

An Insight Of Emergent Contemporary English Fiction In Saudi Arabia

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Abstract:

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is undergoing several social, economic, and cultural changes. As it pivots towards an increasingly national, rather than religious identity, government investments are being made in promoting contemporary and historical Saudi culture as well as the kingdom's history as a nation. As the country continues its path toward a brighter, more innovative future, all-inclusive advances will play a key role in creating this new and progressed Saudi Arabia. Recently there has been an evident increase in literary output though the country was the periphery of literary production. This noticeable increase is the result of government institutional support and investment in culture as well as the key role of technology and social media in enhancing the access to and distribution of literature. This paper analyzes the factors contributing to the escalation of English fiction in Saudi Arabia and its potential to draw global literary attention. It will also emphasize the techniques and strategies applied by famous contemporary fiction writers.

Keywords: contemporary fiction, social, economic & cultural changes, Saudi Arabia, literary output.

Introduction:

Since ages Arabian tribesmen before the advent of writing exchanged important information with other members using oral poetry. Arabian poetry has always been popular and is an extension of emotional connections between people. It is a

means to represent the complexities of life in the region. It depicts people's lives, traditions, and morals, and depicts their pain, hopes and aspirations. For the Western world the word 'literature' means imaginative literature like novels, short stories, folktales, drama, poetry, or their close equivalents in other cultures. The Arabic equivalent of literature or *Adab* is an umbrella term extending literature to culture, etiquette, decency, and humanity, and whose parameters, even in the literary context, coexist with those of the English term. The history of Arabic literature dates to the 5th century when it flourished and reached its peak in the Islamic Golden age, sometime between 7th and 13th century AD. Many Islamic poets rose to fame during the 6th century.

In the modern era and after widespread communication between the East and the West, the novel has become more important than any other literary genre. Najīb Maḥfūz, in an article cited in Jabir 'Aṣfūr's work (1999, p.11), claims that poetry prevailed in the era of myth and antiquity, but this modern era of development and industry requires a new literary genre which can depict the ambitions and aspirations of the modern human. Maḥfūz sees narrative as the right genre for this modern era, as it can convey human concerns, problems and facts. It also combines fantasy with reality. 'Aṣfūr describes the modern era as "the age of the novel", as many literary works translated into other languages are novels. In his study about novels in the Arab world, 'Alī al-Ra'ī refers to the novel as the modern *Diwān al-'Arab*, because the novel reflects the Arab tongue. According to al-Ra'ī, the novel can play the same role as poetry in preserving Arab human experiences and experiments in life. The novel is also considered a historical, social, political, humanitarian, and cultural document due to the diversity of its themes (1992, p.3). The novel plays a major role in depicting modern Arab life with all its challenges and transformations ('Aṣfūr, 1999, p.42). In his historical study of the Saudi novel, Al-Qaḥṭānī (2009, p.9) refers to the insubstantial number of published novels, suggesting that there were not enough to start narrative critical studies. Saudi critics at that time did not have enough critical tools and approaches to study the novel, and for that reason, such studies were late to emerge. Currently, research is flourishing in the form of books, academic articles, journals, and conferences

about the Saudi novel. The writers have sufficient space to highlight several aspects of life and encompass humanitarian expertise and experiences. Moreover, the large number of published novels has increased sharply. For example, 271 Saudi novels were published between 2000 and 2008, whereas Saudi novels published before this period (1930 to 1999) did not reach half that number (alḤāzimi and al-Yūsif, 2008, p.56). Translation has also played a significant role in the transfer of Socialist thought to Arab culture; furthermore, Arab publishing houses, particularly in Beirut with flexible censorship, played the same role in introducing Socialist ideology to Arab culture. These publishing houses published many translated works that conveyed Socialist thought, including stories, novels, and scientific studies. Some of the Socialist ideas were welcomed by many Arab novelists who adopted some of these ideas in their writings such as Najīb Maḥfūz, ‘Abdu al-Raḥmān, Ghazi al-Quṣaibi and al-Nassir, especially about the issue of social equality among the classes.

