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Saudi Women's Status in the Social Novel Ibrahim Al-Nassir as a Case Study

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Abstract:

The Saudi social novel devotes considerable attention to women as a theme, analyzing and debating several issues concerning them. This article will discuss the status of Saudi women in social novels. The article will look at the reason for this interest in women's issues. Besides, it will examine the factors that lie behind the weak position of women in Saudi society. Then, it will provide three images of women in the Saudi social novel that symbolize the transformations in Saudi women's status and that appear in al-Nassir's novels: traditional women, modern women, and radical women. With regards to the first of these types, they do not play an active role in the progress of the fictional events, reflecting the passivity of the role they play in real life. In contrast, their modern and radical counterparts play a central role in the narrative. Finally, this article will deal with the Arab Women's Liberation Movement, which has influenced some of al-Nassir's fiction characters.

Keywords: Saudi women, Saudi social novel, al_Nassir's novels, Arab Women's liberation

Arabic Transliteration Table

ʾ ء	dh ذ	Ẓ/ẓ ظ	n ن
b ب	r ر	ʿ ع	H هـ
t ت	z ز	gh غ	w و
th ث	s س	f ف	y ي
j ج	sh ش	q ق	
Ḥ/ḥ ح	Ṣ/ṣ ص	k ك	
kh خ	Ḍ/ḍ ض	l ل	

d د	T̲/t̲ ط	m م	

VOWELS:

LONG: Ā/ā ا- Ū/ū و- Ī/ī ي-

SHORT: a - َ u- ُ i- ِ

1. Introduction

Like other Saudi novelists, Ibrahim al-Nassir found that women's issues provide rich literary material, so he dedicated two of his novels specifically to this subject: *ʿAdhraʾ al-Manfā* and *Dam al-Barāʾa* [1]. Al-Nassir features female characters who represent the liberation of women in society. They try to change traditional ideas about the role of women in a developing society by raising the level of social awareness about this topic. The social novel also investigated the relationship between Islam and women and revealed that society is trying to resist changes to the role of women by placing old customs and religion as obstacles in front of them.

The existence of this issue in Saudi narrative discourse is a result of the rapid changes—economic, political, and social—that have occurred in women's status and roles.

2. Representing Women's Issues in the Social Novel

Women's issues are a central topic in a large number of Arab novels, and their depiction is usually regarded as one of the most significant concerns in Arabic narrative discourse. In discussing the image of women in the realist novel, critic Mohammed al-Shinṭi (2004, p.425) observes: "With regards to the female character in the realist novel at this stage, she is mostly characterized positively. Novelists give her a great deal of attention and track her progress".

Saudi Arabia's social narrative discourse pays close attention to women and presents many images of them as wives, daughters, mothers, and friends. In addition, it provides a variety of female characters, such as traditional, oppressed, educated, modern and radical women. Moreover, the novels discuss women's issues, such as their right to education and work. The social transformations occurring in all aspects of Saudi society have altered the social roles of both genders and changed numerous concepts and ideas about masculinity and femininity.

According to Ḥāmid al-Rubaiʿi (2013), *Adhra' al-Manfā* " narrates some important events in the lives of Saudi women, [representing] the story of women's struggle until they gained some of their legitimate rights". In her study of al-Nassir's novels, al-

[1] 'Blood of Innocence' is the translation of this title.

Mari (2006, pp.220-231) focused solely on *ʿAdhraʾ al-Manfā* to discuss the author's portrayal of images of Saudi women. Al-Nassir (1989, p.112) depicts the social injustice of how some customs and traditions in the region affect women, who still suffer from some of these restrictions, and he believes that these restrictions are not of a religious nature. It could be said that al-Nassir, who wrote *ʿAdhraʾ al-Manfā* in 1978, had a clear vision of how these social transformations would impact women's lives.

Women's issues will continue to dominate novels as long as Saudi women remain marginalized. Khalida Saʿīd (1991, p.69) connects Saudi narrative discourse's attention to women's issues to the enormous number of challenges that women face:

> Until there is full equality in legislation and in reality, as long as people have preconceived ideas about women that have been formed over the ages, from myths and illogical perceptions, as long as society is unwilling to accept women's freedom with respect for their humanity, free from discrimination on the grounds of gender or race, according to the Convention of Human Rights, as long as these issues remain unresolved, this case stays open.

3. The Factors that Contributed to the Decline of Women's Social Roles

Since the unification of the Saudi state, at the beginning of the 20th century, the status of Saudi women has been a major source of contention within the Kingdom, since it has long been undeveloped due to their low rate of education enrolment. Certain parts of society have consistently opposed women's education, mostly on the basis of a form of strict religious doctrine, which has led to the spread of ignorance and illiteracy. Additionally, women faced significant social restrictions that led to the loss of their social role.

3.1 Customs and Traditions

There is still considerable debate concerning the factors that contributed to women's social roles declining significantly, as portrayed in the narrative text. BuShusha bin Jum'a (1999, p.643) identifies adherence to traditional customs as the main factor contributing to Arab women's traditional behaviour:

> This type of woman is connected to the traditional mindset in terms of its mythical and metaphysical bias. It is also connected to the inherited habits and customs which they imitate. This model is the product of a strict conservative society which restricts women through prohibitions that deny her knowledge. ***[...]*** The model is related to the older generation who had no chance to obtain education due to colonialism. The female who used to be illiterate shows unlimited obedience towards man. This female role model is confined to taking care of her husband and children and doing housework.

Bin Jum'a blames persistent traditional habits and customs, referring to both negative Arab men's roles and colonization. All of these factors contributed to the development of a woman who is incapable of interacting with modern life since even when colonial repression ended, it was followed by male repression, which delayed women's progress for many years.

A novel such as *Dam al-Barāʾa* (al-Nassir, 2001) demonstrates the continuity of traditions, customs, and habits passed down through generations, especially within rural society, unaltered until such traditions become taboo. Several of these traditions limit women's roles in society, thereby isolating them. Rural society makes a concerted effort to preserve and perpetuate this ancient heritage of traditions, customs, and habits, which are seen as the foundation of rural social cohesion (Dīb, 1989, p.149).

3.2 Sexism

The Saudi social novel identifies several other factors that contributed to the decline of women's roles. Men's repressive culture has contributed to the decline of women's social roles. *Thuqbun fi Ridaʾ al-Layl* portrays an autocratic father who attempts to mould his family's lives as he wishes. He denies his family members, including his wife, any independence, and everyone must obey his orders. Although the novel is dense with dialogue between the characters, there is not a single line of positive dialogue between the father and any family member, particularly his wife, who does not even express an opinion; her character is portrayed as totally passive and plays no role in shaping events.

A culture of repression is practiced not only by fathers, but also by sons (al-Nassir, 1961, p.12) who play the same authoritarian role:

أما صاحبنا عيسى فلقد كان كبير ستة أخوة مما أعطاه ميزة لا تدانى بين أفراد أسرته وعلى الأخص بالنسبة لأمه. فلقد كان في البيت نافذ الكلمة مهاب الجانب تكفي إشارة منه للحصول على ما يريد.

> Our friend ʿIssā was the eldest of six brothers, a seniority that gave him distinction within the family, especially in his mother's eyes. He was listened to by everybody, and the smallest sign from him was enough to make him obey.

Arabs adore children, particularly sons, who serve as a source of pride and power. Mūḍi in *Dam al-Barāʾa* (al-Nassir, 2001, pp.32-33) faces persecution because, despite her father's death, her brother continues to fulfill the same traditional male role in Saudi society. She feels under his control and he makes her life a living hell, making her wonder about a way to change her life: "Do I have to be a man to gain my right and to have an authority in this house?" The novel places Mūḍi in a struggle with this traditional authority, which makes this character very active in the plot, in contrast to the mother in *Thuqbun fi Ridaʾ al-Layl*.

3.3 Religion

The novel *ʿAdhraʾ al-Manfā* (al-Nassir, 1978, pp.14-17) makes reference to another factor that contributed to the decline of women's roles, which is severe religious teachings that were opposed to female education. Furthermore, the novel (ibid., p.25) implies that some Saudi mothers prepare their daughters for a traditional social role confined to the marital home.

Islam differentiates between males and females but views them as equal in Islamic law. Gender inequality does not come from Islamic scriptures, but from different understandings and interpretations of some religious teachings, which fail to take into account the transformation of society over time. According to *Sharīʿa*[2], there is no distinction between men and women from the legal age of sixteen in terms of ownership, control, and use of money" (Yamani, 2000, p.11). Thus, the distinctions that exist between the genders have been created by society.

[2] The system of religious laws that Muslims follow.

The Saudi social novel in general refers to the use of religion to rob women of their rights and limit their social roles. The protagonist of *Thuqbun fi Ridaʾ al-Layl* (al-Nassir, 1961, p.81) wonders about women's status in his town, comparing it to that of women in an open society:

وفي بلدته .. هذه البلدة التي لا تبعد سوى فراسخ معدودة لا يسمح للبنت بأن ترفع صوتها حتى لا يسمعه الرجال الغرباء لأن من يفعل ذلك لابد أن يكون مجوسيا .. ومع ذلك فهو واثق أن هؤلاء الفتيات لسن مجوسيات إنما هم مسلمات أو على الأقل أغلبهن كذلك .. فلم يبح الدين منح هذه الحرية لنساء مدينة بعينها في حين يمنعها عن نساء بلدة أخرى كبلدته .. بل إن الرجال في بلدته يتمسكون بأشياء كثيرة لا يتزحزحون عنها حتى لو أقتضى الأمر أن يسيل الدم ..!!؟.

> His hometown, which is only a few leagues away, does not allow a girl to raise her voice, so that strangers should not hear this, lest she is a Magian. However he is confident that these girls are not Magians but Muslims, or at least most of them are. Islam did not grant freedom to women in one specific city and not another, like his hometown, but the men in his town cling strongly to many things, even if blood must be spilled over them!

This passage raises an important issue about religious rulings that differ from one place to another and the impact of these rules on believers. The passage demonstrates the level of women's subjugation in a village that is considered a closed society. The term "voice" does not only refer to the sound we make when we speak; (2004) it also refers to the right to express an opinion. As a result, in this closed society, women lack a voice in both senses and are severely restricted, and anyone who attempts to circumvent these restrictions is considered outside the pale of society. The protagonist wonders why there is a difference in the status of women in his own community and in more open places elsewhere, where Muslim women have more freedom. The passage suggests that religious teachings are subject to interpretation by society, which can choose to read them in different ways. As the passage shows, the villagers still cling strongly to their old social customs and beliefs and will not only abandon them, but are willing to die to defend them.

4. Images of Women

The female characters in al-Nassir's novels provide various images of Saudi women as wives, daughters, sisters, friends, or lovers. These characters are portrayed as having different personalities, such as being peaceable or intrusive, and representing different types, such as the struggler, the leader, etc. However, there are three clear divisions amongst the female characters in al-Nassir's novels, which represent three types of attitudes towards social transformation in Saudi women's status: the traditional, the modern, and the radical. Traditionalists are most frequently seen in Saudi narrative discourse, but characters are also portrayed who adopt more radical attitudes toward their role in society.

4.1 Traditional Woman

In this context, the term 'traditional woman' refers to characters who appear to espouse a set of long-established ideals passed down through generations that have influenced the role and status of women in society and are still prevalent in contemporary society. Despite the fact that all countries have experienced some degree of social change as a result of development, globalisation, the industrial boom, and the technological revolution—effects that vary quantitatively and qualitatively from country to country—some women have retained their traditional roles despite these changes. According to Bin Jum'a (1999, p. 643), this traditional female type is constrained by societal rules and traditions and is viewed as the product of a strict, conservative society that confines women through taboos that prevent them from enjoying their rights. Rather than that, they are oppressed by male authority and dominance.

Adapting from Plato's allegory of the cave, traditional women might be seen as living in the shadows while men live in reality. Plato (2007, p. 193) uses the cave allegory to "make an image of our nature in its education and want of education." However, the terms 'shadows' and 'reality' here relate to women's position under men's control. The traditional woman has not gained important rights and freedoms, owing partly to the Islamic empire's weakness, the collapse of religious values in Arab society, and the revival of certain Arab tribal traditions and customs that abrogate women's rights. Thus, the shadow woman (i.e., traditional woman) is a result of the authority, volition, and willingness of the man who embodies reality. Thus, fathers, brothers, husbands, and even sons are seen as reality, but women are seen as their shadows. If women

were to assert their natural status, this reality-shadow relationship might be transformed into one between two realities.

The Saudi social novel contains a large number of traditional female characters who appear to be mere shadows. As a result, they lack substance in the narrative text and are worthless or insignificant in driving the plotline. However, because the traditional woman is completely subordinate to male authority, she lacks the ability to exchange ideas with men. *Thuqbun fi Ridaʾ al-Layl* illustrates Saudi society's male dominance over females. The episode depicting ʿIssā father's reaction to his son's school punishment demonstrates that women lack power in the presence of male authority. The mother was powerless to defend her son from his father's punishment. He threw himself on his mother in need of protection, but she was terrified of her husband and was powerless to defend him. Her only answer was to murmur a few prayers for her son's protection from his angry father. If women had rights, the mother would be able to react more in this scene, and we would see an interaction between two realities, male and female, but the woman remains a shadow of the authoritarian man.

The traditional role of women as described in the social novel does not extend beyond doing housework and raising children, as shown in *Raʿshat al-Ẓil* (al-Nassir, 1994, pp.19-20):

من بعيد سمع ثغاء أغنام وهي تتعارك فتذكر أمه تبسمل في البواكير ماضية إلى عنزتها حتى تحلبها وتحضر له تلك الرغوة المرتعشة. [...] عقب الإفطار الخفيف الذي تشيعه بركة الدعاء ما بين الرغيف الحار الذي تحرص أمه أن تقدمه لهم من التنور الذي أوقدته بالجلة والحطب مباشرة مع الحليب الفائر ينطلق إلى المطوع للدراسة مع رفاقه أبناء الحي.

> From afar, he heard sheep bleating and fighting with each other. He remembered his mother starting her day in the early morning with the name of God and heading towards her goats to milk them. After a light breakfast, with a blessing of supplication, hot homemade bread, served directly from the wood-fired clay oven, and hot milk, he rushed to school with his friends from the same district.

Some traditional women were opposed to modern Saudi women's new role outside the home. Women, such as Zāhir's mother, are portrayed as role models for future generations, a position that is highlighted throughout the novels. *ʿAdhraʾ al-Manfā* exemplifies the traditional mother's relationship with her daughters. Zāhir's mother's

responsibility is to educate her daughter in domestic skills like cooking and cleaning, in order to prepare her for the traditional social role of an obedient wife who satisfies all male needs and desires. When there is a fierce debate between Zāhir and his mother, she angrily tells him (al-Nassir, 1978, p.25): "Shut up, or I'll break your sister's head". This episode demonstrates how women influence their daughters to adopt the traditionally female pattern. Moreover, it is important to note that oppressed characters attempt to oppress people who are weaker and less powerful than themselves as a means of regaining their confidence. Mufīd Najim (2012) claimed that this explains why the mother characters in many novels practise cruelty and oppression on their own daughters.

In the Saudi social novel, the traditional woman is represented as being without will or decision-making abilities, even during life-changing events like her own marriage. *Safinat al-Ḍayāʿ* (al-Nassir, 2004, p.74), for example, depicts a traditional arranged marriage in which the wife is much younger than her husband and does not feel happy in her marriage, as her husband has noted. This marriage is not based on love; the wife is merely playing her traditional social role as she cannot refuse her family's decision. Highly critical representations of this type of marriage are found in many of al-Nassir's novels.

The spread of myths and legends and the domination of folk culture affect the responses of traditional women to modern technology and life, making it hard for them to easily adapt to the modern lifestyle. *Dam al-Barāʾa* (al-Nassir, 2001, pp.10-11) shows the reactions of traditional women when told about the new lifestyle. ʾUmm Sāmir, a minor character who had lived abroad in a Western country, is a striking presence among the women in the village, and the other women like to listen to stories about her life abroad.

وهناك في تلك المحافل تجد أن الحلقة تتسع حولها حين تتحدث لهن عما رأته في تلك البلاد البعيدة التي عاشت فيها زمنا طويلا فتعلمت الكثير من الفنون التي تجهلها وتشربت بالثقافات التي تضطرب في الأوطان البعيدة والقريبة من بلاد الغرب أو بلاد الكفر كما يدعونها في ذلك الحين. فهي تحدثهن عن مخترعات لم يسمعن بها إلا قليلا مثل ذلك الجهاز الذي يسمونه(بالراديو) يخشخش طوال النهار بالأحاديث والأغاني أو الجهاز الذي ينقل المكالمات من مدينة إلى أخرى والملابس التي يرتديها الناس في تلك الديار و نوع الطعام و الشراب وغير ذلك من الأمور التي ليست مألوفة لديهن فيصغين غير مصدقات أو يتعوذون من الشيطان لأن تلك المخترعات لا بد ويسيرها الجن الذين يختفون في تلك الأجهزة المريبة.

> In their meetings, she was surrounded by many other women who listened to what she had seen in that distant country, where she had lived for a long time. She had learned many skills and absorbed many cultures in the Western country, or the 'land of non-believers', as they called it in those times. She talked about inventions which she had not known previously, such as a device called 'a radio' which broadcasts conversations and music, or another device used to make calls from one city to another. She also talked about the clothes they wore in that country, and the types of food and drink they enjoyed, and other matters that were unfamiliar to them. They listened carefully and could not believe it. They sought refuge from Satan because these inventions surely were controlled by jinn who were hiding in those suspicious devices.

This episode makes three points about traditional women. Firstly, that cultural knowledge, which to some extent is founded on myths and superstitions, is used to explain and understand new facts. Thus, their lack of education means they are not prepared for new ideas. Secondly, news about the arrival of modernity in Saudi society, with its new technology and inventions, was spread by word of mouth, which helped to lessen the impact of culture shock. However, traditional women are, to some extent, "isolated from the wider world outside, which could give women the appropriate amount of knowledge to bypass the oral culture" (al-Ḍabʿ 2007, p13). Finally, religion conditioned perceptions about the other (Western culture) at that time, placing a barrier between Saudi society and the other, meaning there was no acceptance of other lifestyles.

4.2 Modern Woman

The modern Saudi woman is an educated woman, often to a very high degree, and this education enables women to expand their social horizons beyond the house in order to pursue career prospects. Saudi social narratives demonstrate that modern women's education encompasses much more than writing and reading, showing education's critical role in transforming women's status.

Due to conservative Saudi society's prevailing attitudes toward women's status, women's education was one of the most difficult challenges the Saudi government

faced. The Saudi government made the first significant move toward advancing Saudi women's rights in 1960, when it established the first government agency dedicated to girls' education, known as the General Presidency for Girls' Education. This was to pave the way for significant future changes in the position of women in society.

According to the Saudi social model, education is a legitimate right for both males and females and is a critical factor in the nation's development. *ʿAdhraʾ al-Manfā* devotes significant attention to the problem of women's education, which serves as a guiding theme throughout the novel and demonstrates the critical significance of education in transforming women's social roles and status in Saudi society. Additionally, the novel demonstrates the media's involvement in raising public awareness about the critical nature of women's education.

As many studies show, al-Nassir carefully chose the setting for this novel, selecting the western region of Saudi Arabia known as Ḥijāz, as is clear from the dialogue between some characters who speak the local dialect. This was Saudi Arabia's most developed area at the time the novel is set. Furthermore, it is associated with the beginning of modern Saudi female education and development. Numerous educated women were known to have resided there, notably ʿIffat al-Thunayyān, who, in 1955, established Dār al-Ḥanān, the first private school for girls, intended especially for those who were poor and orphaned (Slamah, 2008, p.47).

In her study, al-Mari (2006, p.221) shows the importance of the Ḥijāz setting given that the region is considered the most open, culturally and intellectually; in addition, the first newspaper was established there. She also notes that in 1930, Ḥijāz used to be governed by Egypt, so this direct link between the region and Egypt created a new educational environment. Her study focuses on the impact of Egyptian culture on modern Saudi women, especially in Ḥijāz, and neglects the role of private schools in the region. The region had been under Egyptian rule since 1812, when Mohammed Ali succeeded in recapturing Ḥijāz (Dodwell, 1977, pp.43-44), and not in the 1930s, as the study suggests.

The narrative events highlight several factors—both external and internal—that led to the formation of the image of the modern Saudi woman. Firstly, scholarships to study abroad played a major role. These scholarships encouraged connections between Saudi women and their counterparts in more developed countries and meant these

female Saudi students were influenced by other cultures. Like many Saudi girls from rich families, Buthaina (al-Nassir, 1978, p.15) studied in Lebanon as there was no chance for women to continue their education in Saudi Arabia. Since her father believed that she should play a responsible role in society, her new role after finishing her studies was to raise Saudi women's level of awareness about education.

Al-Mari (2006, p.221) mentions Lebanon's role in helping to create the modern Saudi woman, since it is the most open Arab nation in both intellectual and cultural terms due to its being more liberal. Another study (al-Qaḥṭani, 2009, p.18-19) examines the direct contact between Egyptian and Saudi culture and the impact of the former on the latter, as many Saudi women, especially those from Ḥijāz, used to travel there to study. As a result, both Lebanon and Egypt have a significant impact on the intellectual and cultural development of modern Saudi women.

The novel also highlights other internal factors that contributed to the emergence of this new feminist image, such as the role of the media in educating citizens about the importance of women's education. *ʿAdhraʾ al-Manfā* (al-Nassir, 1978, pp.14-17) depicts the media's contribution to the formation of the modern Saudi woman by increasing social awareness of women's education. Buthaina's father, who is the editor-in-chief of a Saudi newspaper, strongly supports the need for women's education and plans to establish a page in his newspaper which will educate society on the importance of women's education; he assigns the task of supervising this to Zāhir and Buthaina. Her father states (ibid., p.15):

خدمة المجتمع من الجنسين واجب وطني وعلى الفتاة المثقفة خاصة دور كبير في توعية بنات جنسها [...] . إن حضارة أية أمة أو شعب – في يقيني – لن تبرز أو تثبت وجودها مالم تتضافر جهود الجنسين في كافة الميادين.

> Serving society is a social duty for both genders. Educated women especially have to play a major role in raising the level of Saudi women's awareness […] the civilisation of any nation or public – in my opinion – will not excel or will not prove its existence unless both men and women work together toward this goal in all fields.

Zāhir agrees with what the editor-in-chief says and accepts the responsibility of supervising the page. However, he realises that this task will not be easy because society is resistant to this idea. Educated Saudis could be expected to actively contribute to spreading awareness about this issue among their fellow citizens.

However, the novel depicts some of the social opposition to the issue, which comes from two groups–the religious conservatives and the traditionalists who believe that women's education leads to moral decay.

As the novel (ibid., p.79) relates, the launch of the women's page creates a strong impression on society:

كانت مقالاتها في غاية التركيز والموضوعية , وتوجهت بصورة مباشرة إلى **[...]**وظهرت صفحة المرأة الشباب محملة إياه مسئولية المبادرة لمحو الأمية مشيرة إلى ارهاصات النهضة التي تبدت في الأفق الفكري ثم تدرجت إلى أن تعليم الفتاة أصبح يشكل المنطلق الأول للتحرر من عبودية الجهل و **[...]**لشباب الجزيرة الظلام التي رسفت المرأة في أغلالها طوال قرون. وتساءلت هل من المعقول أن تستطيع أمة مواكبة التقدم الانساني في حين أن أكثر من نصف المجتمع يعيش في عتمة الخرافة و متاهات الخواء الفكري؟! وفندت في الوقت ذاته مزاعم الفئات التي تتوجس خيفة من أن يمتد الانحلال إلى أغوار سحيقة فيما لو نالت المرأة قسطا من التعليم.

> The woman's page was published. [...] Its articles were very focused and objective. It directly addressed young people to take responsibility for putting an end to illiteracy. The page refers to the harbingers of the Renaissance, which had begun to be seen in the intellectual horizons of Saudi youth. [...] Then, gradually, the page began to discuss the issue of women's education, which is the first step of liberation from the bondage of ignorance and darkness that had restricted them for centuries. The page asked: Is it possible for a nation to keep up with human progress while more than half its population lives in the darkness of superstition and in the maze of an intellectual vacuum? At the same time, the page refuted the allegations of those groups who were wary about the possibility of moral decline if women got involved in education.

As implied by the above quotation, the newspaper's editor-in-chief hopes to create social mobility in the Saudi public through encouraging discussion about women's education. Due to the fact that the media is run by educated individuals such as Zāhir, Buthaina, and her father, they support this idea as a means of overcoming ignorance and oppression.

The novel depicts a period of significant social change in Saudi Arabia, as women's status evolves from the traditional stereotype to that of a more contemporary,

educated woman who is no longer confined to the home. Historically, the majority of women suffered from illiteracy and ignorance as a result of a shortage of schools dedicated to girls' education, their lack of equality with men, and a lack of social awareness of the importance of women's education. Thus, Saudi women had a limited role in society for a long period of time until the government took bold action and founded the General Presidency for Girls' Education in 1960.

Al-Nassir meticulously crafted the novel's characters to encapsulate various aspects of this issue. Zāhir's family represents traditional thinking, whilst Buthaina's family embodies the image of a modern, educated family. Thus, it is not surprising that a conflict arises between these two radically different ways of thinking. Additionally, al-Nassir serves as a bridge between two different families in terms of living and intellectual standards, as seen by the relationship between Zāhir and Buthaina, who are both well-educated and share the same ambitions. Buthaina represents the modern Saudi female due to "her ability as a symbol to express the author's vision and ideas about the world" (al-Mari, 2006, p.228).

Education and employment are inextricably linked, since educational attainment is the main engine of the labor market. Thus, education prepared women for their real social roles. The social novel exposed many educated Saudi women's desire to work outside the home. *Dam al-Barāʾa* (al-Nassir, 2001, p.89) highlights the attitude of Hiba, who plans to look for a job:

ترغب أن تكون حرة في تفكيرها وفي تصرفاتها دون خضوع أو مذلة. وماذا يحول دون تحقيق هذه الأمنية طالما تعلمت وسوف تجد وظيفة جيدة تتناسب مع مؤهلها ويكفي مرتبها لتحقيق حياة ميسورة دون الحاجة لأي كان.

> She would like to be free in her thoughts and attitude without facing any humiliation or submission. What prevents her from achieving this wish, as long as she studies and finds a good job that suits her qualifications? Her salary will be enough to secure an affordable life without the need for anyone.

Education has contributed toward building the character of Saudi women as willing to struggle in order to gain their full rights and freedom in a patriarchal society; it provides security to women who used to have no option other than complete dependence upon men. This passage highlights the absence of freedom in Hiba's

community, which serves as the basis of modern women's thought. Hiba, like any other modern woman, is continually searching for this missing value.

4.3 Radical Woman: Saudi Feminists Representation

As a consequence of modern women's education, the radical woman represents the third noticeable transformation in the status of the Saudi woman. It is important to define the concept of radical women before discussing their depictions in the Saudi social novel. Nancy Whittier (1995, p.1), in her study on the radical women's movement in the United States, especially in Ohio, proposes a descriptive framework for women from the perspective of the radical feminist movement. The meaning of feminist in this case is "to be independent and strong, to take oneself and other women seriously, and to challenge the restrictions placed on women in a male-dominated society". Thus, the foundation of the movement is to maintain a woman's identity and strongly assert the presence of women in society.

There has been no special movement representing the issues of radical women in Saudi society as in Western countries. However, the lack of such an institution does not necessarily indicate a lack of radical Saudi women. Individual efforts have been made by some feminists to discuss many women-related issues, including Saudi women's driving and the creation of gender equality in terms of work opportunities, administrative positions, and freedom to choose a spouse. In addition, some Saudi women's rights campaigns[3] have emerged alongside other rights campaigns that use Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites to disseminate their ideas and garner support.

In Saudi Arabia, radical women contribute to media discourse as employees or freelance journalists who write about a variety of general interest subjects and promote dialogue on cultural and social concerns, including women's issues. They communicate directly with the people, rather than relying on men to do it. Additionally, women contribute to Saudi Arabia's cultural creativity via the writing of short stories, novels, poetry, and plays, as well as conducting scientific and theoretical research. Numerous well-known Saudi females, including poet Thuria Qabil, the

[3] To read more about the Saudi women's rights campaign, visit the campaign website through the link: http://saudiwomen22.blogspot.co.uk/p/blog-page_22.html

novelist Rajāʾ ʿAlim, the playwright Milḫa ʿAbdullah, and the scientist Ḫayāt bint Sulaimān Sindi, have a significant cultural presence in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi authorities are likewise concerned with women's issues. Women's education was one of the outcomes of the government's initiatives to expand women's rights. Furthermore, the government now provides job opportunities in a variety of sectors and has empowered women to vote and run for office in municipal elections. Moreover, women have been appointed to leadership positions and currently occupy 30 seats on the Shura Council, one of Saudi Arabia's most powerful decision-making authorities (al-Jazira, 2013).

Saudi Arabia's narrative discourse is filled with radical female characters who oppose the customs and traditions that limit and narrow their roles and rights within society. Buthaina in *ʿAdhraʾ al-Manfā* can be seen as a symbol of the radical Saudi woman. Buthaina is a modern, educated woman with clear opinions about her social role and rights. She dazzles men with her intellect: "Zāhir was amazed by her accurate observations, which reflect a deep awareness" (al-Nassir, 1978, p.39).

Buthaina is a pragmatic character who does not enjoy living outside the boundaries of her social reality; she also enjoys adventure, especially in regard to those things she strongly yearns to achieve because, as she (ibid., p.112) states, "experience has broken all of the intellectual and human energies that I have." Moreover, she is strong-minded, a characteristic implanted in her personality by her father, who also allows her freedom, as he trusts her and is very confident in her decisions.

Although Buthaina believes in freedom, she is aware of the numerous societal constraints that limit women's roles in society, and hence she is always at odds with these customs and traditions, refusing to abide by them (ibid., pp.67-69). Freedom gives her the ability to voice a dissenting opinion in a society that provides no space for bold women, as shown through the abovementioned attitudes of Buthaina towards her society.

The narration reveals radical Saudi women opposing certain ideas and attitudes that are firmly established in the community's mindset. Buthaina does not like to play the conventional role of the traditional woman when dealing with her husband. Her opposition to this (ibid., p.109) is seen in a dialogue between Buthaina and her mother, who suggests that her daughter should ask her husband if he needs something:

– أسرعي. روحي له يمكن مستنيك.

إن احتاج لي حينادیني من نفسه يا أمي.

المرأة يابنتي لازم تشعر زوجها أنه محتاجها.

و طفقت أمضغ طعامي على مهل و كأنني لم أسمع ملاحظتها. بل أنني لم أكن بحاجة إلى تلك الملاحظة لأنها تمثل طريقة الجيل الذي تنتمي إليه أمي في محاولة إلى كسب الرجل في كل مناسبة.

Hurry up and go to your husband. He might be waiting for you.

- He will call me if he needs me, mom.
- A woman should show her husband that he always needs her help and he should feel he needs you.

  I continued chewing my food slowly, pretending that I did not hear her comment. I didn't need it because it represents the way my mom's generation tries to win over a man at every opportunity.

The mother-daughter dialogue is an intergenerational exchange between two radically different ways of thinking — traditional and modern. As can be seen, the radical woman is aware that her husband is angry with her, but she has her own way of dealing with the matter. In the presence of men, the traditional mother has a weak and obedient personality and a traditional way of dealing with them. By contrast, Buthaina, as a radical woman, detests weakness and submission since she no longer accepts man's arrogance.

She (ibid., pp. 79–108) is fully aware that, despite the fact that the age of female oppression is gone, women like her mother continue to enable males to limit their freedoms through these traditional methods. Like any radical woman, she recognises the importance of work for women, so she has no great need to found her life with a man as she is able to take care of her own responsibilities herself. She does not mind working as a journalist in a male-dominated environment, as long as the relationship between them is limited to work. Her reason for choosing to work in the field of media is to spread awareness of the issue of women's education. Finally, she accomplishes her objective and convinces several social groups of her idea.

However, Buthaina faces some harsh criticism from certain traditional women who oppose women's new roles and status. Zāhir's mother compares her to a male because she works with them, and she is also fearful of what others will say about her son if

they learn he is working with a woman, which is socially unacceptable. She blames women's education for their employment with males. However, Buthaina is unconcerned about what others think since she is confident that she is not committing an illegal act.

Radical women realise that their social role is not restricted to the home, a belief reflected in Buthaina's thoughts when she (ibid., p.121) says: "I won't accept this costume. Life is full of many things to do. I will fight for what I believe in". Although it appears that the radical woman is difficult to persuade and is willing to make sacrifices to accomplish her objectives, the relationship between Buthaina and her father, which is founded on respect, contributes to the development of this new type of woman because her father understands the nature of life and the impact of social changes on the role and status of Saudi women. Additionally, figures such as Zāhir demonstrate that some males backed radical women's efforts to reform women's social roles and status.

Buthaina is portrayed in the novel as a feisty fighter who disseminates many ideas about radical Saudi women and helps to drive the narrative forward. Buthaina, in particular, is considered to be one of the most effective characters in al-Nassir's novels, as al-Mari (2006, p.219) claimed. Buthaina plays an active role in the narrative, demonstrating that radical women reject the long-established social conventions that no longer suit the modern era and the aspirations of modern women.

Dam al-Barāʾa (al-Nassir, 2001, p.125) provides another representation of a radical Saudi woman who is just as active as Buthaina. Hibā falls in love with the protagonist, acting on her beliefs about women's freedom. Although she is aware that visiting a man who is not a relative is socially improper and taboo, she disregards these traditions and visits him at his home when he is injured (ibid., p.90). Additionally, she does not wear a veil, traditionally worn by Saudi women (ibid.). Moreover, she (ibid., p.125) knows that by social tradition she will be forced to marry a relative, but she totally rejects this idea, and prefers instead to remain single rather than be forced into an arranged marriage.

إن مجتمعهم المحافظ لا يقبل بمثل ذلك الاختيار [...] إن من فساد هذا النظام التعيس الذي تحرم فيه الفتاة من اختيار عريسها الذي قد تظهر مساوئه بالعشرات ولكن لا فائدة من معرفتها بعد أن يكون قد اقتحم خندق الفتاة.

> Conservative society does not accept such a choice. In this corrupt system, the girl cannot choose her husband, who could have many negative traits, and there is no way to know about these traits until after the marriage (ibid.).

The author criticizes this closed society in which long-established social customs and traditions disregard women's rights, even on the most critical issues affecting them. Regular meetings between Hiba and the protagonist (ibid., p.90) show her opposition to social customs and traditions. Both Hiba and Buthaina clearly present the ideas of radical women. There are other radical female characters in al-Nassir's novels, such as ʿIṯir in *Ḥiṯān al-Rīḥ*[4], proving that Buthaina is not the only active character in al-Nassir's novel, as al-Mari claims.

5. The Arab Women's Liberation Movement

The modern era has witnessed many calls for women's liberation accompanied by social movements. The Arab Women's Liberation Movement (1899), as it was named by Qasim ʾAmin, the first feminist in Arab society, played a major role in advancing the status of Arab women. Mohammad Ḫusaīn (1993, p.20), claimed that the roots of this movement extended to the era of Mohammad Ali Basha, the Governor of Egypt (1805-1848) who sent many Egyptians on scholarships to France, and they returned with different mindsets, having been affected by Western culture. However, Ḫusaīn saw these scholars as attempting to reform Egyptian culture by employing Western ideas that conflicted with Islam. Thus, the roots of women's liberation lie in an earlier era, but ʾAmīn is generally recognised as the founder of this movement in the Arab world.

ʾAmīn wrote a book entitled *Taḥrīr al-Marʾa (The Liberation of Women)* to show the importance of the need to raise the level of social awareness about women's rights, in which he outlined the need for action:

> I call on every lover of truth to examine with me the status of women in Egyptian society. I am confident that such individuals will arrive independently at the same conclusion I have – namely, the necessity of improving the status of Egyptian women. The truth I am presenting

[4] 'The Windy Walls' is the translation of this title.

> today has preoccupied me for a long time; I have considered it, examined it, and analysed it. [...] I have finally reached the point where it has become my dominant thought, alerting me to its advantages and reminding me of its necessity (ibid, p.3).

ʾAmin's study (ibid., pp.10-25) showed the impact of education on Western women who feel free and able to claim their rights, which in turn brings them to prominence. After the era of colonialism, Arab men started to colonise their own women, although Islam technically gives women full freedom and rights. Therefore, ʾAmīn claims, Arab men are dictators, using a style of authority borrowed from dictatorial regimes. His study also commented on different trends in society's views towards female education, with some believing that women's education is not obligatory, whereas others were unclear on whether it is forbidden in Islam.

ʾAmin's ideas, which had many supporters and opponents, had an impact not only on Egyptian society, but also on many other Arab countries. Some scholars believe that they represent a kind of Westernisation that will destroy Arab Islamic identity (Ḥusaīn, 1993, p.8-14). One hundred years after the publication of ʾAmin's call for women's liberation, the University of Cairo held its first conference on women's liberation on October 23-28, 1999. The conference discussed ʾAmin's opinions and the harsh criticism that they had evoked. Discussing ʾAmin's ideas a century after they were first introduced suggests that little progress has been achieved in the liberation of Arab women, and, of course, the demands of this generation differ greatly from those of ʾAmin's generation.

However, ʾAmin's call for the liberation of women has had a clear impact on Saudi society and the modern Saudi woman. The Saudi narrative has also been influenced by these ideas and *ʿAthraʾ al-Manfā* suggests that Saudis are split between supporters and opponents of ʾAmin's work. Zāhir (al-Nassir, 1978, p.20), who is responsible for editing a page on women's issues, is known amongst his friends as Qasim ʾAmin's successor in the Arabian Peninsula, and ʾAmin's ideas are seen to have the support of some educated Saudi women. Buthaina (ibid., p.78), for example, is pro-ʾAmīn even though her father does not totally agree with him, as the following dialogue shows.

إيه رأيك يا بابا في كتابات قاسم أمين؟

- فأجاب وهو يحرك يديه: متطرف شويه.

- وفغرت فاها دهشة, فلم تكن تعتقد بأن أباها يحمل مثل هذه الفكرة. هذا بالرغم من أنها فكرت أن تنقل بعض المقالات من مؤلفاته لصفحة المرأة ولكن هاهي الآن تصطدم بما يقضي على ما أعتزمته فأي خيبة أمل هذه؟ [...] فأجابت بفتور: كنت أحسبك من أنصاره؟
- فقاطعها بسرعة: هذا صحيح. أنا فاهم قصدك. ولكني لا أدين بكل ما ينادي به قاسم أمين. (ثم أضاف)
- يعني أختلف معه في بعض النواحي وليس جميع أفكاره أرفضها.
- فلانت ملامحها و علقت بسرور: لقد أعدت لي الثقة بنفسي.

What do you think, Dad, about Qasim ʾAmin's writings?

- He answered while his hands continued moving: He is an extremist.
- She opened her mouth in shock; she was not happy that her father had expressed such an opinion. She was planning to use some of his articles on the women's page, but now the shock made her forget what she had intended to do. **[...]**
- She answered lukewarmly: I thought you were one of his supporters.
- He interrupted her quickly: That's right. I understand what you mean. But I don't accept everything he calls for. (Then he added)
- I disagree with him in some respects, but I don't reject all of his ideas.

She looked relieved, and she said happily: You have just restored my self-confidence.

ʾAmin's call to change the status of women, who at that time still suffered under the burden of illiteracy and social tradition, had an impact on Saudi society, especially educated women. Buthaina, who supports his ideas, appears surprised by her father's reaction when she raises this topic, as he is a very educated, liberal individual and a supporter of women's issues. However, he does not agree with all of the aims of the women's liberation movement, possibly due to his belief that all societies are different and their approaches to new ideologies will vary. In addition, the use of the word 'extremist' by Buthaina's father suggests that he might believe some of ʾAmin's ideas are confrontational and that adopting them could cause social conflict.

ʾAmin's ideas produce a new type of female character in the narrative text. Buthaina, for example, plays an active role in the novel's plotline. In other words, Buthaina in this novel can be considered the embodiment of ʾAmin's ideas.

6. Conclusion

This discussion of the representation of Saudi women in al-Nassir's work has shown how social change has impacted the position of females in the Saudi novel. These transformations in the role of Saudi women faced a number of obstacles that slowed down the progress of the Saudi women's movement in comparison to the rapid development of infrastructure and the economy.

The novels explore the complicated relationship between women's roles and Islamic belief, which has been complicated by misinterpretations of religious teachings and texts. Additionally, al-Nassir's female characters exhibit the impact of feminist concepts, with the emergence of new kinds such as the modern woman and the radical woman. Female protagonists are shown to overcome some of their social challenges in the fields of education and work.

Saudi women are looking to achieve more and participate more fully in society. To date, they have succeeded in gaining just some of their rights and will continue their struggle against other unresolved issues. Conservative religious beliefs and long-established social customs are reasons for the slowness of the pace of change with regard to women's issues. In his novels, al-Nassir attempts to reflect the different roles that women play within Saudi society. Traditional women's characters take no active role in the narrative's progression. By contrast, the radical female characters play a major role in moving the plot forward and are represented as being free from restrictions.

Despite the Saudi government's concerted efforts to improve women's participation in the political, economic, and educational fields of the state, transformations in Saudi women's status appear to be gradual in comparison to other transformations. Male characters, on average, have a larger role in the Saudi social novel than their female counterparts. On the other hand, male characters are portrayed demanding freedom for Saudi women on the grounds that they believe females have the right to be involved in all aspects of society. Al-Nassir was regarded as the first significant advocate of women's rights during his lifetime, as evidenced by his works, which devote considerable attention to women's issues.

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