

## **Shifts in the feminist Discourse in Saudi Women's Novels During the Era of Vision 2030**

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**Abstract.** Saudi Arabia has undergone profound social and cultural transformations, driven by the ambitious goals of its Vision 2030 plan. The diverse women empowerment initiatives since 2017 have contributed to a notable shift in societal norms, expanding opportunities for women in education, the workforce, and leadership roles, and reshaping their status and participation within society. In this evolving landscape, Saudi women's novels have become dynamic expressions of societal change. This research examines significant shifts in feminist discourse within Saudi women's novels published during the Vision 2030 era. The study analyses six novels by three prominent women authors: Umaima Alkhamis, Fatima Abdel Hamid, and Sahar Bahrawi. For each author, the analysis compares one novel from before the announcement of Vision 2030 and a more recent work written after its introduction. Through close readings of this selected corpus, the study explores how women's narratives engage with themes of gender, tradition, and societal transformation. The analysis identifies thematic changes, character portrayals, and narrative strategies that reflect a shift in feminist discourse. Additionally, the study contextualizes these literary works within broader societal changes and ongoing gender equality initiatives in Saudi Arabia.

**Keywords:** Feminist discourse, Saudi novel, Vision 2030, Saudi Women.

### **Introduction**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has undergone a profound transformation since the launch of Vision 2030. This ambitious plan is designed to usher in a new era of economic, cultural, and societal transformation. Among the myriad changes that have reshaped Saudi Arabia, one of the most compelling and resonant is the evolving role of women in the country (Saudi Vision, 2016). The diverse women empowerment initiatives since 2017 have contributed to a notable shift in societal norms, fostering greater gender equality and expanding women's participation in various sectors aiming to "harness the economic power of women" (Eum, 2019). These initiatives include reforms in education, employment, and legal rights, which have collectively worked to dismantle long-standing barriers to women's full participation in society (Saudi Vision, 2016). In this dynamic landscape, Saudi women authors are embracing the opportunity to tell stories that explore the shifting dynamics of power and identity in the

era of Vision 2030. This study examines how novels by Saudi women, published during the Vision 2030 era, reflect and contribute to this societal shift and how these narratives offer a unique lens through which to understand the evolving status of women in the Kingdom. The study traces significant shifts in the feminist discourse represented in these novels from the time before the launch of Vision 2030 to after.

This research focuses on the novels of three Saudi women writers: Umaima Alkhamis, Fatima Abdel Hamid and Sahar Bahrawi. All of the selected novelists are prolific writers who have published novels before and after Vision 2030. Their novels have been nominated for national or regional awards which testifies to their literary significance and artistic style. The study adopts a close reading examination of the themes, narratives, and perspectives present in the works of the selected novelists and sets them in contrast with pre-Vision-2030 works by the same authors. The works selected are *Albahriyat* (Sea-Wafted Women, 2006) and *Msra Al-Ghrānīq fī Mudn Al-‘qīq* (The Journey of the Swans in the Cities of Agate, 2019) by Umaima Alkhamis; *Tāā Al-Nisūh* (The Feminine Taa, 2016) and *Al’ufug Al’ala* (The Highest Horizon, 2022) by Fatima Abdel Hamid; *Sajīn Aljasad* (Prisoner of the Body, 2014) and *Hamsāt Merāh* (Whispers of a Mirror, 2021) by Sahar Bahrawi. By examining the ways in which these authors address issues such as gender, empowerment, and societal change, this study seeks to shed light on the complex interplay between literature, feminism, and the broader socio-political context in Saudi Arabia. Feminist discourse in this study refers to discussions and narratives that challenge gender inequality, advocate for women’s rights, and explore the roles and experiences of women in society. It encompasses the themes, narratives, and perspectives presented in these novels that contribute to the broader feminist movements in Saudi Arabia.

Existing research, while not directly focused on feminist discourse in Saudi women’s novels, provides valuable insights into the broader societal context and literary engagement within this context. Wafaa Saleh and Areej Malibari’s “Women and Vision 2030: Bridging the Gap?” (2021) examines the intersection of Saudi women’s experiences and Vision 2030, highlighting the evolving roles and opportunities for women in the changing landscape. Also, Mubarak Altwaiji et al. (2021) explore the potential impact of Vision 2030 on raising awareness of national literature among Saudi students, offering indirect implications for the reception and dissemination of literary works, including those authored by Saudi women. On the other hand, Doaiji (2018) examines Saudi feminism beyond patriarchal bargaining, offering critical perspectives on gender dynamics and women’s agency in Saudi society. Although not specific to literary analysis, Doaiji’s insights contribute to understanding the broader socio-cultural context within which Saudi women’s novels are situated. By emphasizing the agency and contentions of Saudi feminists, particularly their push for a feminism beyond state control and patriarchal norms, Doaiji emphasises the complexities inherent in Saudi women’s activism and literary expressions. Moreover, Doaiji’s heavy reliance on primary sources underscores the importance of engaging directly with the voices and experiences of Saudi feminists themselves, aligning with the proposed methodology for analysing Saudi women’s novels in this paper.

While these studies do not directly address the feminist discourse in the Vision 2030-era Saudi women’s novels, they provide valuable contextual groundwork for understanding the evolving landscape of Saudi feminism and its implications for literary representations of gender and identity in contemporary Saudi society. By synthesizing insights from existing research on Saudi feminism, Vision 2030, and literary analysis, this study aims to fill a significant gap in the literature by examining how contemporary Saudi women novelists engage with and contribute to the feminist discourse amidst the transformative socio-cultural landscape of the Vision 2030 era. It represents the first comprehensive analysis of the feminist discourse within Saudi women’s novels of the Vision 2030 era, pioneering an investigation into thematic shifts, character portrayals, and narrative strategies amidst Saudi societal transformation.

The paper is divided into two sections. The first section provides a contextual framework

by discussing the position of Saudi women within the reform plans of Vision 2030. It explores how these reforms influenced societal norms and shaped the evolving goals and styles of feminist movements in Saudi Arabia. The second section presents a close reading analysis of the selected novels. It examines the themes, narratives, and perspectives presented in the works of Umaima Alkhamis, Fatima Abdel Hamid, and Sahar Bahrawi, comparing them to their pre-Vision 2030 publications. This analysis aims to illuminate the significant shifts in feminist discourse that have occurred in Saudi Arabia during this transformative period.

### **Feminist Discourse and the Saudi Vision 2030**

Since the introduction of Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom has embarked on a series of transformative reforms in which “[w]omen’s empowerment is central to the nation’s agenda: economically, socially and publicly” (Saudi Vision, 2016, p. 14). These changes have been instrumental in challenging traditional gender norms and increasing women’s participation in various aspects of society. One of the most iconic reforms was the lifting of the ban on women driving in 2018, allowing women a relative space of freedom and independence (McKenzie & Thompson, 2018). This change represented a pivotal moment in Saudi history, symbolizing the Saudi Arabia’s commitment to enhancing women’s mobility and granting them greater autonomy over their daily lives. It also facilitated women’s participation in the workforce by removing a significant barrier to employment (Hvidt, 2018). Saudi women began to occupy high-ranking positions in government and the private sector, contributing to policy changes and reforms (Alessa, 2022; Dojii, 2018). Moreover, Saudi women have gained greater access to educational and employment opportunities in various fields, and their representation in managerial positions has seen a significant increase over the past decade (National Transformation Program, 2021).

The Vision also introduced legal reforms that empower women such as the amendments to guardianship laws which have given women more independence and a relative control over their own lives (Kinninmont, ٢٠١٧). Additionally, there has been an emphasis on promoting women’s leadership roles in various sectors, with women taking on prominent positions in government and industry. These reforms contribute to a more diverse and dynamic workforce, with women playing an increasingly prominent role in the country’s economy (National Transformation Program, 2023). These advancements have not only contributed to women’s financial independence but also challenged societal perceptions about gender roles (Hvidt, 2018). There are ongoing challenges and debates surrounding women’s rights and gender equality in Saudi Arabia, making it a dynamic and evolving space for social change and gender empowerment.

The sweeping reforms initiated under Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia, mainly those concerning women’s rights and empowerment, have been widely reflected in the media, both within the Kingdom and abroad. In Saudi media, there is a growing openness to discuss and portray these reforms (Dojii, 2018). The local press and broadcasters have provided extensive coverage of women participating in various fields, breaking stereotypes, and achieving significant milestones. Internationally, the reforms have generated keen interest and media coverage, with the international community closely watching as Saudi Arabia takes groundbreaking steps toward gender equality (Kinninmont, 2017). The global media has showcased the lifting of the driving ban, the rise of women in managerial positions, and the societal transformations occurring in the Kingdom (Kinninmont, 2017). The media has thus played a crucial role in amplifying and disseminating the impact of these reforms, facilitating discussions, and contributing to an evolving narrative of Saudi Arabia’s progress toward gender empowerment and social change. This attention is paralleled with similar attention in books, research papers and literary production (Dojii, 2018). The nationalist agenda garnered by the Saudi Vision-2030 has been echoed in many poems and poetry books (Foley, 2022; Al-Thaqafi,

2023). It is seen in filmography and drama (El Akkad, 2023). It is, however, indirectly reflected in the novel (Altwaiji et al., 2022). While the nationalistic ideas are not directly investigated or celebrated in the novel, other societal changes are clearly evident in the Vision 2030-era novels. Because of the limited scope of this study, the focus will be only on the feminist discourse and how far it was influenced by the reforms in Saudi Arabia.

Before Vision 2030, the feminist discourse in Saudi Arabia was primarily driven by a small group of activists. These activists often had to rely on social media and international platforms to voice their concerns and demand legal reforms (Al-Dabbagh, 2015; Hoza, 2019). They sought to challenge the existing norms and advocated for women's rights, often in the face of backlash and criticism. Mainly the pre-Vision 2030 feminist discourse was confronting the driving ban, the guardianship system, and the strict gender-segregated structure that restricted women's movement and participation in public life (Dojii, 2018; Meijer, 2010). As explained earlier in the discourse, the introduction of Vision 2030 brought a wave of legal and societal reforms that have significantly transformed the status of women in Saudi Arabia and influenced the Saudi feminist discourse.

The feminist discourse moved from a relatively underground movement to a mainstream conversation after Vision 2030, with "trends in Saudi feminism" becoming a "part of a complex fabric of Saudi political action in the forms of activism, alliances, mobilizations, and within movement moments" (Dojii, 2018, p. 118). However, the term "feminism" or its Arabic equivalent "nasawiyya" is still problematic to the present day. Many women seek a terminology or expression that resonates with their religious convictions while articulating the concept of equality, "something that can describe equality in terms compatible with their religious beliefs without, nonetheless, including the term 'feminism'" (Hoza, 2019, p. 6). Notably, most women seeking gender equality and women rights "do not operate with a feminist or exclusively feminist agenda" mainly because the Arabic term "nasawiyya" is "not widely used, nor is it agreed on by women working on women's issues" (Al-Dabbagh, 2015, p. 235). This avoidance suggests that Saudi women feel little affinity with Western feminism. Yet, its connotations of women's empowerment and gender equality are becoming central themes in the national dialogue, with more Saudi women feeling inspired to speak out about their rights and experiences.

In the realm of literature, earlier feminist discourse often centred on expressing discontent with the status of women and society, occasionally in a provocative manner lacking creative depth and narrative structure (Al Nuami & Bu Falagah, 2017). In the post-9/11 era, the Saudi literary scene witnessed a plethora of novels that used the body as a cultural element to articulate oppression, social issues, and the desire for self-expression and exploration (Al-Refai, 2009). Sometimes shocking, sometimes transcendent, and occasionally hyperrealistic, these novels often serve as "native informant texts for an informationally eager Western readership" (Booth, 2010, p. 154). The focus of this paper does not extend to those novels, as they frequently lack artistic style and heavily rely on an exotic, self-orientalist agenda that many Saudi women readers find tantalizing (Al Nuami & Bu Falagah, 2017).

The transformative reforms in Saudi Arabia since the inception of Vision 2030 have left an indelible mark on the realm of Saudi women's novels. Saudi women novelists have seized this pivotal moment to explore and reflect upon the shifting dynamics of gender roles and women's empowerment in the Kingdom (Al-Matrafi, 2023). In their literary works, one can discern a profound evolution in portraying female characters and the themes they engage with. In what follows, the study will investigate the shifts and evolution of the feminist discourse in six novels by the selected women writers: Alkhamis, Abdel Hamid and Bahrawi. For each

novelist, the study will examine two works, one published prior to Vision 2030 and the other after, to trace the transformation of representation of women characters, the thematic shifts, and the evolution of the feminist discourse in these novels.

### **Umaima Alkhamis's *Albahṛīāt* (*Sea-Wafted Women*, 2006)**

Omaima Alkhamis is one of the feminist female voices in the Saudi novel and has a long history in fiction writing (Alotaibi, 2021). From her debut novel onwards, readers of Omaima Alkhamis can discern her consistent attention to details, particularly in crafting a female voice that articulates its vulnerabilities, desires, and the surplus of its existence. Her novel *Albahṛīāt* 2006, translated into English as *Sea-Wafted Women* (2019), tells the stories of women from the Levant coming either for work or to live and settle in Saudi Arabia. It is set in the mid to late twentieth century, in the midlands of Saudi Arabia, specifically Najd province. It describes a time when women had a simple space of liberty in a male-dominated society. It depicts the lives of these Arab women as well as the Najdi women with all their struggles and hardships during that time—a time marked in the history of Saudi Arabia with the restrictive religious political movement of *Sahwa* (1960s-1980s) also referred to as the religious awakening. Advocating for a conservative religious agenda with primarily political objectives, *Sahwa* represented a pivotal moment in Saudi Arabia's modernization trajectory (Lacroix, 2010). The movement perceived western ideas as a threat, particularly concerning the increased freedom and mobility of women in the West, which contradicted *Sahwa*'s core mission of preserving tradition and resisting change (Arebi, 1994). This religious resurgence significantly impacted Saudi Arabia's social, cultural, and political landscape until it was suppressed by the government in the late 1990s (Haykel et al., 2015).

Alkhamis' novel explores this moment in the history of Saudi Arabia and focuses particularly on women's experience at that time. It chronicles a time in the history of the Arabian Peninsula from a purely female's point of view. It details many changes that occurred in the Saudi way of living in Najd during the sixties and seventies and the impact of those changes on the women at that time. The novel addresses certain events that were the talk of the hour back then, like the objection to female education, the introduction of the Television and the Siege of Makkah of 1979. Also, the novel pictures the speedy transition towards modernity which took place on the back of the oil revenues of the 1970s, during which the country undertook wide-ranging construction programmes which needed "the mobilization of all social resources to fill in the newly developed roles in different fields" (El-Mallakh, 2015, p. 36). This resulted in new job opportunities which have been filled by foreigners or individuals from neighbouring Arab countries. In Alkhamis' novel, we encounter three Arab women: Bahija from Syria, Souad from Lebanon, and Rehab from Palestine. According to the novel, these women are mostly educated and enjoy a degree of liberty that was denied to Saudi women during that time. Coming into Saudi society at that critical moment in history puts these female characters under much pressure. The Najdi women characters criticize them for their "louse praying routine", "transparent face covering" and "overdose of coquetry" (2019, p. 74). However, the Levant women harbored a desire for a distinct experience in a foreign land, resisting feelings of alienation, differentiation, and the adaptation challenges on physical, emotional, and aspirational levels. The obstacles they faced often led to transformations or redirections, accompanied by experiences of dependency and a lack of freedom, perpetuating their ongoing exclusion.

All women characters in *Albahṛīāt* are depicted grappling with a dominative form of patriarchy, which affects both Saudi and other Arab women in the novel. Alkhamis presents women who have no choice but to adapt to patriarchal rule. These women engage in what Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) termed "the patriarchal bargain", where their limited power is gained by

reinforcing men's dominance over others women. In such a case, women can only “negotiate power for themselves at the expense of other women's power” (Zeidan, 1995, p. 144). The women of Al Meabl's household, like Um Slaeh and Moody, are not merely passive victims but are portrayed as strategically adapting to and even perpetuating patriarchal norms in order to secure some degree of power or survival.

Alkhamis expertly weaves feminist discourse into the narrative by portraying the intersection of personal and political struggles faced by women in mid-twentieth-century Saudi Arabia. Through a nuanced exploration of female identity, her novel offers a powerful commentary on the patriarchal constraints that defined women's lives during the *Sahwa* moment. *Albahriyat* is surely not the first novel to depict such a moment in Saudi history—other examples are: Abdul Aziz Al Mesheri's *Saliha*, 1998; Badriyah Albisher's *Habat Al Hal*, 1999. However, it is one of the first novels to include the suffering of other Arab women who were considered a minority in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia back then, and who had to clash with the social norms of the Saudi society at that period in history. Using the experiences of both Najdi and Levantine women, the narrative questions the broader cultural dynamics that shaped women's rights in the region. The novel generally advocates for the rejection of restrictive gender norms and patriarchal rules and calls for the inclusion of other marginalized female voices and experiences.

### **Umaima Alkhamis's *Msra Al-Ghrānīq fī Mudn Al-'qīq* (*The Journey of the Swans in the Cities of Agate*, 2019)**

Umaima Alkhamis embarks on a distinct narrative journey in her latest work, *Msra Al-Ghrānīq fī Mudn Al-'qīq* (2019), which was long-listed for Arabic Booker Prize. This novel marks a departure from the more socially oriented themes of her earlier works, such as *Alwārḥ* (2008), *Zīart Sujā* (2013), and—as examined in this study—*Albahriyat* (2006). *Msra Al-Ghrānīq fī Mudn Al-'qīq* brings to the forefront the character of Mazyad Al Hanafi Al Najdi, whose odyssey spans from Najd, Al Yamamah (the historical name of what now came to be known as Al Riyadh) to destinations as diverse as Baghdad, Jerusalem, Cairo, Morocco, and Andalusia. His quest is rooted in implementing of the seven commandments he has unearthed during his extensive travels. At first glance, the narrative effort appears to be historically grounded, with the narrative pivoting around the realm of Najd, the same setting as Alkhamis's previous novel. A meticulous reading of the place reveals a difference in the novelist's approach to the same setting. Here, Najd is described as a “good country, with crops, udders, and livestock, with full villages, flowing springs, and a blessed countryside” (Alkhamis, 2019, p. 29). While Najd in *Albahriyat* (2006) is depicted as a barren and harsh land in stark contrast to the lush landscapes of the Levantine characters' homeland, such as Damascus or Beirut, which they yearn for incessantly. Najd is further described as a “patriarchal desert” and its women as “nymphs pining for their own husbands” (Alkhamis, 2006, p. 105), which carries in it a heavy gendered and self-orientalist imagery. *Albahriyat* (2006) presents Najd in a way that aligns with orientalist tropes and stereotypes, implying a society where power and authority are predominantly male-held, relegating women to subservient roles.