Saudi Arabian fiction has undergone significant changes over time, reflecting the evolving social, political, and cultural landscape of the country. An insight into how Saudi fiction was changing up to that point, and some general trends that were emerging. The recent switch to time-honoured styles and subject matters is steadily being replaced and expanded upon as Arab wordsmiths and readers explore creative new dimensions of storytelling. Because the dominance of realism in contemporary literature came after the dominance of romance, the appearance of romantic elements is highly expected in some literary works. Ibrahim al-Nassir, for instance, wrote many romantic stories in his early fictional works before changing to a more realistic writing style (al-Yaūm, 2004) because it draws the reader in more than any other approach (al-Nassir, 2010). The major social transformations caused chiefly by globalization and a strong economy require a literary genre that can contain some of these transformations. Not only does the text's wide space give novelists freedom to include several social issues, but also realism increases “the freedom of novelists to include issues in their fiction” (Plietzsch, 2004, p.183). Authors are boldly publishing books in genres once undermined and, in the process, are unwittingly encouraging others to follow suit.

The paper will examine the work of some famous fiction writers of recent times to understand the changing scenario and the techniques adopted by these writers to carry forward the genre of fiction thereby making it visible globally. Influential Saudi authors are selected for the analysis of their work like Ashraf Fagih, Rajaa Alem and Rajaa Alsanea. All three authors have their unique narrative styles and belong to the cadre of new-generation young writers. Other authors who have made a mark in the literary world will also be referred and discussed.

Ashraf E. Fagih is a Saudi author and academic. He is one of the few notable science fiction authors in the Arab Gulf states. He obtained a PhD in Computing from Queen's University in Canada and is an Assistant Professor at the King Fahd University of Petroleum & Minerals. He began writing fiction early and published a science fiction short story collection *The Ghost Hunter* in 1997, aged twenty. He continued writing science fiction until he switched to historical fantasy. His novel *The Impaler* is in this genre and explores the Eastern origins of the legend of Dracula. He is currently writing a historical novel about the military campaign of the Ottoman ruler of Egypt, Muhammad Ali Pasha, in the Arabian Peninsula. Ashraf was the scientific editor of *Al-Qafilah* magazine between 2014 and 2017. He has been an invitee to numerous events on creative writing and the literature of science, including Ithra's Tanween Creativity Season and the World Science Fiction Convention (DisCon III).

Raja Alem is a Saudi novelist who primarily writes in Arabic but her works are translated into English. Her works include ten novels, two plays, biographies, short stories, essays, literary journalism, writing for children and collaborations with artists and photographers. She often appears on the international cultural and literary scene, especially to discuss and give workshops on spirituality, children's creativity, and links between East and West. She has received many awards in the Arab world and in Europe, including one from UNESCO for creative achievement in 2005, and another from the Lebanese Literary Club in Paris in 2008. In 2011, her novel *The Dove's Necklace* was awarded the prestigious International Prize for Arabic Fiction. Her most recent novel *Sarab* has been published in German and in English. The novel's exploration of issues

facing modern Islamic society is bookended by a traditional detective story. Policeman Nasser al-Qahtani is assigned to investigate the murder of a woman whose dead body was found without clothes at the Lane of Many Heads, an alley in a poor section of Mecca. Positive identification of the dead woman was complicated as the dead body was disfigurement because of falling or being thrown from the window. No one came forward to claim the body as a result of the shame that hovers over the victim's exposed, naked body.

Rajaa al-Sanea born in 1981, on 11 September is a Saudi Arabia writer who became famous through her novel *Girls of Riyadh*. The book was first published in Lebanon in 2005 and in English in 2007. She received her bachelor's degree in dentistry from King Saud University in 2005 and a master's degree in oral sciences from the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Dentistry. Al-Sanea rose to prominence in 2005 via the publication of her debut novel *Girls of Riyadh*. The story follows the love lives of four young women, Gamrah, Lamees, Sadeem and Michelle –who is half Saudi and half American- through the form of a series of emails written by an unnamed narrator. Though it was controversial and banned by the Saudi government, Al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* was long-listed for the Dublin Literary Award in 2009. *Arabian Business* released a list of the strongest and most influential Arabs under the age of 40 and Rajaa Al-Sanea ranked the 37th. This list aimed to shed more light on the influential group of youths.

Research Questions:

Saudi Arabian fiction has undergone significant changes over time, reflecting the evolving social, political, and cultural landscape of the country. An insight into how Saudi fiction was changing up to that point, and some general trends that were emerging. Please note that developments may have occurred since then.

