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**LISTENING TO SAUDI WOMEN'S VOICES IN THEIR LIFE  
WRITING**

By

**Mona Muslih Alharbi**

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminology  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada  
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May 8, 2019

## **DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY**

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone's copyright nor violate any proprietary rights and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices. Furthermore, to the extent that I have included copyrighted material that surpasses the bounds of fair dealing within the meaning of the Canada Copyright Act, I certify that I have obtained a written permission from the copyright owner(s) to include such material(s) in my thesis and have included copies of such copyright clearances to my appendix.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis relies on feminist and postcolonial theory, to explore through life writing: *I Tear the Burqa ... I See*, by Huda Al-Daghfaq (2011); *Memoirs of a Saudi Woman*, by Samia Al-Amoudi (2015); *Past, Single, Masculine*, by Omaima Al-Khamis (2011); and *Daring to Drive: A Saudi Woman's Awakening*, by Manal Al-Sharif (2017) how Saudi women constructed themselves and deployed their right to speak. I explore the narratives that they employed to justify their writing and their perspectives and the different types of authority they used to give themselves the right to speak out. Through these texts, I argue that Orientalist discourse is not simply internalized; rather, these women positioned themselves in and used Orientalist framework to interpret or make claims to speak. In doing so, they reproduce Orientalism but also reframes it.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY</i> .....	<i>iii</i>
<i>ABSTRACT</i> .....	<i>iv</i>
<i>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</i> .....	<i>v</i>
<i>CHAPTER ONE</i> .....	<i>1</i>
<i>INTRODUCTION</i> .....	<i>1</i>
<i>LITERATURE REVIEW</i> .....	<i>5</i>
<i>POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF SAUDI ARABIA</i> .....	<i>5</i>
<i>WHY STUDY SAUDI WOMEN’S LIFE WRITING</i> .....	<i>7</i>
<i>DISMISSING WOMEN’S WRITING</i> .....	<i>8</i>
<i>HISTORICAL VIEW OF WOMEN’S WRITING IN SAUDI ARABIA</i> .....	<i>10</i>
<i>AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN ARABIC LITERATURE: DEFINING THE PROBLEM</i> .....	<i>11</i>
<i>INTRODUCTION TO COLONIAL DISCOURSE</i> .....	<i>14</i>
<i>INTERNALIZED ORIENTALISM</i> .....	<i>16</i>
<i>WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND RESCUING MAJORITY WORLD WOMEN</i> .....	<i>17</i>
<i>SUBALTERN STUDIES AND PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE</i> .....	<i>18</i>
<i>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</i> .....	<i>21</i>
<i>TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM</i> .....	<i>21</i>
<i>METHODOLOGY</i> .....	<i>23</i>
<i>RESEARCH QUESTIONS</i> .....	<i>26</i>
<i>CHAPTER TWO</i> .....	<i>28</i>
<i>SITUATING SAUDI WOMEN’S WRITING</i> .....	<i>28</i>
<i>LITERATURE AND THE IMAGE OF THE SAUDI STATE</i> .....	<i>28</i>
<i>SAUDI NATIONALISM</i> .....	<i>34</i>
<i>THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT’S REFORM DISCOURSE</i> .....	<i>36</i>
<i>SAUDI CULTURE WARS</i> .....	<i>37</i>
<i>JUHAYMAN’S MOVEMENT</i> .....	<i>39</i>
<i>CHAPTER THREE</i> .....	<i>43</i>
<i>INTRODUCING SAUDI WOMEN WRITERS AND THEIR TEXTS</i> .....	<i>43</i>
<i>UMAIMA ABDULLAH AL-KHAMIS</i> .....	<i>43</i>
<i>SAMIA AL-AMOUDI</i> .....	<i>51</i>

<i>MANALAL-SHARIF</i> .....	55
<i>HUDA AL-DAGHFAQ</i> .....	58
<i>RECEPTION OF AL-DAGHFAQ'S WORK</i> .....	66
<i>CONCLUSION</i> .....	67
<i>CHAPTER FOUR</i> .....	69
<i>ANALYSIS OF COMMON THEMES ACROSS FOUR AUTOBIOGRAPHIES</i> .....	69
<i>IMAGES OF CONSERVATIVE SOCIETY</i> .....	69
<i>THE IMAGE OF THE VEIL</i> .....	71
<i>THE DILEMMA OF GENDER SEGREGATION</i> .....	75
<i>UNDERSTANDING SAUDI WOMEN'S AGENCY, REPRESENTATION, AND RESISTANCE</i> ...	82
<i>THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SAUDI WOMEN'S LIFE WRITING</i> .....	84
<i>THE PROBLEMS OF A LIBERAL/WESTERN FEMINIST FRAMEWORK FOR READING THE OPPRESSION AGAINST WOMEN</i> .....	85
<i>LIBERAL FEMINIST FRAMEWORK AND HOMOGENOUS IMAGE</i> .....	87
<i>READING THE OPPRESSION AGAINST WOMEN</i> .....	89
<i>INTERNALIZED ORIENTALISM</i> .....	90
<i>CONCLUSION</i> .....	91
<i>REFERENCES</i> .....	94
<i>VITAAUCTORIS</i> .....	103



## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Since 2000, women's positions in Saudi society have been targeted by global media and social and political studies for several reasons. One reason for this targeting is that the Saudi government signed several international conventions, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), as well as the Millennium Development Goals, in the year 2000. In addition, the global impact of the 9/11 terrorist attacks put Arab and Muslim women's issues under a global microscope, which led to a focus on certain narratives that frame Muslim women as victims of a sexist and misogynist culture. However, for Saudi women, the focus has been on a different narrative: successful Saudi women who promote the image of a supportive Saudi government. This image corresponds with the government's international propaganda, which ignores the state's discriminatory policies and instead depicts Saudi Arabia as a moderate Islamic country where women are challenging the oppressive conservative/Wahhabi/nomad culture. Thus, Saudi women's experiences and identities are portrayed in a limited and simplistic way. This image does not necessarily reflect the reality of Saudi women's lives, but it has nevertheless been promoted, both within Saudi society and abroad, through a variety of media, including academic studies, ethnographies, autobiographies, novels, movies, and the press.

Although many social studies published since 2000 have focused on Saudi women's lives, these studies have failed to analyze the sociopolitical context of Saudi society. Feminist studies, for example, have focused on basic rights, such as women's rights to drive, obtain passports, travel without permission, and confer citizenship to their children (Algahtani, 2012; Baki, 2004; Doumato, 2000; Hamdan, 2005; Le Renard, 2014). However, studies from both within and outside of Saudi Arabia have failed to question the origins of the shift in gender equality in Saudi Arabia,

and have instead blamed culture, tradition, and/or religion namely the Awakening movement for the degradation of empowered women in Saudi society, effectively demonizing a particular group of individuals by promoting misunderstanding or ignorance of certain cultural contexts.

As a Saudi woman who has lived both within and outside of Saudi Arabia, I am able to examine the issue from different political perspectives and recognize how the issue of gender equality has become polarized within both Western and Saudi discourse. Because I have lived under, and am familiar with, the recent social conditions and changes that have occurred within Saudi Arabia. I have also studied at gender-segregated schools, such as King Abdulaziz University. Upon earning my bachelor's degree in sociology and social work in 2013, I immediately began working for several non-profit organizations run by Saudi women. A year later, I was hired as a social worker with King Abdulaziz University Hospital, where a Saudi woman served as the manager of a social work department that included both male and female employees. Moreover, I have had several experiences working with intellectual Saudi women, including an experience where I worked on a draft of the Personal Status Laws of the Gulf Arab States, with the goal of changing some articles of Saudi law that affect women's rights. That particular project was based on an Islamic feminism framework, through which we worked on religious interpretations that supported our feminist viewpoint in order to change some legal articles that did not exist in other Arab nations.