The self-orientalist language is, surprisingly, absent from Alkhamis's *Msra Al-Ghrānīq fī Mudn Al-'qīq*. This is more evident in the significant departure in her portrayal of women characters. In contrast to her earlier heroines, who often endured oppression, subordination, and exploitation, the female characters in *Msra Al-Ghrānīq* exhibit a remarkable transformation. They emerge as bold, skillful, and possessing strong personalities with unprecedented audacity. Notably, the narrative introduces a wise, scholarly woman figure, Albha'a, whom Mazyd attends in her education circles in Cordoba

to learn from her philosophy and religion (Alkhamis, 2019, p. 549). Other characters, such as Mazyd's wife Alzahrah, insist on accompanying her husband in his journey to seek knowledge mainly because she is "driven by a lust for knowledge" (p. 555). The portrayal of such female characters is an exalted departure from the traditional portrayal of women in Alkhamis's earlier works of fiction. These characters are likely inspired by the achievements of modern Saudi women in the fields of science, knowledge, and success. It represents a unique addition to Saudi literature, symbolizing the evolving role and potential of women in the contemporary world.

The central character of Mazyd, himself, contradicts the stereotype and common perception of someone from the heart of the Arabian Peninsula, Al Yamamah, as an "a' rābī (Bedouin)" or "jāhil (ignorant)" (Alkhamis, 2019, p. 17). He is depicted as an educated bookseller fascinated with world philosophers and thinkers yet carrying in his heart the strong belief in the uniqueness and depth of his culture. It brings to mind the idea of the modern Saudi individual trying to argue for their identity in a world that has previously—and for many years—framed them into a stereotypical monolithic identity that was not at all charming or positive. The framing and stereotyping are represented in the comment that Mazyd receives wherever he goes on his journey. Their concept of the Arabian Bedouin individual is transformed once they know Mazyd's knowledge and intelligence. It is evident in many places in the novel that this idea resonates with the contemporary Saudi cultural landscape, emphasizing the significance of the Arabic language and a proud affiliation with Al Yamamah and Najd region—the heart of the modern Saudi Arabia. This echoes the modern trend in Saudi culture, which places a strong emphasis on roots, homeland, and heritage (Saudi Vision, 2016). Despite the novel's historical setting in the year 402 AH, it distinctly carries the hallmarks of present-day Saudi Arabia.

### **Fatima Abdel Hamid's *Taa Al-Niswa (The Feminine Taa, 2016)***

Fatima Abdel Hamid, who refuses to be identified as a feminist (Alsudair, 2016)<sup>1</sup>, unequivocally incorporates feminist themes into her novel, *Taa Al-Nisūh* (2016). The novel introduces readers to a diverse array of female characters, each unique in her way, but all grappling with limited opportunities and the constraints of a society that upholds conflicting standards regarding women. Abdel Hamid's narrative unfolds in a light-hearted and engaging manner, chronicling the everyday lives of three close friends, Azhar, Raneem, and Ghalia. These characters are young women in their twenties who, due to their inability to secure the necessary qualifications for university education, find themselves compelled to work as saleswomen in a shopping mall with "a salary of 4500 Riyals, one day off a week, one month a year, and a percentage that accompanies the invoices registered in their name" (Abdel Hamid, 2016, p. 16). This decision is primarily influenced by the limited employment prospects available to women in the pre-Vision 2030 period, especially those who have not completed their education.

The story is narrated through the observant eyes of Azhar, who closely monitors the daily activities of the women in the mall, including both the sellers and shoppers. Azhar observes the societal limitations on women's mobility. Women are expected to be accompanied by a male escort whenever they venture outside, even if the escort is younger or less rational,

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<sup>1</sup> Fatima Abdel Hamid's rejection of the "feminist" label (Alsudair, 2016) aligns with the broader discomfort around the term "feminism" or its Arabic equivalent, "nasawiyya". This discomfort is rooted in the cultural and religious context of the Arab world, where the term is often seen as linked to Western ideology and thus incompatible with certain Islamic or traditional values. As Hoza (2019) notes, many women seek language that reflects gender equality but resonates with their religious beliefs, which may explain why Abdel Hamid avoids identifying as a feminist. Despite her disavowal of the feminist label, Abdel Hamid explicitly incorporates feminist themes into most of her novels and fiction.

as is the case of Azhar and her three-years-younger brother Youssef, who reluctantly takes on the role of observer when she assumes her job in the mall. Whenever Youssef needs to go away for his own business, he warns Azhar to “be always alert” for his “sudden unannounced raids on the shopping mall” (Abdel Hamid, 2016, p. 36). Moreover, the women face restrictions due to their inability to drive, leaving them dependent on foreign drivers who, in turn, become guardians and scrutinizers of their actions and morality. For instance, the Pakistani driver, Ghazi, plays this role in Raneem’s life when she secretly requests his assistance to visit a residential building to see her clandestine lover, only for Ghazi to eventually expose her.

Beneath the comic and satirical veneer through which these realities are portrayed, Abdel Hamid’s feminist voice resounds throughout the narrative. The novel comprehensively addresses critical topics central to the ongoing feminist discourse in Saudi society. It delves into issues such as child marriage, traditional arranged marriage, the male guardianship system, travel restrictions imposed on women, regulations concerning the abaya and veil, and women’s rights to divorce and child custody. Her writing illuminates the challenges and injustices women face, subtly exposing the societal norms that restrict their opportunities and freedom, perpetuating gender-based disparities. The characters and events in the novel serve as a lens through which these feminist themes come into focus, shedding light on the complex and multifaceted experiences of women in a moment in history marked by contradictions and limitations.

#### **Fatima Abdel Hamid’s *Al’ufug Al’ala* (*The Highest Horizon*, 2022)**

In her latest novel, *Al’ufug Al’ala* (2022), short-listed for the Arab Booker Prize in 2022, Abdel Hamid diverges from her previous work by shedding light on the life experience of men. The narrative centers around Suleiman, the protagonist, who was wed at the tender age of 13 to a woman of 24 years to preserve the family lineage. Through Suleiman’s journey, the novel examines the injustices he endures, particularly at the hands of his mother, who prioritizes family’s name and her ambitions over his well-being. Suleiman’s wife, Nabila, yields to his mother’s wishes despite her reservations, driven by societal pressures stemming from her perceived physical imperfections. This unconventional marriage dynamic profoundly shapes Suleiman’s psyche. As he navigates life in his fifties, following the loss of both his wife and mother, he grapples with newfound solitude and uncertainty: “They wanted him to be a man when he was thirteen, but today, in his early fifties, he wants to be a child” (Abdel Hamid, 2022, p. 201).

*Al’ufug Al’ala* stands out distinctly from Abdel Hamid’s previous novel’s themes, characterization, and style. The novel employs an unconventional narrator voice: Death. This choice diverges from traditional narrative perspectives and serves multiple purposes. Death, being a universal concept transcending gender, acts as a neutral and impartial observer, facilitating a more objective and detached narrative perspective. By opting for a non-gendered narrator like Death, the author seemingly aims to subvert “dominant rhetorical practices” (Weldt-Basson, 2006, p. 62), avoiding the reproduction of the gendered structures prevalent in traditional storytelling. This approach allows the author to comment on the story without being limited by the biases or subjectivity associated with a specific gender. It appears to be a deliberate effort to subvert gendered narratives that may perpetuate stereotypes or expectations. Additionally, it allows for a broader exploration of characters and themes, unconstrained by the limitations of a male or female perspective.

According to the Riyadh Review (2022), Sulaiman’s character offers a contrasting image to the stereotypical portrayal of the dominant Arab male. Unlike the conventional portrayal of Arab men as assertive and commanding figures, Sulaiman’s character challenges this



stereotype by embodying qualities and experiences that diverge from the norm. Through Sulaiman's narrative arc, the novel provides a nuanced exploration of masculinity, highlighting vulnerabilities, dependencies, and complexities often overlooked in traditional representations of Saudi Arabian masculinity. This portrayal not only adds depth and dimension to the character but also contributes to a broader reevaluation of societal expectations and norms regarding gender roles in contemporary Saudi culture.

Abdel Hamid's novel challenges conventional perceptions of male dominance by portraying powerful and dominant female characters who influence the destinies of male characters. This narrative contradicts the prevalent portrayal of women as oppressed and victimized, introducing an unconventional character: the oppressed Saudi man devoid of agency. The purpose of this unconventional portrayal may be to challenge the systemic accusation that society conspires against women, marginalizing and disempowering them. The novel suggests that such experiences are not limited to one gender or culture. Moreover, it underscores that women are not always depicted as weak and excluded, nor are they always depicted as inherently virtuous. This distinct portrayal has become more prevalent in novels published after the Vision 2030 moment, signaling a significant departure from the literary traditions of authors like Abdel Hamid and other Saudi women writers. This shift reflects evolving societal perspectives and a reevaluation of gender dynamics in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

#### **Sahar Bahrawi's *Sajīn Aljasad (Prisoner of the Body, 2014)***

Sahar Bahrawi's debut novel, *Sajīn Aljasad* (2014), was nominated for the Katara Prize for Arabic Novels in 2014. It prominently features a controversial gender identity. At its core is the story of Omran, a young individual born with an ambiguous gender identity, who has lived his life as a woman named Rolla. At the age of thirty, Omran makes the courageous decision to undergo gender-affirming surgery, transitioning to his true gender identity as a man. This transformative journey exposes Omran to the harsh realities of societal stigma surrounding gender nonconformity. As Omran embarks on his journey of self-realization, he encounters resistance and rejection from his family, friends, and the wider community. Despite the support of his mother and psychiatrist, the path to legitimizing his gender identity is fraught with obstacles. Omran's struggles extend beyond the realm of gender identity as he faces challenges in obtaining Saudi citizenship due to his status as the son of a Saudi mother and a non-Saudi father. Saudi Arabia follows a patrilineal system of nationality, where citizenship is inherited through the father. A child born to a Saudi mother and a non-Saudi father does not automatically receive Saudi citizenship. This policy has historically created difficulties for children in mixed-nationality families, particularly those of Saudi mothers, as they often struggle to obtain full legal rights in Saudi Arabia. This denial of national identity exacerbates Omran's internal turmoil and external conflicts, amplifying feelings of alienation and social exclusion.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, the novel discusses Omran's quest for economic stability and how it is hindered by the limited opportunities available to non-citizen residents in Saudi Arabia, with high-paying governmental jobs reserved exclusively for Saudi citizens. This financial dependency on his Saudi relatives adds another layer of complexity to his journey towards self-actualization.

*Sajīn Aljasad* explores the complex realm of gender identity, presenting a provocative narrative that challenges societal norms. Through Omran's story, Bahrawi skilfully critiques societal norms and regulations, in relation to citizenship rights and the treatment of individuals

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<sup>2</sup> While there have been some recent legal reforms, such as granting Saudi women the right to sponsor their children for residency (2013), these children still face barriers in obtaining full citizenship rights, including access to certain jobs, social services, and economic benefits reserved for citizens (Al-Dabbagh, 2015).

who deviate from normative gender identity. The novel sheds light on the struggles faced by those who defy societal expectations, offering a poignant exploration of belonging and acceptance in Saudi society. Bahrawi's work is a compelling portrayal of the enduring influence of cultural customs and oppressive traditional rules. By highlighting gender issues, through Omran's story, the novel underscores a powerful feminist perspective, advocating for greater inclusivity and acceptance within society.

### **Sahar Bahrawi's *Hamsāt Merāh* (*Whispers of a Mirror*, 2021)**

*Hamsāt Merāh*, 2021, is Bahrawi's latest novel through which she explores the challenges faced by women dealing with breast cancer. Unlike the protagonist depicted in Bahrawi's previous works, who grapple with issues of identity and societal oppression, the protagonist in this novel is portrayed as a free, independent individual who succeeds in "realizing the equation of the successful woman in all aspects of life" (Bahrawi, 2021, p. 358). The narrator, who works as a writer, confronts the burdens of success and perfectionism, constantly striving for achievement in every aspect of her life. Her endeavors are consuming her time and effort, as she laments, "in a remarkably short period, I released my second novel and succeeded in writing and directing my play. However, my liberation became tainted, as ambition and perseverance continued to enslave me" (p. 11). The novel commences in London, where the writer spends her summer vacation with her mother and sister, freely navigating between the bustling city and their home city, Jeddah. This comfort level is striking and departs from previous depictions of women in Bahrawi's other novels, *Sajīn Aljasad* (2014) or *Amenah* (2017).

Furthermore, the narrator's journey with the disease is characterized by unprecedented courage, self-awareness, and solidarity: "I am not the first woman afflicted by cancer, nor will I be the last. Whether the smooth bald head or the short hair, which may take time to grow back again, will ever be symbols of beauty in our society doesn't matter anymore, because they have certainly become so to me" (p. 294). The unwavering support from her mother, daughter, and female friends stand in stark contrast to the notion of women being seen as the main adversaries to other women or carriers of the "patriarchal bargain" (Kandiyoti, 1988), as seen in the previous novels such as Alkhamis' *Albahriāt* (2006). Moreover, the novel features modern educated Saudi male characters like Sahar's husband, father, brother, and uncle, who offer unwavering support to the protagonist throughout her battle with the disease. Both male and female characters in the novel are portrayed in a remarkably consistent manner, reflecting the lived experiences of contemporary individuals in Saudi Arabia. The heroine's journey through treatment is meticulously documented in the novel, making her the voice of all women who have faced this disease. She also represents the voices of contemporary successful Saudi women who exhibit limitless determination and willpower in their pursuits.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the emergence of Saudi women's novels as powerful reflections of the significant social and cultural transformations driven by the Vision 2030 plan, particularly in terms of feminist discourse. Comparing pre-Vision 2030 Saudi women's novels to contemporary ones, the analysis identifies various thematic changes, character portrayals, and narrative strategies that signal a shift in the feminist discourse. These novels now encompass a broader spectrum of experiences within Saudi society, exploring the multifaceted aspects of the Saudi individual and the evolving Saudi society, addressing themes like empowerment, identity, and the interplay of gender with other dimensions of identity.

The Saudi women's novels selected for this study have undergone significant evolution, shifting from a predominantly female-centered, self-orientalist style that once characterized women's writing. In the Vision 2030 literary era, the Saudi women novelist have diversified their feminist discourse, exploring a wider range of topics, styles, and character development, while embracing broader perspectives. Notably, recent women-empowerment initiatives have led to a departure from prevalent themes of pain, lamentation, and complaint within women's literary works. Contemporary narratives often feature strong female protagonists who assert their independence. Themes such as mobility, employment, independence, and equality have become recurring motifs. The thematic and narrative analysis conducted in this study has provided insights into the evolving landscape of feminism and women's rights in Saudi Arabia, highlighting the instrumental role of literature as both a mirror to society and a catalyst for change. As Vision 2030 endeavours to chart a course towards gender equality and women's empowerment, Saudi women authors are at the forefront translating these reforms and aspirations into powerful narratives. Their novels transcend literary expressions; they are vital contributions to the ongoing dialogue on women's rights and gender equality in the region, offering readers a deeper understanding of the multifaceted journey of Saudi women during a period of profound social and cultural change. However, due to the limited scope of this study, the analysis is primarily based on a selected corpus of novels by three authors, which may not fully represent the true diversity of feminist discourse within Saudi women's literature. Future research could explore a wider range of authors and texts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the evolving landscape of feminist discourse in Saudi Arabia. Additionally, examining the reception and impact of these novels on Saudi society would offer valuable insights into the influence of literature on social change.

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## رواية المرأة السعودية وتحولات الخطاب النسوي في ضوء رؤية ٢٠٣٠

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**المستخلص.** شهدت المملكة العربية السعودية تحولات اجتماعية وثقافية عميقة، مدفوعة بالأهداف الطموحة لمبادرة رؤية ٢٠٣٠. وقد أسهمت مبادرات تمكين المرأة المتنوعة منذ إطلاق الرؤية عام ٢٠١٧ في إحداث تغيير ملحوظ في الأعراف الاجتماعية، مما أتاح فرصا واسعة للمرأة السعودية في التعليم وسوق العمل والأدوار القيادية، وأعاد تشكيل وضعها ومساهمتها داخل المجتمع. وقد برزت روايات المرأة السعودية كتعبيرات ديناميكية عن التحول المجتمعي ضمن هذا المشهد المتطور. وتبحث هذه الورقة العلمية في التحولات الواضحة ضمن الخطاب النسوي في روايات المرأة السعودية المنشورة خلال حقبة رؤية ٢٠٣٠، من خلال ستة أعمال روائية لثلاث كاتبات سعوديات: أميمة الخميس، فاطمة عبد الحميد، وسحر بحراني. يقارن البحث بين روايات الكاتبات التي نشرت قبل إعلان رؤية ٢٠٣٠ وأخرى كتبت بعد إعلان الرؤية. كما تبحث هذه الدراسة من خلال قراءة هذه الأعمال الأدبية المختارة، في كيفية تصوير هذه الروايات للنوع الاجتماعي والعادات والتقاليد والتحولات المجتمعية. وتحدد هذه الدراسة التغيرات الموضوعية وتصوير الشخصيات وتطور الاستراتيجيات السردية في رواية المرأة السعودية والتي تعكس تحولا واضحا في الخطاب النسوي السعودي. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، تضع هذه الورقة تلك الأعمال الأدبية في سياق التغيرات المجتمعية الأوسع ومبادرات المساواة بين الجنسين الجارية في المملكة العربية السعودية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الخطاب النسوي، الرواية السعودية، رؤية ٢٠٣٠، المرأة السعودية.