1. What are the important features of the writing adopted by the new-generation writers?
2. What are the changes in Saudi Arabia and techniques adopted by the government to propagate fiction?

Significance of the Study:

This study is intended to enrich the body of academic work regarding the growth of English fiction in Literature. With escalated efforts of the Saudi government to develop tourism, films, music, and literature. This change can be evident in the several cultural and literary festivals organized in Saudi Arabia. Saudi writers are making a mark with their creative writing and their work is gaining recognition globally. Some Saudi novels and stories have been adapted into film and television, expanding the reach of Saudi fiction to wider audiences and sparking interest in literary works. The study will contribute to the reasons and strategies adopted by young writers to make their work stand tall and strong. An insight into their novels will help to understand this transition.

Discussions and Findings:

Saudi Arabia has seen the emergence of a new generation of writers who are proficient in English and are exploring various genres, including fiction. These writers often draw inspiration from their own experiences and culture, offering a unique perspective in their storytelling. Saudi Arabia has a strong tradition of oral storytelling, and this influence can be seen in the narrative style of many Saudi authors. They may use techniques such as vivid oral descriptions, rhythmic language, and dialogue to engage the reader and convey the oral storytelling tradition onto the written page.

Cultural Context: Saudi authors often incorporate elements of their rich cultural heritage into their stories. This can include references to traditional customs, folklore, and historical events. They create a deeper connection with their readers by grounding their narratives in a familiar cultural context. The blend of traditional storytelling with modern literary techniques creates a unique fusion that appeals to a wide range of readers. In *Girls of Riyadh* (Banat al-Riyadh) by Rajaa Alsanea, cultural context is not just a backdrop but a central stylistic and narrative technique. The novel is written in the form of emails, messages, and online chats exchanged among a group of young Saudi women living in Riyadh. Within this format, cultural context is interwoven into the narrative in several ways. By using cultural context as a stylistic technique, *Girls of Riyadh* immerses readers in the everyday lives and struggles of its characters within the specific cultural and social milieu of Saudi Arabia.

This narrative approach not only enhances the authenticity of the storytelling but also highlights the complexities of navigating a society with deep-rooted traditions and modern aspirations. The Dove's Necklace by Raja Alem is known for its exploration of various cultural and social aspects of Saudi Arabian society. It delves into the complex social issues of Saudi Arabia, such as gender segregation, the role of women in society, and the tension between traditional values and modernization. The novel portrays the lives of various characters, including women, who navigate these societal norms and expectations. The writer also highlights the contrast between urban and rural life in Saudi Arabia. It portrays the vibrant and cosmopolitan atmosphere of Jeddah, a major city, as well as the more traditional and conservative rural areas. This juxtaposition underscores the diversity within the country. As it is a crime novel, with a murder mystery at its core. The investigation of the crime reveals hidden aspects of society and sheds light on the lives of the characters involved. The novel presents moral dilemmas faced by its characters, which are often shaped by the cultural and societal context in which they live. They navigate between their Saudi Arabian heritage and the influences of globalization and modernization.

Saudi authors often emphasize the authenticity of their cultural and social settings, drawing on their firsthand experiences to provide readers with an immersive and accurate portrayal of life in Saudi Arabia. They describe the customs, traditions, and daily life of their characters in detail. The Dove's Necklace by Raja Alem dives deep into postmodern Mecca and registers the city's transformation. Novels that take place in Mecca are rare. Alem manages to reveal an unexplored world, showing its traditions, history, and philosophy.

Modernization and Globalization: The novels explore the tension between traditional Saudi culture and the forces of modernization and globalization. The characters grapple with the influence of Western culture, the impact of the internet and social media, and the desire for more freedom and autonomy within the confines of their cultural context. Contemporary Saudi fiction often takes a more global perspective, exploring themes and settings beyond the borders of Saudi Arabia. This international outlook has helped bridge cultural gaps and has made Saudi literature more accessible to a global audience.

Saudi fiction has increasingly ventured into speculative genres like science fiction and fantasy. Writers have used these genres to explore themes related to technology, futurism, and societal change, offering unique perspectives on the future of Saudi Arabia and the Arab world. Saudi science fiction authors draw upon their cultural and linguistic backgrounds to create unique and imaginative stories that often incorporate elements of Arabian folklore, history, and contemporary issues into their narratives. Some notable Saudi science fiction writers include Ahmed Naji, Noura Al-Noman, and Yasser Bahjatt, among others, who have made significant contributions to the genre while writing in Arabic. Ashraf Fagih, a Computer Science Professor and Science fiction writer has introduced a distinctive style of creative writing to his readers and in his latest novel has merged two genres into a story where Zero is the hero. *A Portrait of the Void* delves into an eventful period in history through the tale of 13th-century Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci and the emergence of the Hindu-Arabic numeral system, the most common system for the symbolic representation of numbers in the world. Fagih looks at Arab and Islamic history from a new angle, focusing on a non-Muslim and non-Arab figure who was deeply influenced by the culture and inviting Arab readers to rediscover themselves and their heritage.

Intertextuality: Intertextuality in Saudi English fiction involves referencing, alluding to, or drawing inspiration from other literary works, both Western and Arabic, to enrich the narrative and deepen the layers of meaning. One example of intertextuality in Saudi English fiction is the novel *Girls of Riyadh* by Rajaa Alsanea which is often compared to Jane Austen's *"Pride and Prejudice"* for its portrayal of social dynamics, relationships, and the constraints faced by young women in Saudi Arabia. By drawing on the classic themes and character interactions of Austen's novel, Alsanea offers a contemporary Arabian perspective on similar issues. Another example is *Finding Nouf* by Zoë Ferraris, a mystery novel set in Saudi Arabia. The author incorporates elements of the detective fiction genre, like the works of Agatha Christie. The novel's detective, Nayir, shares similarities with classic detectives like Hercule Poirot, as he unravels the mystery surrounding the disappearance of a young woman. *Nocturnal Promenade* by

Saudi writer Noura Al-Noman is a science fiction novella that draws on the Arabian Nights tales and incorporates themes and storytelling techniques reminiscent of the traditional One Thousand and One Nights stories. It reimagines classic narratives in a futuristic and dystopian setting. Intertextuality in Saudi English fiction allows authors to connect their work to broader literary traditions, offering readers a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the stories and themes they explore. It also serves to bridge the gap between Western and Arabic literature, making these works more accessible and relatable to a global audience.

Government Support: The Saudi government has also shown interest in promoting cultural and artistic endeavours, including literature with the launch of the ambitious Saudi Vision 2030. Ten months after its establishment, the Ministry of Culture launched its own strategy that identified, under its vision and trends, 16 sub-sectors to focus its efforts and activities on, which are: heritage, museums, cultural and archaeological landscapes, theatre and performing arts, cultural festivals and events, books and publication, architecture and design, natural heritage, films, fashion, language and translation, culinary arts, literature, libraries, visual arts, and music. The Ministry of Culture has established 11 new cultural commissions responsible for developing a certain sector. The new commissions are, Literature, Publishing and Translation Commission; Fashion Commission; Film Commission; Heritage Commission; Architecture and Design Commission; Visual Arts Commission; Museums Commission; Theater and Performing Arts Commission; Libraries Commission; Music Commission; and Culinary Arts Commission. The Riyadh International Book Fair held in 2021 was aimed to constitute an important cultural event in the industry of books and publication by shedding light on reading, increasing cognitive, cultural, and literary awareness, offering inspiring experiments through stimulating cultural participation for Saudi Arabia and stimulating the trade cooperation so that the Kingdom can become a global gateway for the publication sector. The Riyadh International Book Fair is one of the largest book festivals in the region. The 2022 edition saw more than 900,000 visitors. It is hosted by the Ministry of Culture and organized by the Literature, Publishing & Translation Commission, both working towards establishing

Saudi Arabia as the core of publishing, literature, and arts and culture and architecture. It is recognized as the first Educational & social event in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in line with “The Vision 2030”. The Riyadh International Book Fair, for the first time, included an international conference for publishers with the aim of enhancing communication among local, Arab, and international publication houses, activating partnerships among relevant institutions and companies and enriching the regional publishing scene in a sustainable way through a set of discussion panels, interactive activities, workshops, and diversified cultural symposiums. Initiatives and grants have been established to support writers and encourage the development of Saudi literature.

Translation and International Recognition: Saudi literature has gained more attention on the international stage through translation efforts. Works by Saudi authors have been translated into various languages, helping to foster cross-cultural understanding and recognition. The Literature, Publishing and Translation Commission, upon its establishment, launched an initiative to enrich the Arabic content and enhance cultural exchange between the Arabic language and its peers in the world through the “Tarjim” initiative which is considered one of the first pack of initiatives that the Ministry of Culture announced during the launching ceremony of its vision and trends. The ministry then announced the second track of the “Tarjim” initiative, which is the “Translating academic journals” project, through which the Commission seeks to enrich the Arabic cognitive content by translating academic journals in the cultural, social, and humanitarian fields. Many novels translated from Arabic to English have achieved popularity across the world. *Road To Mecca* was written by an Austro-Hungarian convert to Islam, Muhammad Asad. *Desert Promises* narrates an uncanny love story of an expat man and a Saudi woman and tells their story through the prism of a rapidly changing country. *HWJN*, the book first published in Arabic, was an instant hit, selling out so quickly that there was almost scarcity when it was launched. A national literary phenomenon, written by Ibraheem Abbas and rewritten in English by Yasser Bahjat under their co-founded Arabian Science Fiction publishing house Yatakhaylon. Later this popular Arabic fiction novel was made into a movie directed by Yasir AlYasiri. by Saudi author Ibraheem Abbas,

HWJN, a genie, falls in love with a successful Jeddah-based girl named Sawsan whose family moves into the home where HWJN lives. Narrator Hawjan (HWJN) speaks directly to the reader throughout the story, explaining how he fell in love with a human woman and what he ultimately needed to do to save her life.

Online Platforms and Self-Publishing: The digital age has brought about changes in how Saudi authors publish and share their work. Many aspiring writers now use online platforms and self-publishing to reach a wider audience, reducing their dependence on traditional publishing houses. Through websites, e-books, and digital distribution channels, their work can be accessed by readers from around the world, allowing them to connect with a diverse and international readership. Online platforms and self-publishing allow Saudi writers to experiment with different formats, lengths, and styles. They can publish short stories, essays, novellas, and poetry collections alongside full-length novels, helping them diversify their portfolio and creative output. Self-publishing can be financially rewarding as well as it offers a faster route to publication compared to traditional publishing, which can involve lengthy submission and review processes. Saudi writers can earn royalties directly from their book sales, which can be a source of income for them. This financial independence can be especially beneficial for emerging and independent authors. This autonomy allows Saudi writers to express their voices freely and pursue their artistic visions without the constraints of traditional publishing. These platforms have played a crucial role in empowering Saudi writers and contributing to the diversity and richness of the literary landscape in Saudi Arabia and beyond.

Literary Festivals and Initiatives: The emergence of literary festivals and cultural initiatives in Saudi Arabia has provided a platform for writers to showcase their work and engage with readers. Events like the Riyadh International Book Fair have encouraged literary growth. Saudi Arabia's Literature, Publishing & Translation Commission is organizing the 'Writers and Readers Festival' from 23 February to 11 March 2023 in the Eastern Province to celebrate Arab and international culture and literature. The festival is being held in five locations in the Eastern Region: Dammam Corniche, Dhahran Expo, Khobar

Corniche, King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture (Ithra), and Qatif Corniche. The festival, while aiming to attract prominent intellectuals from different nationalities to present their works to an international audience, will also provide opportunities for partnerships in publishing and translation, allowing private and non-profit sectors to contribute to the enrichment of the literary movement. Through its festival, the Literature, Publishing & Translation Commission seeks to celebrate writers and readers as the most influential links in the chain of culture and human civilization, besides providing a platform that allows Saudi Arabia's literary creators to communicate on a global platform to enrich the cultural arena and provide the community with aesthetic forms of literature, culture, and other arts.

Conclusion:

Saudi fiction has achieved cultural gains by moving in parallel with the progress that is happening socially. This is partially due to substantial changes being made through the kingdom's Vision 2030. Saudi literary works have conquered the Arabic literary circles previously dominated by Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, and Lebanese writers. In the current scenario, more Saudi authors are seen escalating their literary status and producing works that rise to the status of world literature. For example, Mohammed Alwan's *A Small Death* was named the winner of the 2017 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, making him the third Saudi author in less than ten years to receive the Arab world's most prestigious literary award. This study has attempted to declare Saudi fiction worthy of serious critical attention as a result of the various factors discussed that promise more visibility for Saudi fiction on the literary world stage.

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