In 2015, I decided to study abroad, along with many other Saudi women, at a non-gender-segregated institution of higher learning. Throughout my experiences in private and public spaces, both within and outside of Saudi Arabia, I have observed that women's experiences in private spaces are less likely to hinder their agency and development, whereas their experiences in public spaces can impede both. The interaction between these spaces compels Saudi women to evaluate

the personal choices they have made as well as the stereotypes associated with these choices. For example, when deciding where, when, and how to wear the hijab, I observed that Saudi women tend to make these choices for a variety of reasons. In this way, my cultural and experiential knowledge has given me greater insight, while my academic knowledge has allowed me to speak in a way that is more invested in ensuring that Saudi women are not reproduced as caricatures. Thus, my position as a Saudi woman lends credence to my ability to validate Saudi women's voices and incorporate them into academic knowledge. Moreover, a Saudi woman-centred analysis and study of Saudi women's experiences and voices has the potential to counter misrepresentations both within and outside of Saudi Arabia, which may prove particularly beneficial when analyzing Saudi women's autobiographies as there is currently a lack of criticism of such works in English, and the criticism that does exist in the Arabic world comes almost exclusively from a male perspective.

A Saudi woman-centred analysis has the potential to make a significant contribution to the field of sociology, specifically with respect to women's studies and the understanding of Arab Muslim women as Majority World women<sup>1</sup>. Because Saudi women's life writing has been under-researched and there is a need for further investigation, this study aims to listen to, validate, and plan to incorporate Saudi women's voices into the larger cultural narrative of Saudi Arabia incorporate women's voices regarding their own experiences with life writing in order to determine what they are experiencing and how they experience their own lives from their own individual perspectives. Saudi women's autobiographies and life writing can reveal women's agency and demonstrate how they interpret the social and cultural changes occurring within their society,

<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to use the terms Majority World women rather than Third World women, Eastern rather than non-Western, and non-Eastern rather than Western. By using these terms, I am highlighting the fact that the majority of the world's women are not western and they come from very different backgrounds.

which can help us to better understand the status and lives of Saudi women simply by listening to them and acknowledging their social and political context.

The current study focuses on Saudi women's voices and their experiences in private and public spaces, where they are advancing their roles and agency within the constraints of several different discourses, such as liberal politics, religion, nationalism, and modernity. This study will also explore how Saudi women have challenged the limited and ignorant global presumptions about their lives inside Saudi Arabia and will examine Saudi women's autobiographies beyond the Western and male perspectives. The theoretical framework of postcolonial/transnational feminism will explain the importance of allowing women to speak and to be heard and understood within the sociopolitical and historical circumstances under which they live. Additionally, this framework questions the sociopolitical and historical circumstances relative to Orientalism, legacies of Western imperialism, and postcolonial development of the world order of nation-states.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While many people in the West assume that, as a class, Saudi women are docile, silent, obedient, and subject to oppression, the proliferation of literary output from Saudi women since the 1960s has challenged this misconception. Al-Rasheed (2013), who documented the vital impact of Saudi women's writing since the late 1960s, notes that Saudi women use various types of literature, including novels, poems, letters, personal and creative testimonies, press interviews, essays, short stories, biographies, and autobiographies, in order to raise their voices and change their reality (Al-Ghamdi, 2017; Al-Rasheed, 2013). Al-Ghadeer (2018) affirms that Saudi women, both in Western and local discourse, have become the heroines of dramatic work and argues that both discourses have reduced the variety of representations and experiences of Saudi women to a homogeneous group who share the same standards of suffering, the same class, and almost the same experiences. Thus, in order to dismantle these misrepresentations and their social implications, it is necessary to first understand the development of Saudi Arabia as a nation, and then to appreciate the historical context of women's writing in Saudi Arabia, in order to identify distinguished publications, explore the context within which they were written, and determine how they were published, and then to examine what Saudi women are able to express and accomplish through their writing.

### **Political, Economic, and Social Development of Saudi Arabia**

Saudi Arabia is one of the most influential countries in the Arab world because of its political, geographic, and economic position. Al-Munajjed (1997) explains that Saudi Arabia is home to the two holy cities—Mecca and Medina—where Islam was introduced at the end of the sixth century by the Prophet Muhammad. Globally, Mecca and Medina are considered holy places for one

billion Muslims, which has given Saudi Arabia religious importance of Saudi Arabia within the Islamic world and bolstered Saudi involvement in international relations with Arab and Muslim countries (Al-Munajjed, 1997, p. 1).

The Saudi population is currently 31 million people, a third of whom are foreign workers. The population is geographically distributed across 13 administrative regions (Demographic Survey, 2016). Diversity is the main character of these 13 regions. The minorities, because of their topography, differ from the mountains of the south to the northern Nefud desert. Thus, they have a broad range of cultures and traditions because they belong to different ethnicities (Montagu, 2015). The religion of the diverse regions of Saudi Arabia includes Sunni Islam. The Shia population in the Eastern Province is estimated to be about 1.5–2.5 million. The Ismaili community resides in the south (Montagu, 2015). Females make up 49% of Saudi citizens and 43% of all residents of Saudi Arabia (Demography Survey, 2016). In 2013, the total adult literacy rate of 94.43% was recorded, the male and the female literacy rate were 96.53% and 91.37%, respectively (countryeconomy,2019). The statistics from the Saudi Ministry of Education revealed that more Saudi women are studying in universities than men. Saudi women constitute 51.8% of Saudi university students. For example, the number of women in bachelor degree programs is 551,000 compared to 513,000 men(Alarabiya, 2015). Also, in 2014, Saudi women who were studying abroad (in 57 countries) were 35,537 (Alarabiya, 2015). The government statistics show that 28% of Saudi households are financially dependent on women (Nazif, 2017).

According to Alshaqir (2017), Saudi society has been subjected to four waves of value changes over the past 40 years. The first of these waves occurred as a result of the economic boom

in 1970, which quickly made the middle-class wealthy and forced the society as a whole to rapidly and comprehensively reinterpret its values and traditions. The Islamic Awakening in 1979 was a period when values were again reinterpreted quickly and comprehensively; this was followed by a period of economic recession, brought about by a sharp decline in the price of oil. Finally, the second Gulf War in 2003 brought about rapid advances in technology and methods of communication. Through each of these waves, Alshaqir (2017) claims, the Saudi community adapted by reinterpreting its values and giving new meaning to life and to the world (Alshaqir, 2017).

### **Why Study Saudi Women's Life Writing**

This study focuses on Saudi women's writing because, as Perkins (2000) claims, women's life writing offers two important things: it gives writers a chance to present their perspectives of their individual experiences, and it gives them the opportunity to "reinvent themselves against their own (and others') memories of the past" (p. xvi). Likewise, Harlow (1998) states that the importance of Majority World women's life writing lies in the representations of the social and political struggles in these countries, and that such stories defy Western ideological assumptions that articulate Majority World women's issues. Additionally, Makdisi (2007) asserts the importance of Arab women's life writing as it relates to misrepresentations by others, which have reduced Arab women to a homogenous group or problem. This type of writing does not reflect the actual lives of women who live in the shadows and who might highlight completely different issues. The truth is that many—though not all—of the books written in English about Arab women come from assumptions of racial or cultural misunderstanding (Makdisi, 2007).

Arab women's life writing can describe cultural changes that occur in everyday life, which are themselves aspects of politics. Politics and culture are also a reflection of power structures. The changes in power structures brought about by imperial invasion, colonization, war, and

revolution, or through more profound means, such as the development of schools and universities, and knowledge, also happen in everyday life. These everyday changes may be brought about by personal choices that are as commonplace as the language women speak, the clothes they wear, the beauty ideals they adopt, the songs they sing, and the dances they perform, and can also include important life events, such as marriage and death, and the customs associated with each. All of these things reflect the experiences of women, who provide the majority of cultural content. Thus, studying the lives of ordinary women is a way to recognize their social lives and cultures. Such studies illustrate how women function as creators of culture and as key participants in their cultural history and demonstrate that women are fully aware of the historical transformations that have occurred within the structure of power and the resulting modifications to their and their families' lives (Makdisi, 2007).

### **Dismissing Women's Writing**

Anderson and Jack (1991) explain how the discussion of women's lives combines two conflicting perspectives,

one framed in concepts and values that reflect men's dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of women's personal experience. Where their experience does not fit dominant meanings, alternative concepts may not readily be available. (p. 11)

Anderson and Jack (1991) argue that women often silence their own opinions and feelings while they are describing their lives in order to fit "the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conversations" (p. 11). They also emphasize the need to hear women's voices and explore their unique experiences and perspectives, as well as how women "give meaning to actions, things, and events, whether [autobiographies] allow women to explore



‘unwomanly’ feeling and behaviours, and whether they encourage women to explain what they mean in their own terms” (Anderson & Jack, 1991, p. 17).

McClure (2008) highlights the fact that, even though many consecutive generations of women have valued the importance of “documenting their experiences and asserting their presence, both physically and symbolically on the cultural scene,” (p.150) the early generations of women writers could not evade the social and cultural confusions and traps that ushered women’s entry “into the public sphere, where they were entangled in the dichotomies of concealment/confession and appearance/disappearance” (p. 150). Therefore, we can interpret women’s writing as a way of resisting different forms of marginalization and “forced concealment that women have endured” (McClure, 2008, p. 150). Similarly, Al-Hassan (2003) argues that when women write about themselves, it is often considered “private” and about domestic matters, whereas male writers are more invested in “public” space and in political issues. Al-Hassan (2003) questions what we consider “private” versus “public,” whether women’s writing is different from men’s writing, and whether it can reflect women's agency to express their own culture (p. xi). This analysis essentially points out that women’s writing has been dismissed and perceived as less important than men’s writing, and that female writers have been perceived as less capable than male writers. Not only is women’s writing dismissed, but women are not even considered people who are capable of producing knowledge.

Both Anderson and Jack (1991) and McClure (2008) raise questions about how some of these women’s texts employ the liberal framework and dominant western narrative which frame Saudi women's lives and experiences, including their rights. Through the liberal feminist lens, all women are struggling and have hardships because of the oppressive patriarchy system. Therefore, those liberal women who can represent themselves as actors and speaking subjects are able to

empower other women. Female writers from Saudi Arabia claim to be liberal feminists, focusing on women's social rights, liberation, and, in particular, empowering women in general. They focus on the issues of women driving and being in public places with men. However, these writers also draw on their Islamic and national background and knowledges as they critique, challenge, and question women's conditions. Their voice is thus articulated through the integration of liberalism and Islamic feminism that is also inflected by Orientalism, as I will explain more later.

### **HISTORICAL VIEW OF WOMEN'S WRITING IN SAUDI ARABIA**

McClure (2008) argues that women's writing in the Arabian Peninsula began in the 1950s or early 1960s and suggests two factors that may have precipitated the increase in women's writing: the opening of girls' schools and the influence of news media, through which women began to publish their short stories. However, women's experiences in Saudi Arabia differ from the experiences of women in other Gulf countries; in Saudi Arabia, women had opportunities to publish their writing before the official spread of education as some areas of the country offered primary schools for girls. Additionally, some women were educated privately in their homes, as was the case for Sultana al-Sudairi. Arebi (1994) notes that some cities in Saudi Arabia offered private schools for girls, such as Al-Nassif and Al-Jamjoom in Jeddah; additional schools were opened in Mecca, Medina, and AL Riyadh. In the early 1950s, some wealthy families sent their daughters to Arabic schools in other countries outside of Saudi Arabia, such as Egypt, Lebanon, or Iraq (Arebi, 1994; McClure, 2008). However, in the 1960s, when formal female education was introduced, there was public disquiet around the possibility of such education having a Westernizing effect on the girls, and that this Westernization may affect their morality (Arebi, 1994).

Generally speaking, the Saudi press began to publish women's writing with some frequency in the 1960s and even dedicated a page in each newspaper to include women's stories,

poetry, and literary essays, even though many of these female writers were beginners who had not completed secondary or high school. At the time, Saudi women's writing was not confined only to the Saudi press and began to emerge in publications in other countries within the region (McClure, 2008).

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHY IN ARABIC LITERATURE: DEFINING THE PROBLEM**

Jayyusi (1988) considers autobiography a "desire to resurrect the past" and suggests that this is a nostalgic way for someone to explore the time and place of their childhood and youth (p. 31). Although autobiography was known as a literary genre in ancient Arabic literature over a thousand years ago, until recently, the genre was exclusively male (Al-Ghamdi, 2017). According to Amal Al-Tamimi (2005), the trend toward writing women's autobiographies began in the early twentieth century, in the form of personal articles. However, women's autobiographies only became common in the 1950s and did not reach maturity until the 1980s (Al-Tamimi, 2005). McClure (2008) adds that, in Arab women's literature, there is a lack of autobiographical representation and, where this representation does exist, it exists in very small numbers. However, significant attempts have been made to increase women's literary representation, including the publication of Fadwa Tuqan's autobiography, which documents her life in Palestine over seven decades in the twentieth century, and Najmiya Hikmat's autobiography, which was the first by a Jordanian woman. Hikmat's autobiography describes her dream to be able to read and write, which she argues should not be neglected.

Al-Ghamdi (2013), Al-Tamimi (2005), and Almuqbi (2014) all recognize the problematic nature of defining autobiography within the context of Arabic literature. They agree that autobiography is characterized by chaos within the realm of Arabic literature because there are no confines through which to distinguish autobiography from other literary genres, such as memoirs and diaries. Al-Ghamdi (2017) outlines the historical contribution of Saudi women's

autobiographies from the first attempt made by Sultana al-Sudairi in 1989; it appears that al-Sudairi did not succeed because her family forced her to quit her writing career. Her autobiography was serialized in the newspaper, *Al Yamamah*, under the title, “Memoirs of a Saudi Woman.” Umaima Al-Khamis’s autobiography, *Past, Single, Masculine*, Huda Al-Daghfaq’s autobiography, and other women’s autobiographies were also initially serialized in newspapers.

Al-Ghamdi (2017) claims that the only explicitly female autobiography was published in 2010, when Laila al-Juhani published *40 in the Meaning that I Grow*. Al-Ghamdi (2017) attributes the rapid emergence of Saudi women’s autobiographies to the improvement of social conditions that had previously restricted women and that now gave Saudi women relative freedom to write about their lives and reveal their potential, helping them to secure recognition within this literary genre.

Almuqbil (2014), who studies women’s autobiographies through the field of narratology, classifies some of these autobiographies as memoirs, such as *On the Banks of Hyde Park Lake:*

*Memoirs of a Saudi Student in Britain*, by Maram Mekkawi. Some he considers partial autobiographies, such as Al-Khamis’s *Past, Single, Masculine* and Al-Daghfaq’s *I Tear the Burqa... I See Others* he classifies as “self-drawings,” such as Al-Jehani’s *40 in the Meaning that I Grow*. However, he agrees that each of these sub-genres are branches of the same ambiguous tree of autobiography.

Almuqbil (2014) analyzes analyzes these partial autobiographies, memoirs, and ‘self-drawings’ as a genre, asking whether the writer acknowledges her work as existing under one of the autobiographical narrative branches[.] Was she afraid to declare or express this, so that her writings cannot be classified as narrative literature? Did she intend to write her autobiography, but she made a mistake in classifying it under the nearest branch of the autobiographical narratives? (p. 2)

Almuqbil (2014) questions whether Saudi women have the strength to write comprehensive and complete autobiographies or whether “they are satisfied with trying disclosure and trying themselves in this field” (p. 2). McClure (2008), however, agrees with Paul deMan’s perspective that “every type of writing is some form of autobiography” (p. 150). Consequently, extending the concept of autobiography would allow works which are categorized as memoirs, diaries, letters, autobiographies, biographies, and autobiographical fiction to be included in discourses on autobiography.

Few studies have examined Saudi women’s autobiographies, with some exceptions. For example, Almuqbil (2014) and Al-Ghamdi (2017) study women’s experiences by examining their autobiographies; however, they only pay slight attention to the issues of problematizing and contextualizing Saudi women’s lives. Several studies conducted by Arab, such as those by Al-Tamimi (2005) and Al-Hassan (2003), have read Arabic women’s autobiographies from a sociological perspective. Al-Tamimi (2005) divides her study into two parts: a historical study that examines the phenomenon of women who write autobiographies, and an analytical study that adopts a descriptive, analytical method through which she monitors the literary phenomenon and evaluates the data using criteria set out by literary criticism. She focuses on the reasons for the absence of women’s autobiography in modern Arabic literature and discusses the religious, cultural, social, and political factors for this absence. She likewise questions the lack of critical attention paid to women’s autobiographical writing in contemporary literary criticism and addresses the reasons for this marginalization relative to the celebration of men’s autobiographical writing.

Al-Hassan (2003) studies a selection of Arabic women’s autobiographies in order to examine how Arabic women represent themselves and write about their lives in different ways.

She cites examples of Arab Muslim women who demonstrate a positive impact on society by promoting education and feminist consciousness (Abu-Sarhan, 2011) and addresses how Arab women's autobiographies are read in the context of both Western academics and Arabic society. Her study questions "the Western theoretical methodologies, assessing the impact of their application on these texts, as well as how suitable they are to such a task" (Alsuwaidi, 2005). Al-Hassan (2003) highlights the importance of applying Edward Said's framework of Orientalism, through which he critiques Western attitudes toward the East, to the reading of Arab women's autobiographies in order to understand the influence of colonialism on Arab women's lives. Said's concept of Orientalism, along with postcolonial feminist theory, offers insight into the themes that are inherent to Saudi women's life writing. This theoretical framework can support our understanding of feminist productions of knowledge in Saudi Arabia, especially when it comes to stereotyping women's lives and agency.

### **INTRODUCTION TO COLONIAL DISCOURSE**

Current postcolonial scholars highlight the lasting impact of western imperialism and colonialism on the global hierarchy, organizations of nation-states, and knowledge and subjective frameworks. Said's framework investigates Orientalism as the approach through which nineteenth century Europe represented the many cultures that it came into contact and conflict with through imperialist expansion. Said's main argument is that the West created these cultures as "others" set against a Western norm; consequently, many travelers and researchers tried to not only represent these other cultures as different from the British culture, but as negatively different. Thus, "other" people were depicted as lazy, decadent, uncivilized, and barbaric, in contrast to the British, who were framed as civilized and diligent (Mills, 1998).

According to Young (2003), Orientalism is defined as the “representation of another culture without reference to the original” (p. 141). For instance, writers and artists render stereotypes of “others” by producing images that conform to the colonizers’ misconceptions, such as the fantasy of the colonial harem (Young, 2003). According to Gandhi (1998), Said also defines the development of the West as a structure and a system that directly impacted the colonized Orient by representing “Europe as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience” (p. 73). This can be seen when non-Western writers restructure the Orientalist binary “of the ‘West’ as modern, rational, and dynamic and opposed to an ‘East’ that is static, irrational, and anti-modern” (Rastegar, 2006, p. 2). Gandhi (1998) likewise suggests that Orientalism not only constitutes the first phase of postcolonial theory by studying the history and motivations of anti-colonial resistance, but also suggests that Orientalism focuses on “the discursive and textual production of colonial meanings and, concomitantly, to the consolidation of colonial hegemony” (p. 64). Moreover, in attempting to understand “other” cultures, Said (1979) questions whether the cultural, religious, and racial differences matter more than socio-economic and politico-historical categories. He is also concerned with how ideas obtain the authority to determine normality and the status of “natural” truth.

Orientalism was established in Arab consciousness early on. Massad’s (2008) *Desiring Arabs* traces the historical roots of Western construction in Arab consciousness by explaining how Arab authors’ responses to Orientalism address the issues they encounter when adopting European notions of civilization and culture, and their commensurate insertion into a social Darwinist idiom defined by evolution, progress, advancement, development, degeneration, and, most importantly, decadence and renaissance. Massad (2008) concludes that

Arab intellectuals accepted the thesis that the eighteenth century had been decadent and used it to legitimate their own cultural production (renaissance [nahda, nahdah]). Nahda required a concept of cultural decadence, for how else was the claim of cultural renewal to be justified? In addition, the concept of contemporary renaissance required the discovery of a “classical” period in the distant past that might be rejuvenated in the present. Analogous to European concepts of the renaissance, Islamic intellectuals in the nineteenth century fell back upon a “Golden Age” of Islam. But even here, the European Orientalists provided precious assistance by explaining to them what the classical Islamic period was, and how it was to be understood and assessed historically. (p. 5)

Massad (2008) refers to Said’s notion of Orientalism to demonstrate how the views held by Westerners about Arabs since the European Enlightenment continue to produce and shape the “Oriental.” He describes how Orientalism involves generating “scholarship about various kinds of Orientalist representations of Arabs and Muslims in Europe but, unfortunately, little if any scholarship was produced in its wake about Orientalist representations in the Arab world, whether in Arabic or in European languages” (Massad, 2008, p. 47-48). Massad’s (2008) review of Orientalism is important in relation to Saudi women’s autobiographies because it helps to frame how Orientalism has also shaped discourses within the Arab world.

### **INTERNALIZED ORIENTALISM**

Makdisi (2007) states that, globally, Arab and Muslim women are subject to stereotyping more frequently than any other group, not only because of the continuous production of misleading representations of Arab and Islamic culture by outsiders, but also because of such misrepresentations by Arabs themselves. Arabs have learned to look at themselves through the eyes of others, primarily Westerners, rather than to see themselves according to who they are, in terms of class, territory, personality, intellect, and education. Massad (2008) suggests that



Orientalism has not only affected how Arabs have been seen but has also shaped their “own perceptions of themselves and each other since the Arab Renaissance” (p. 48).

Alahmed (2017) notes that the first appearance of the phrase, “internalized Orientalism,” appeared in 1992, when Heng and Devan addressed the movement of Singapore elites toward the use of Western eyes and methods in their local discourse and representations within society. The aim of that discourse was to modernize the local population by implementing a Western discourse of representation, which created a division between the modern self and un-modern others within the state and drove many to encourage other Singaporeans to participate in the process of modernity. Hatem’s definition of internalized Orientalism is particularly applicable to discourses on Saudi women’s autobiographies. He describes internalized Orientalism “as a dominant system of representation that accepts the superiority of the Occident and the inferiority and the backwardness of the Orient” (as cited in Alahmed, 2017, p. 17).

### **WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND RESCUING MAJORITY WORLD WOMEN**

Entry into the global market required many countries, including Saudi Arabia, to sign conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). This type of convention, as well as international reports about women’s lives, focused on the Arab world, specifically the influence of women’s liberation and Orientalist representations of the region (Abu-Lughod, 2009, p. 85). Massad (2008), for example, illustrates a correlation between Orientalism and sexual rights and describes how the sexual rights agenda that emerged in the late 1960s and increased in the 1980s and 1990s in the United States and other Western countries led to discussions of sexual practices in the rest of the world, including Arab countries. This sexual rights agenda introduced notions of “civilized” and “uncivilized” sexual behaviour. Massad (2008) demonstrates how international human rights discourse has focused on

women and homosexuals in Arab countries, such as the victims of “honour” crimes in Jordan, while neglecting, for example, the fact that Western women are also killed in the United States by their boyfriends or husbands (Massad, 2008, p. 37). Massad (2008) also points out that current non-Western subjectivities are repressed and destroyed by political powers in order to produce new subjectivities that concur with Western conceptions, a process that is presented “as a force of redeeming humanity from traditional cultures” (p. 42).

### **SUBALTERN STUDIES AND PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE**

In her essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak (1988) applies the term *subaltern* to women who live under colonial control. She cites the example of Sati, a Hindu widow’s ceremony performed among a small group of Hindus, whereupon the woman climbs her dead husband’s pyre and throws herself upon it. In this example, the British intervened to abolish the practice, which Spivak (1988) uses to illustrate how the white man (colonizer) tried to save the brown woman from the brown man (colonized), and how the brown woman’s body has become a subject of dispute between the parties. Spivak (1988) notes that the colonial desire to create a “moral” society led the colonizers to intervene in Indian religious values and traditions, which affected Indian women and caused them to become polarizing objects in the discourse between colonizer and colonized. The British colonial representation of Sati as a barbaric practice led to the perception of the British as civilized people who were on a mission to save Hindu women from their patriarchal society (Morton, 2003). In this regard, Rajan (1993) proposes that, instead of upholding the colonial representations of Indian women as passive victims who lack agency, we should

displace the traditional construction of the “sati” (the widow who dies upon her husband’s funeral pyre) in terms of one who chooses to die/is forced to die, first on to the questions of the embodied subject (the subject of pain) and then onto (pre-colonial) literary and

historical representations of the widow who chooses to live. (As cited in Mills, 1998, p. 104)

Spivak does not suggest exalting the act of burning widows; however, she does try to grasp “different perspectives on the possibilities of subject-position which are mapped out for these women and with which they then negotiate” (Mills, 1998, p. 104). Spivak (1988) and Rajan (1993) both discuss subaltern agency and the tone of condescension and essentialism in Western feminist writing and suggest that there is an essence of “woman” that all women possess, regardless of nationality and culture. Postcolonial feminist theory has critiqued essentialism by challenging Western feminists to adopt “a position whereby it is difficult to posit agency or a voice from which to speak to/for other women” (as cited in Mills, 1998, p. 104). Thus, Spivak claims that there is an absence and under-representation of the colonized female subject, even in the interaction between coalitions that aim to diversify identities and give opportunities for subaltern subjects to express their positions (as cited in Kaplan, 1992, p. 213). Spivak (1996) argues that “the subaltern cannot speak” (p. 292), meaning that, even when the subaltern makes an effort to speak, she is not heard. This inability to be heard is the result of a dominant political system of representation within which marginalized groups are neither heard nor recognized (Morton, 2003). The central principle of Spivak’s essay applies to questions of marginalized groups’ production of knowledge, such as Saudi women’s autobiographies. As Morton (2003) demonstrates, the crucial point of this essay is to both address the social agency and the lived experiences of disempowered and subaltern women, and to demonstrate how these marginalized women “receive their political and discursive identities within historically determinate systems of political and economic representation” (p. 81).

Spivak’s work is critical to discourses about Saudi women’s autobiographies because it considers the fact that colonized women are unable to speak, be heard, or be understood because

of the current knowledge systems that represent them as objects of contention or as passive social mediums through which colonizing and colonized men compete, rather than as autonomous and active social agents. Colonial legacies and histories have left a hegemonic Western tradition/framework through which Saudi women cannot be heard and Orientalism has perpetuated. As a result, it is difficult to discern a feminine identity that is not consistent with this framework, which means that colonized women are viewed almost exclusively as oppressed victims.

In her book, *Do Muslims Need Saving?*, Abu-Lughod (2013) discusses the fact that Western theses view Muslim women in terms of their need for salvation, often by disposing of their religion and “harsh” male culture. For example, following the 9/11 attacks, Western representations of Muslim women were comprised primarily of oppressive images, which became associated with the Western mission to save Muslim women from their cultures. The Western media, along with feminist activists, reported some stories that highlighted Muslim women’s status of oppression and oppression of Muslim women until the stories of Iranian, Afghani, and Saudi women became best-sellers in the West (Abu-Lughod, 2013). Abu-Lughod (2013) argues that American feminist narratives revolved around oppressive practices, such as female genital mutilation, enforced veiling, or honour crimes, stories of which were easy to gather. These narratives were “promoting causes far from home, they could secure themselves a niche in larger political discussions around the role of the United States as the beacon of humanitarianism” (Abu-Lughod, 2013, p. 8).

Abu-Lughod (2013) raises an essential question regarding liberal feminist orientations, wherein “other” cultures are accused of patriarchal practices, that advocate for universal standards to combat gender inequity that primarily impacts women in the Majority World and women of

colour in the West. At the same time, liberal feminists admit that there are other factors that shape women's experiences, such as racial differences, class positions, and geographic locations. Abu-Lughod (2013) questions the applicability of using one singular category, "women," or subcategory, "Muslim women," to understand issues of gender equality.

Moneera Al-Ghadeer (2018) similarly highlights the condescending attitudes that Saudi women face internationally. Many Western figures express enthusiastic approval of, and even appear to take credit for, any minor changes in Saudi women's rights, such as lifting the ban on female drivers (Al-Ghadeer, 2018). Saudi women who celebrate this kind of outsider response may affirm the idea that Western women are role models for other women to follow, which can create problematic representations. Therefore, Al-Ghadeer (2018) claims that Western women are constantly trying to save Eastern and Muslim women from cultural and religious oppression.

My theoretical framework can empower women by centering women's own voices as insiders who construct representations of their own cultures and voices while distinguishing between their voices from those outside their nation-states by attending to the different contextual elements and experiences. This theoretical framework can also help us to understand the reasons why Saudi women's representations might be used inside Saudi society, where they might bridge the gap between liberal and conservative views, and outside the society, where Muslim and Arab women's lives are continually misrepresented. Finally, this framework can be used to examine the questions of whether and why Saudi women writers have the opportunity to be heard inside and outside of their society, without Western feminist intervention, and whether there are other ways of enabling women to contextualize and interpret their lives without limiting them to a certain feminist framework that claims to articulate for all gender and sexual differences through the same approach.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **TRANSNATIONAL FEMINISM**

With the internationalization of women's issues, postcolonial feminists have increasingly turned their attention to the problem of transnational feminist solidarity and how this is difficult to achieve given the lack of Majority World women's voices. Postcolonial feminists argue that Majority World women's experiential knowledge should be the basis for a future that does not include a postcolonial sexist society, a perception that shows the double tasks of the feminist agenda: "The task of critique (attacking gender stereotypes) and the task of construction. Without this second task (sometimes called feminist praxis), feminism has no goal" (Humm, 1998, p. 194). Thus, Young (2003) argues that postcolonial writing has, since the early 1980s, tried to shift the dominant methods that non-Eastern people use to view Eastern lives. This shift in methods of perception has involved Western people's perspective of the Eastern world, which has often framed the world through the image of the West and Western assumptions. These assumptions may not reflect the reality of how Eastern people feel and how they perceive themselves (Young, 2003). Therefore, postcolonialism endeavours to inject "alternative knowledge into the power structures of the west as well as the non-west" (Young, 2003, p. 7) and aims to shift the approach toward how people think and behave in order to construct a more just and equal relationship between diverse peoples (Young, 2003).

Mohanty (1984) likewise examines how representations of Third World women are produced in Western feminist texts. She critiques Western feminist writing as a practice of "rhetorical colonization" of Majority World women and claims that Western feminists see women as a homogeneous group, assuming their interests are identical despite their having divergent identities with respect to any combination of social markers, such as location, class, race, and

ethnicity. Thus, Western feminists imply that there are universal gender characteristics that are unique to women despite cultural differences (Mohanty, 1984). Western feminists also tend to believe that the concept of gender struggles can be applied and disseminated everywhere because they view women's oppression as the same, regardless of women's individual differences. This assumption has led to the representation of an average Majority World woman in which she

leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being "third world" (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). In contrast to the implicit self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. (Mohanty, 1984, p. 337)

Spivak (1987) states that one of the South American criticisms levelled against international feminism since the 1990s is that it concentrates on the commonalities and solidarities of feminist needs without paying attention to any of the differences. For example, international feminism fails to consider the racial oppression that South American women encounter as a consequence of colonization (Abu-Sarhan, 2011). Spivak (1987) underscores the fact that First World women must question their own feelings of privilege and learn to understand Majority World women's lives in order to produce a varied readership. This theoretical framework provides insight into the reasons behind the recent proliferation of Saudi women's life writing in the West and the subsequent attempts to use the same victim narratives that frame Muslim/Saudi women as oppressed persons with no agency. This framework also provides a critical analysis of Western feminism while maintaining a focus on Saudi women's writing and validating their voices.

## **METHODOLOGY**

In order to explore Saudi women's voices, I have chosen autobiographies published since 2000: *I Tear the Burqa ... I See*, by Huda Al-Daghfaq (2011); *Memoirs of a Saudi Woman*, by

Samia Al-Amoudi (2015); *Past, Single, Masculine*, by Umaima Al-Khamis (2011); and *Daring to Drive: A Saudi Woman's Awakening*, by Manal Al-Sharif (2017). They provide the ideal data that can be analyzed against the backdrop of their unique historical context of post-9/11 and globalization. This analysis requires that each narrative first be summarized and broken down into three categories: the first category covers stereotypes associated with Saudi women, such as the image of the hijab, the impact of the nomadic or tribal culture, the role of the victim, the submissive role with which Saudi women are generally associated, and the exaggerated adverse effects of gender segregation; the second category relates to the ways in which Saudi women's autobiographies describe their experiences, status, and agency within their society; and the third category deals with how Saudi women represent themselves within their society and how they resist and challenge discriminatory policies within that society. In order to understand these women's overarching experiences, it is important to first examine the social context of each autobiography through a political lens by questioning what the writer could and could not write about. It is likewise vital to consider who published each autobiography and how that relates to discussions of each writer's life, both within and outside of Saudi Arabia. Once each of these elements are established, it is then possible to consider the implications of these women's autobiographies.

Several criteria were used to select these texts for analysis. First, each work had to have been written by a Saudi woman living inside Saudi Arabia at the time of writing and had to have been written in Arabic with an Arabic target audience. Second, the works had to have been written after 9/11, the period during which Saudi writers have attempted to reconstruct Saudi and Islamic identity as a result of global pressure in the post-9/11 era, when Saudi Arabia began to be viewed as an incubator of terrorism. Third, all writers were required to represent themselves as liberal



women with an ideological orientation that can explain how colonial discourse influenced their writing and the ways in which they may have reproduced misconceptions and misinterpretations of Saudi society.

The selected texts are unique in the sense that each provides a description of both the personal lives of Saudi women and the social and historical changes that have occurred in Saudi society. However, the selected works were also involved in the cultural war between liberals and conservatives in Saudi Arabia. These specific authors were given the opportunity to present their work because they were each well-known before they wrote their autobiographies. Each of the four writers—Al-Sharif, Al-Amoudi, Al-Daghfaq, and Al-Khamis—wrote opinion pieces for different Saudi newspapers for several years, which significantly shaped their feminist awareness and helped them to unpack the causes of gender inequality. Their ideas allowed the themes of their individual texts to be easily identified and analyzed, including the static colonial image of the veil and of Saudi society as sexist, conservative, tribal, and Wahhabi. In short, depicted as a society that finds it difficult to accept social change, especially when it comes to women’s rights. In addition, the reductive interpretations that each author offers in order to understand gender segregation in a sexist society expresses women’s fears and how they see segregation as an obstacle that isolates women from the real world. Finally, the negative descriptions of women’s roles under the notion of the “harem,” which primarily tend to accuse the Arab patriarchal system of suppressing women’s rights.

Several common themes emerged from the four selected autobiographies, particularly with regard to sociopolitical factors. These themes include the oil boom and affluence of the 1960s, the Islamic Awakening of the 1980s, and globalization, which Al-Sharif (2017), Al-Amoudi (2015), Al-Daghfaq (2011), and Al-Khamis (2011) each emphasize in their work. All four autobiographies

discuss Saudi women's empowerment and each author details her own experience of empowerment. Another common theme among these autobiographies is the representation of feminist identities and the description of women's agency in private spaces, which has always been absent from the male-dominated discourse both inside and outside of Saudi Arabia.

Throughout each of these selected autobiographies, various spaces are examined; for example, Al-Daghfaq (2011) and Al-Khamis (2011) describe private spaces, while Al-Sharif (2017) and Al-Amoudi (2015) describe public spaces. It is also important to understand the diversity of the geographic locations depicted in these texts, which can make a significant difference when reading and analyzing the cultural contexts of each author's experiences. For example, Al-Sharif (2017) and Al-Amoudi (2015), who are from different age categories, were both living in western Saudi Arabia, while Al-Daghfaq (2011) and Al-Khamis (2011) were both living in central Saudi Arabia. It is also important to consider the period, between 2011 and 2017, during which each respective work was written so as to examine the different the political and historical factors that might have influenced their reasons for writing at that time.

Several works were excluded from this study. For example, Saudi women's autobiographies that focused only on general societal issues and autobiographies about Saudi women's lives and experiences outside of Saudi Arabia were excluded because these women might be more likely to understand themselves through another – often Western – perspective, or through the context and values of others, which can create an “us or them” attitude.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The current study seeks to answer six central research questions:

1. How do Saudi women writers represent women's place and voice?

2. What are the social and political changes and factors that have affected women's writing in Saudi Arabian society from the 1960s to the 2000s?
3. How do Saudi women writers describe their social-political history/context and the issues created by that context?
4. How do women's voices come out and what have they responded to in the Saudi and international context?
5. How have orientalist binaries shaped what Saudi women say?
6. Has Saudi women writing reproduced orientalist framework, and if so, why?

## CHAPTER TWO

### SITUATING SAUDI WOMEN'S WRITING

To understand the works of Al-Sharif, Al-Amoudi, Al-Daghfaq, and Al-Khamis, it is important to first understand their historical contexts and the historical view of women's writing in Saudi Arabia. There were social and political factors which shaped how they write as well as how their writing was read and evaluated. In addition, it is important to understand why women in Saudi use writing to express their views and how Saudi women's writing has developed over time. Understanding historical conditions of women's writing can provide insight into the texts by Al-Sharif, Al-Amoudi, Al-Daghfaq, and Al-Khamis, who wrote since 2001. Moreover, understanding the historical background and the roots of conflict and the polarization of gender equality is essential in order to effectively analyze each of these important works.

### LITERATURE AND THE IMAGE OF THE SAUDI STATE

Historically, there have been three generations of Saudi women's writing representing three broad shifts in women's conditions: the 1950-1979s, 1980-2000, and 2001-2017. The first period began with the 1958 publication of *I Bid My Hopes Farewell (Wadda't Amali)*, Samira Khashuqi's first novel, published under the pseudonym Bint al-Jazira. During the same period, in 1972, Huda Al-Rashid published *Lost Innocence (Al-Bara'a Al-Mafquda)* in Beirut. Both novels were critiqued as weak with regard to their literary technique and, most importantly, because their heroines did not reflect the realities of Saudi society, choosing instead to live abroad in a different sociocultural context (Algahtani, 2016). There were other attempts during this period, such as Sultana al-Sudairi's collection of poetry, *Fragrance of the Desert (Abir al-sahra)*, which was published in Saudi Arabia in 1956 (Arebi, 1994; Jayyusi, 1988; McClure, 2008).

The predominant factor affecting women's writing during this early period was exposure to different cultural contexts, as these writers studied abroad or were educated in private schools that were run by other Arab women, which influenced their individual writing paths. Arebi (1994) claims that the increase in women's writing between 1970-1980 can be read as an indication of social recognition and acceptance, but that it also shows the structures of their opportunities in two important aspects. The first opportunity structure is the writers' personal backgrounds, which includes economic and class affiliations, education, and other sociocultural elements. The second structure is the cultural status of the literary spheres in which these women wrote, which highlight the main focus of literary production and consumption of the period.

The second generation of Saudi women writers began in the 1980s and included such writers as Fawziyya Abu Khalid, Amal Shata, Safiyya 'Anbar, and Raja Alem. These writers were more focused on the cultural and social issues affecting women in Saudi society. However, during the 1980s, both men and women faced some restrictions to the publication of their creative writing due to the conflict between modernism and conservatism in Saudi society, indicating that women's issues were not central to the intellectual conflict between modernists and conservatives, which is in sharp contrast to the post-2001 era, when women became the central point of conflict between liberals and conservatives.

In 1994, Fawziyya Abu Khalid wrote her autobiography, *Alyawm*, in the form of individual episodes, which was different from the autobiographical experiences of first- and third-generation women writers. In 1989, for instance, Sultana al-Sudairi first attempted to write her memoir, *Memoirs of a Saudi Woman*, in which she describes her childhood, schools, family, natural environment, and the people around her in an exceedingly aesthetic way. By comparison, in her *Autobiography of a Collective Stream*, Fawziyya Abu Khalid documents intellectual conflict

between modernists and conservatives, including her male colleagues. She does not talk about her personal life as much as she talks about how her female teachers helped her develop her intellectual orientation and the intellectual atmosphere of the Saudi newspapers (*Alfaisal Magazine*, 1997). The difference between these two experiences is attributed to the changes in political, social, and cultural climate.

In the Gulf region, the increase in publishing opportunities, which resulted from the economic changes and increases in educational channels, led to the production of more women's writing (Al-Hassan Golley, 2003). Jayyusi (1988) provides a broad overview of the aspects of literary progress in Saudi Arabia between 1970-2000, during which time several factors played a considerable role in enriching Saudi literary productions. These factors included social and economic modernization, the expansion of higher and internal education, an increase in literary performance evenings hosted by the Saudi state, and the opening of university and institutional libraries and literary clubs.

Al-Rasheed (2013) attributes the visibility and production of Saudi women's literary works in the second half of the twentieth century to women's and girls' increased enrollment in the humanities, social sciences, and religious studies since the 1960s. Al-Rasheed (2013) also states that the lack of available women's employment in the broader economy may have led a growing number of women to pursue writing as an alternative method of social contribution.

Women's roles in the public space were also marginalized as part of the Saudi state project, which enabled educated men in positions of leadership to oversee state-initiated development projects; women, because they were marginalized, sought to raise their voices through writing and focused specifically on the novel, which was a less dangerous genre of literature in Saudi society at the time. In addition, the relaxed Saudi legal restrictions on fiction pushed men and women to

utilize this genre in order to disrupt taboos without upsetting the state (Al-Rasheed,2013). Al-Rasheed (2013) suggests that, because women could not organize a feminist movement on the ground, they established their own pressure groups through fiction. Thus, fiction became “a strategic move to cope with the authoritarianism and domination that prohibit independent civil society organizations, promote conservatism, apply strict religious teachings, and enforce constant surveillance of women in public places” (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 176).

The third generation of women writers has been shaped by factors other than higher education, namely globalization, technological advances, and the political climate of the post-9/11 era. This period includes seminal works such as Raja al-Sani’s *Girls of Riyadh (Banat al-Riyadh)*, published in 2005; Warda Abd al-Malik’s *Return (Al-Awba)*, published in 2008; and Samar al-Muqrin’s *Women of Vice (Nisa al-Munkar)*, published in 2008 (Kanie, 2017). Algahtani (2016), Al-Rasheed (2013), and Kanie (2017) agree that this third generation of women writers has been marked by a tone of criticism against Saudi social, cultural, and religious life.

Algahtani (2016) outlines the six major changes in the socio-political context that have helped to construct Saudi national identity and have affected cultural production in the Kingdom since the 1990s: religious discourse, oil-fueled economic growth, the Gulf War, the events of 9/11, the Riyadh International Book Fairs, and national or international academic conferences. As a result of these changes, third-generation women writers are highly educated and have high public profiles. They chose to write novels to discuss social issues and to challenge patriarchal society. Thus, novels have become a strategic approach for Saudi women writers who seek to express their personal ideas and viewpoints. Writing novels has allowed Saudi women to “hide behind an imaginary world, created out of fragments of reality, personalities, and historical moments” (Algahtani, 2016, p. 28). This can be considered an important indication as to why Saudi women

did not utilize the autobiographical genre to raise their voices and tell their stories; it seems that novels allowed these writers the opportunity to tell their stories without exposing themselves to social judgment, which may have been the case had they shared their real individual stories.

According to Kanie (2017), the literature produced by this third generation of writers significantly shocked the Saudi public as these works directly critiqued many aspects of Saudi society, including culture and religion. Kanie (2017) notes that the religious aspects of society were critiqued in a different way by this generation because first-generation writers tried “to re-articulate Islam as a force for the empowerment of women” (p. 284). Second-generation writers took neither a secularist nor an atheistic perspective when critiquing religion and focused, instead, on critiquing the radical religious elites and institutions in Saudi Arabia, offering a more “individualized perspective of religion and religious life” (Kanie, 2017, p. 284). Such a transformation to the type of critique provided—whether cultural, social, or religious—must be understood within the larger context of changes that have occurred in Saudi Arabia, including changes to the national state identity and the global political context. Therefore, an understanding of Saudi nationalism is essential in order to understand the changes that have occurred within the Saudi Arabian sociopolitical context, discourses on women’s empowerment, and the ways in which women tell their narratives in relation to these changes.

Al-Ghamidi (2017) claims that the rapid emergence of autobiographies, such as Al-Khamis’s (2013) *Past, Single, Masculine* and Al-Daghfaq’s (2011) *I Tear the Burqa... I See*, is the result of improvements to the social conditions that previously restricted women from engaging in life writing. The relative freedom experienced by this third generation of women allowed them to write about their lives and reveal their potential. In addition, the social and political recognition of women’s self-expression promoted this genre (Al-Ghamidi, 2017).



However, McClure (2008), Jayyusi (2006), and Almuqbil (2014) all agree the production of autobiography within Saudi literature in general, and among Saudi women writers in particular, is rare. Al-Ghamidi (2017) attributes the rarity of women's autobiographical writing to their confusion and hesitation regarding their autobiographical experience. He further argues that, although they have different ways of expressing their desire to write and different lives and experiences to explore through this genre, they have shown confusion and hesitation about classifying their work as autobiography and explaining the motives and aims that led them to write their stories (Al-Ghamidi,2017).

Therefore, the term, "autobiography," was not used on the covers of these books; rather, it was used in metaphorical titles that had no intrinsic value. Some of these writers, including Al-Khamis (2013), deny that what they wrote is a legitimate autobiography; others, like Al-Daghfaq (2011), describe their work as an incomplete autobiography. This hesitation may be explained by their fear of the negative social attitude toward writers who express their own, sometimes intimate, thoughts and feelings, or it may be a pre-emptive justification for any technical weaknesses or deficiencies that may appear in their autobiographies (Al-Ghamidi, 2017). This hesitation to categorize their work as autobiographical has given them a relative amount of freedom to critique what is happening in their spaces. However, choosing to define their work as autobiographical may be a more effective method of documenting women's lives in a systematic and historical manner. Another possible reason for their hesitation to define their work as autobiographical is that autobiographies can contain accusations against certain people, or against the state, when writers have had the time to reflect on their experiences and recognize the nature of their lives. For example, Al-Khamis (2013) defines the autobiographical experience as one in which the writer can share significant experiences under colonialism, in prison, or as a leader. Thus, through

autobiography, writers have the power to name influential people or factors, which might be politicized.

### **SAUDI NATIONALISM**

Jayyusi (1988) outlines three chronological stages of Saudi state history and notes that the first stage involved the 1744 collaboration between the religious reformer, Shaikh Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab, and Imam Muhammad ibn Saud, who sought to spread Islam. This stage was followed by the involvement of the Ottoman Turks, led by the *Wali* (ruler) of Egypt, Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha, in 1818. Then, in 1820, conflict developed between Turki ibn ‘Abdallah ibn Muhammad ibn Saud and the Saudi ruler, Al Rashid, which ended with departure from Najd, in central Saudi Arabia. The final stage of Saudi state history began in 1902, with King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Faisal ibn Turki Al Saud, who wanted to secure “his ancestors’ crown and the establishment of the modern Saudi state” (Jayyusi, 1988. p 3).

King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz was successful in his attempt to unite the Saudi state, which had been affected by the Ottoman Empire, especially in the Hijaz region and in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. King ‘Abd al- ‘Aziz was successful because he used “military prowess and political acumen,” along with support from Britain (p. 3). He convinced the British that a unified Saudi Arabia, under his rule, would facilitate and “secure a link with Britain’s colonies in Asia” (p. 3). Britain then acknowledged the independence of all Saudi cities under the sovereign rule of King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz (Jayyusi, 1988). Al-Rasheed (2013) explains that Saudi state identity was constructed as

a project to restore a unified religious nation, under the banner of Wahhabi Islam. This makes nationalism in its well-studied secular manifestation and colonial and anti-colonial variants a controversial principle to invoke here. But tracing the historical formation of the country and the discourse under which this was carried out leaves scope for investigating

a different type of nationalism, specific to Ibn Saud and his ulama's project of imagining Saudi Arabia, better thought of as religious nationalism. (p. 14)

Al-Rasheed (2013) goes on to state that the invented Saudi nation was identified by its application of sharia (Islamic) law in all respects in order to represent and establish a universal Islamic ethos. She further notes that, under the banner of a Saudi nation, women, “as in secular nationalist and anti-colonial nationalist projects, were signed fundamental pillars of this imagined religious community” (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 15), which can be problematic on many different levels. For example, the historical discourse of women’s empowerment was exploited by national leaders from Atatürk to Nasser, who used women to promote their society as modernized. However, authoritarianism remained entrenched, and the “patriarchal sensibilities of constituencies as rulers cooperated with these constituencies to confirm the subjugation of women rather than challenge it” (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 4). Hence, the state gave the sub-national communities control over women through the tribes, ethnic groups, and sects.

### **The Geopolitical Context Prior to 9/11**

Since the 1950s, American and Arab relations have primarily been associated with US investments in Saudi Arabian oil companies, such as Aramco. In the mid-20th century, the United States succeeded Britain as the superpower responsible for finding a resolution to Palestinian issues (Naber, 2012). According to Al-Rasheed (2016), Steinberg and Woermer (2013), Naber (2012), and Goodson and Johnson (2011), there were three significant events, two global and one local, that changed the Saudi sociopolitical context. The first event was the 1979 Iranian Revolution, a religious revolution, the dynamic of which was a serious threat to the political regimes in the region, including Saudi Arabia. The second event was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Both of these international events steered the direction of religious discourse, as

Khomeini called for Islamic centrism, which Saudi Arabia also wanted, creating conflict between the two regimes. Americans who were against the Soviet Union and the Iranian Revolution allied themselves with Saudi Arabia and with Islamist leaders around the world.

The third event involved the seizure of the Mecca Mosque by a violent fringe group guided by Juhayman Al-Otaybi in an act of protest against the alliance that had developed between Saudi Arabia and the United States (Al-Rasheed, 2016; Goodson & Johnson, 2011; Naber, 2012; Steinberg & Woermer, 2013). Al-Rasheed (2013) argues that there was a powerful relationship between the Saudi government and radical Islam which encouraged the marginalization of women in Saudi society; this relationship led to the repression of Saudi women by the radical religious clerics who dominated the Saudi educational institutions and media. Aldosari (2016) notes that, historically, “Saudi rulers have secured their monopoly on the state by three means: regional and local partnerships, the collection of ample oil rent, and support from powerful Western patrons” (Aldosari, 2016).

### **THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT’S REFORM DISCOURSE**

In the early 2000s, the Saudi government, under King Abdullah, resolved to bring reformation and development to the country. These reforms were also intended to meet the requirements of the global market and to help the country gain recognition among the international community, specifically with regard to economic and social development (Determann, 2014). Although these intentions demonstrate the Saudi government’s desire to pursue reform, the government directed reform discourse toward combatting terrorism and radical Islamic movements following the attacks on 9/11 and in response to international pressure, as Saudi Arabia was considered an “incubator of terror.” Therefore, the Saudi government modified the extremist Islamic educational curriculum and empowered women, giving them the right to obtain their own personal identities (Le Renard, 2014). King Abdullah launched an interfaith dialogue between

Muslims, Christians, Jews, and adherents of other faiths as part of his call for tolerance. Part of the reform also involved promoting a culture of dialogue in the country; to this end, the government established the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue, the goal of which was to discuss issues regarding the status of women, youth education, employment, and general reforms.

Al-Rasheed (2013) explains that some of the changes within Saudi society were related to the discourse surrounding women's empowerment. For instance, after 9/11, the Saudi state "needed women to dispel negative images of the country associated with Jihadi terrorism abroad and inside the country" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 40). Thus, there emerged a group of women who represented the state as "modern and enlightened." At this point, the local Saudi media began to focus on the achievements made by exceptional women and how they represent other narratives of "female victims of society and its strict religious codes and social norms" (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 40). Al-Rasheed (2013) further notes that "the soft face of the cosmopolitan, sophisticated, and articulate woman was the best weapon the state could summon in its war not only against terrorism but also against its demonization in the international community" (p. 153).

### **SAUDI CULTURE WARS**

It is important here to analyze Saudi women's life writing within the context of the culture wars in Saudi Arabia for three central reasons. First, it can provide insights into how women's equality issues have been polarized between different discourses. Second, it can help to identify how these different discourses served and utilized gender equality issues. Lastly, it can offer insights into how this writing intersects with the colonial legacy in which others perceive Muslim women's oppression.

Al Haydar (2015) examined the Saudi culture wars between Islamists and modernists from the 1980s to the 1990s, and between liberals and conservatives post 9/11 event. He believes these "symbolic contestations" offer "access to the resources of the nation-state" through the

polarization of the representations of Saudi women. For instance, it was observed that public opinion in Saudi society divided “their battlegrounds in relation to the status of women” (Al Haydar, 2015, p. 10). Consequently, after the 9/11 event, conservatives considered themselves the defenders of women’s honor and liberals presented themselves as the liberators who want to save women from draconian laws and norms (Al Haydar, 2015).

Al Haydar (2015) believed the Saudi culture wars existed. This can be linked to the common notion in Saudi that “the Orient is constructed for the West to include the notion that the West also exists ‘for’ the Islamic world and serves as an important contrastive comparison which restricts and controls women’s resistance” (Al Haydar, 2015, p. 8). Al Haydar also argued that each party perceived the other differently during the culture wars. For example, conservatives see the Saudi “liberals” as agents of the “West.” Thus, they want to protect Saudi women from the perspective of liberals. As a result of portraying liberals “as mere proxies of the West,” Saudi conservatives created a discourse in which Saudi liberals were described in terms “occidentalism,” a brand of reverse-orientalism in which the “West is constructed as a space of lax morality and sexual deviance” (Al Haydar, 2015, p. 8). In contrast, Saudi liberals held an orientalist discourse in which they targeted and attacked Islamists.

After the 9/11 event, which is the main focus period in this project, the Saudi culture battlegrounds were dominated by intellectual Saudi liberal’s due to the international pressures. At this time, Saudi Arabia was seen as an incubator of terrorism because 15 Saudi citizens were involved in the 9/11 event. Thus, Saudi liberals positioned themselves as more open-minded people who wanted to save the country by directing the public discussion to certain issues, e.g., reform in education, which necessitated changing the position of Saudi women in the society, adapting to a “tolerant” dialogue, reducing the role of unregenerate xenophobic Wahhabi clerics,

and promoting Saudi Arabia in the foreign press (Meijer, 2010). Hence, certain liberal topics were the focus of the public discussion—for example, veiling and unveiling women, gender segregation, allowing women to work in public space, lifting the ban on women driving a car, and challenging the Islamist views against entertainment activities such as cinema and live music.

### **JUHAYMAN’S MOVEMENT**

Regarding the dramatic social changes to women’s status that occurred as a result of the Juhayman’s movement in the 1980s, Alamer (2012), Alshaalan (2014), and Al-rashed (2014) disagreed with the mainstream story that Saudi society was peaceful and friendly until “Juhayman” came and aroused the people. As a result, the government censored the media, closed down the cinema, and prohibited performances by Umm Kulthum, a female singer, from being aired on TV. Subsequently, