of his mentor, have been very instrumental in the emergence of some of the so-called neo-Salafi, reformist ideologies in modern Sunni Islam [54–57]. What is more relevant here is his idea of the wife as a prisoner or a slave of the husband, whereas the Qur’an says exactly the opposite: “*hunna libās lakum wa-antum libās lahunna*” (Qur’an 2: 187), which simply translates as “they [wives] are your dress and you [husbands] are their dress.” This Qur’anic statement expressly indicates male–female interdependency as well as the mutual love, affection, and respect that should exist in a marital relationship. In reaction to Ibn Qayyim’s above statement vis-à-vis the contents of the Qur’an and Hadith, Ziba Mir-Hosseini notes that “Muslim legal tradition and its textual sources have come to appear hypocritical or, at best, contradictory” [59] (p. 8). Some other scholars have expressed the same concern [13–26], the details of which are beyond the scope of the present study.

My point here is that rather than referring to the Qur’an, some Muslims would refer to and implement what the shaykh says. This is reflected in *Banāt al-Riyād*, for example, in the narrative of Sadeem’s engagement where the bone of contention is the idea that a woman should thumbprint only, she is not allowed to sign on her marriage contract. Implicitly, the author—through Sadeem’s protest—believes that this idea has no basis in Islam. Nevertheless, neither the author’s narrator nor the bride herself reflects on the non-acceptability of this practice from the point of view of the Qur’an and Hadith. According to the Qur’an, marriage is a social and legal *contract* (*‘aqd*) that must be attested to by people, especially relatives of the intending couple, with or without the involvement of religious and government officials. This is contained in several Qur’anic verses that stipulate that both the male and female should be responsible for their actions and for their social and commercial transactions—including in cases of marriage and divorce—which should be properly documented



(chapters 2: 282 and 4: 32). It is based on the idea of marriage as a contract that the concept of *al-ijāb wa-al-qubūl* (proposal and acceptance) is codified in the *sharī'a* (Islamic law), in accordance with the related rules most of which are detailed, especially, in chapters 2 and 4 of the Qur'an [61].

*Al-ijāb wa-al-qubūl* are not just coterminous, but are also unanimously considered in the *sharī'a* as the first and most important condition of marriage. For this condition to be met, both the bride and the groom (or their approved representatives) are required to endorse the marriage contract orally and/or in writing (in the form of a certificate/register). Their names should be clearly written/typed on the contract, to which should be appended their respective signatures, if they both are literate, as expected in the contemporary period. All these should be done by themselves or by their proxies, with their confirmed and clearly expressed approval (Qur'an 2:282; 4:19) [61]. I would posit here that thumbprinting—which is not mentioned in the Qur'an and Hadith in the same way as a signature is not—should be applicable only if both or one of the couple is not literate; in this case, both of them—not only the illiterate one—should thumbprint. Thumbprinting should be a supplement to the names and signatures.

As noted earlier, many Muslim communities have corrupted Islam with patriarchal culture in a way that has overshadowed the egalitarian values of the religion [16,36]. In fact, each Muslim society—at least, in today's world—is a hybrid society: a mixture of varied elements. These include some doctrinal rules and ethical values derived from the Qur'an and the so-called prophetic tradition—based on both authentic and fabricated *ahādīth* (sing. *hadith*)—mixed with some aspects of Arabic culture—native or domesticated—that have spread alongside the spread of Islam. All of these have been adapted to and added over and above the local culture and law of a given society. A perfect example of a religion-engendered cultural hybridity can be found in Rebecca Foley's observation that "Islam in Malaysia [is] a "softer" version than those found in the Middle East because it has been influenced by the native Malaysian custom of *adat*, which stipulates that descent and inheritance are equal for men and women" [62,63] (p. 56). *Adat* is an Arabic word—*ādāt* (sing. *āda*), meaning customs, mores, moral attitudes—that has been adopted in the Malay language—as well as in several other languages that have been influenced by Arabic and Islam: e.g., Swahili, Hausa, and Yoruba, all in Africa—to refer to local cultural mores [64,65].

#### 2.4. *Sadeem and Waleed: The Taste and Dump Palaver*

Much has been written on the legal and juridical interpretations and applications in Muslim societies of Qur'anic injunctions on marital affairs from the classical through the modern periods [21–24, 37,40–43,52]. In a review of the literature on the topic, Mulki Al-Sharmani explains how Mir-Hosseini's series of studies highlight:

the gap between the moral/ethical and the legal in jurists' formulations of some of the main marriage and divorce doctrines. For example, the Qur'anic definition of marriage as 'tranquility, love, and mercy' (Qur'anic verse 30:21) is not translated into enforceable legal rulings on marital roles and rights. Thus, unilateral repudiation (divorce initiated by men) and polygamy, for instance, are legally sanctioned, but whether justice is served when these legal rights are exercised by men is left to the ethical realm which is divorced from the legal. [24] (p. 5.)

*Banāt al-Riyād* depicts this contradiction between the ethical and the legal in Saudi Arabia in several ways including through what I call 'the taste and dump palaver' that characterizes Sadeem's plight in the novel.

Because they are already engaged, Sadeem's father allows the couple some more freedom to come closer to knowing each other more. Consequently, the couple begins to spend ample time together in the evenings, either "hanging out" at "a top-rated restaurant" or staying indoors "at Sadeem's place." As the narrator recounts, "They used to talk and laugh [and] watch films, which he had borrowed from his friends or those she had borrowed from hers; thereafter, events began to unfold to the extent

that she tasted the first kiss" [1] (p. 39). It is a "long kiss" (*qubla tawīla*) that has been engendered by a romantic film they have just watched together [1] (p. 40). Consequently, Waleed requests for a quick wedding so he can begin to live together with his wife-to-be. However, she appeals to him to have the wedding postponed until she will have finished her end-of-year examinations at college. For this reason, "she decided to please him" [1] (p. 40). So, in the absence of her father, Sadeem invites Waleed to her house for a romantic night, which results in her defloration:

Because Sadeem has pledged to please her beloved Waleed she allowed him to continue to touch her that night [ . . . ]. She did not attempt to prevent him as she hitherto used to do whenever he attempted to cross the red lines (*al-khuṭūṭ al-ḥamrā'*) which she had set for herself and for him at the beginning of their intimacy soon after the engagement. [1] (p. 40)

As characteristic of the novel, the sex scene which is partly extracted here is not explicitly presented. Nonetheless, it is consequential in that, after the sexual encounter, Waleed changes his attitude towards Sadeem. As the narrator further recounts, "Sadeem waited as usual for [Waleed's] call after he might have reached home, especially [now] that she is in a dire need of his pampering and [assuring] words, following a night like this" [1] (p. 41). Three days later, she decides to swallow her pride—"takhallat 'an thiyābihā," which literally means, "she gave up her clothes"—by contacting him herself "only to find that his cell phone has been switched off" [1] (p. 41).

Eventually, Waleed sends a divorce letter to Sadeem's family, giving them no specific reason for his heartbreaking action. The seriously-appalled bride-to-be could not 'confess' to her father that she has crossed the red line in her affair with Waleed. If she had done so, her father would have fought seriously with his family, who would have thereafter compelled him to marry the girl at all costs, according to Arabian tradition. "How will she inform [her father]? And what will she tell him?" she queries herself [1] (p. 43). The situation thus far described constitutes the background to Sadeem's ruminations about the legality of her sexual intercourse with Waleed:

Was she wrong to have submitted herself to him before the wedding? Damn! Is Waleed crazy?? Is it rational for her to think that this is his reason for avoiding her since that day? But why? *Is he not her legal husband since (the moment of) the engagement?* Or is marriage a big hall [filled with] invited guests, entertainers, and a feast?? What is marriage? Does what she has done make her liable for punishment? Was he not the one who initiated it? [1] (p. 41; emphasis mine)

She continues:

Is she not his legal wife? Did she not press her thumbprint beside his signature on the huge register book? Were there no *ījāb wa-qubūl* (proposal by the groom and acceptance by the bride), *shuhūd* (witnesses), and *ishhār* (publicity)? Do all of these not mean that she has become his legal wife without any wedding ceremony? [1] (p. 42)

These internal musings by Sadeem raise the question: at what stage is the nikah—also *nikāḥ*, meaning marriage—process considered legally complete, and ready for consummation? In the second quotation above, Sadeem enunciates the essentials of marriage as stipulated in the *sharī'a*. The first and most important of these is the earlier-explained *al-ījāb wa-al-qubūl*. The others include the consent of *walī al-amr* (the bride's guardian), at least two witnesses, the *sadāq* or *mahr* (nuptial gift/dower), and the *walīma* (feast/publicity) (see, e.g., Qur'an 4: 25) [61,66]. Most of these may be waived or delayed, depending on other circumstances [61] (pp. 138–167); in fact, a related hadith on the waivers—"Sahih Muslim: 3477"—is cited at the top of chapter 33 on page 211 of the novel.

All the conditions have been met during the engagement, except for the *sadāq*, which is not mentioned at all in the narrative of the Waleed and Sadeem affair. According to the *sharī'a*, the *sadāq* could be any amount of money, anything of value, or any service to be rendered by the groom; it could be paid or given at the time of the marriage or delayed to a later date. What matters most is that the

*sadāq* should be mutually agreed upon prior to the consummation of the marriage [61] (pp. 158–167). In any case, it is explicit that the material conditions of marriage are not the bone of contention in the Sadeem and Waleed affair. This is why Sadeem could not understand Waleed's decision to divorce her. After all, he was the one who deflowered her. It should be noted that, in Arabic, the word *nikāḥ* literally means "*idkhāl shay' i fī shay'*" [67], meaning "to insert something into something," "to penetrate (something with something)" [68], by which is implied sexual intercourse between a man and a woman through which a marriage is consummated. Even though the novel does not explain the primary/literal concept of *nikah* in this way, Sadeem's somewhat discursive reflections on the legality of the sexual intercourse with her intended indicate that she knows the essentials of *nikah* as stipulated by Allah. To buttress her position, she mentions that she has heard many stories of intending couples having sexual intercourse "in the period between their *al-milka* (engagement/betrothal) and *al-zufāf* (wedding), and even some women giving birth to their completely-mature baby within seven months of the wedding" [1] (p. 42). The term used by the author here is *al-milka*, which is a common term in Saudi Arabia often used interchangeably with the more universal term *nikah* (or '*aqd al-nikāḥ*').

Furthermore, through the consciousness of Sadeem, al-Ṣāni' expresses the point that some intending couples in Saudi Arabia—out of impatience—consider the practice of pre-wedding sex as *ḥalāl* (lawful) since it is not the same as pre-marital—i.e., pre-engagement/pre-*nikah*—sex. On his part, when asked by his father as to the reason for the divorce, Waleed's excuse is that "he has discovered that he cannot get along with Sadeem. So, it is better for him to dissolve the nuptial relationship before the wedding day and before copulating with her" [1] (p. 43). Thus, Waleed lies to his father about his reason for the pre-mature divorce. Implicitly, Waleed's proclamation of the divorce indicates his belief that the marriage has already taken place. After all, there can be no divorce without marriage. Nonetheless, the fact that neither of them could tell their respective parents what actually transpired between them implies that post-engagement sex is still not acceptable in Saudi culture.

The question here is about the legality of the practice itself rather than what people do or, in most cases, surreptitiously, think. If the engagement/betrothal is considered marriage in Islamic law, then "what error [have I committed]?" Sadeem queries herself. She probes further: "Is the borderline in the [Islamic] religion the same as drawn in the [Saudi] youth's mentality?" [1] (p. 42). She is therefore torn between what is Islamically permissible in love and marital relationships and what is the acceptable boundary in Saudi culture, especially among the male members of that society. She recollects how "Waleed used to reproach her each time she tried to prevent him" from touching her soon after the engagement. He used to say, emphatically, that "she has become his wife in line with the *Sunnah* (the rule/code of conduct) of Allah and His Messenger [the Prophet Muhammad]" [1] (p. 42). For Sadeem, this statement by Waleed used to serve as an assurance and a confirmation of what she also believed is acceptable within the Islamic legal framework. But Waleed's action after the sexual encounter not only affirms the contrary, but also confirms the frequent warnings of the more experienced female members of Saudi society. Sadeem recounts how "Both her aunt and Umm Nuwayyir used to warn her against getting too intimate with [Waleed] because she, [customarily], remains his proposed wife only," even after the engagement. "Who should she believe?" she queries [1] (p. 42), in an indirect reference to the older women's warnings vis-à-vis the Islamic tenets which Waleed has hitherto used as an excuse to convince her that they are eligible to copulate with each following the engagement.

## 2.5. Sadeem and Gamra: Aftermath of a Divorce

Divorce (*ṭalāq* or *talaq*) is another aspect of Muslim family law that has come under serious scrutiny in contemporary scholarship [13–26,36–43], and [52]. Many Muslim women have been oppressed through divorce laws and practices which are usually claimed to be *sharī'a*-based, whereas most of the basic Qur'anic stipulations on the procedures of divorce are either being ignored or misinterpreted in favor of personal interest or patriarchal culture. For instance, 'Triple Talaq'—a common practice in some Muslim societies to date and which has just been banned in India in September 2018 [69]—implies that a man can divorce his wife with a spontaneous pronouncement of words, uttered three times, by

saying to his wife, “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you” [61] (p. 179). Obviously, the proponents of Triple Talaq are misinterpreting a Qur’anic rule which stipulates, in simple terms, three divorce pronouncements “over a period of three monthly (menstrual) periods” (*thalāthat qurū’*; Qur’an 2: 228). According to Qur’an 4:35, if a man wants to divorce his wife, both their families should come together to reconcile them and if the reconciliation efforts fail, then he can pronounce a statement of divorce and wait for a period of three months before the divorce process can be finalized; the waiting period is called the ‘*idda*. If the man withdraws the divorce pronouncement or he has sexual intercourse with the wife during this period, the divorce is considered null and void [61] (pp. 198–203). In practice, however, many Muslims ignore these Qur’anic principles and rely instead on what the shaykh or their relatives say, as noted earlier.

While *Banāt al-Riyād* does not explore the legal dimension of divorce in Saudi Arabia, it extensively depicts the ethical dimension and the psycho-social effects of divorce on Saudi women. This aspect of the novel has attracted the attention of many of its reviewers [9]. My intention in this section is to briefly examine the novel’s representation of divorce and its aftermath in comparison with some other fictional and non-fictional sources from the wider Gulf region. I have noted elsewhere how the plight of the divorced woman is a prevalent theme in many cultural productions emanating from the region. For instance, in “*Ḥumā fī layla sākhina*” (1986, *Fever in a Hot Night*), the Saudi woman writer and social activist Najwā Hāshim (b. 1960) makes “frequent references to other women in similar situations as [the] heroine, named Sāmiya (or Samia),” with a view to illustrating “the kind of contempt with which [some] divorced women are treated in some sections of Saudi society.” Sāmiya’s predicament “is presented within an intertextual context [ . . . ] whereby the plight of a divorced woman in a movie being watched by the people of [her] parental home becomes the subject of a heated debate among them” [33].

“In much of the Gulf region, virtually nothing diminishes in the social status of a divorced man; he retains much of his dignity and honor in society. Unlike his female counterpart, the divorced man is not always discriminated against in terms of (re)marriage” [33]. Corroborating this is *Banāt al-Riyād*’s representation of Gamra and Sadeem’s post-divorce experience, described below, as well as Sāmiya’s lamentation, in “*Fever in a Hot Night*,” that “The divorced woman has no existence in [Saudi] society” [70] (p. 150). Sāmiya makes this frustrating conclusion “in reaction to the unanimous position of her family members that the twenty-year-old male protagonist of the movie ‘should not marry a divorced woman,’ because he is still young and single” [33].

Much of the socio-anthropological research on the effects of divorce on Gulf women shows that the situation has changed only a little since the last quarter of the twentieth century [52,71]. Some of the improvements being witnessed include that, as Abeer Abu Saud notes with regard to Qatar, the chances for the divorced Qatari women to be re-married “are high but are mostly [restricted] to a certain group of men—divorcés, widowers but rarely bachelors” [72] (p. 98). The same is applicable, in varying degrees, to the other oil-rich Gulf States of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates [52]. Sadeem and Gamra’s post-divorce experiences symbolize the prevalent apathy often encountered by female divorcees in Saudi Arabia where they risk being single until the end of their lives. Their situation becomes worse if they already have a child from their first marriage, as aptly represented in the novel by the story of Gamra. After her divorce by her first husband, Gamra is proposed to by another man, who wants her as his second wife, because his first marriage has been childless. The man declares: “My condition [before proceeding with] this marriage is that the boy [Gamra’s son] will remain in his [maternal] grandfather’s house, he will not live with me in my house. Frankly speaking, I ain’t ready to nurture a child I ain’t his biological father” [1] (pp. 212–214).

Similar societal contempt and humiliation, which a divorced woman is usually subjected to in her society, make Sadeem leave for London. But what she is trying to evade at home is not any different from what she finds among the Saudi men she encounters abroad. Immediately after most of her male admirers know that she was once engaged, they disappear. All they want is to have fun, especially sex, with her and then ‘dump’ her [1] (pp. 74–88). Apart from Sadeem’s experience in London, several

aspects of the stories of her other friends also corroborate the point that the Saudi male mentality vis-à-vis love and marital relationship does not change even when the men are exposed to the so-called free world in Europe and North America. “Abaya or not, the strict code of restrictions that defines life in Saudi Arabia manages to transcend geography,” observes Zakaria [6]. Through the story of Sadeem, in particular, al-Ṣāni‘ tries to prove that “The absence of the abaya”—Sadeem not wearing the black, long, and loose dress that is the traditional daily uniform for most Gulf women—“imposes an even more stringent presumption in which [she], in every interaction [while in London], must prove that she is not loose and immoral simply because she has agreed to meet a male by herself” [6]. From an Islamic feminist perspective, *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* does not extensively discuss the positions of the Islamic scriptural texts on the procedures of divorce and how divorcees should be treated in society in the same way as the author has done with marriage, as explained earlier. Nevertheless, the novel’s tone and language, as well as its heroines’ statements and thoughts on the injustice and discrimination embedded in the divorce practices in Saudi society, all point accusing fingers at the patriarchal culture and tribal customs.

### 3. Conclusions

The foregoing has shown that some women writers are effectively combining their knowledge of the source texts of Islam—with or without the influences of modern Western civilization—in their bid to engage patriarchal hegemony and call for social change in their immediate communities. Al-Ṣāni‘’s *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* exemplifies this trend in the twenty-first-century Saudi literary tradition. Challenging, at the formal level, the idea of what constitutes a novel and, at the level of content, the Saudi patriarchal and religious establishment, the novel raises feminist consciousness in its own way. Illustrating how most of the previous readings of the novel have downplayed the central position in which al-Ṣāni‘ attempts to place the religion of Islam, the article demonstrated why and how the novel is an Islamic feminist text. Like some other Islamic feminists, the author is contending for women’s rights within the purview of cardinal Islamic injunctions, thereby contributing to the argument that most of the gendered do’s and do not’s of modern Saudi society are patriarchally constructed.

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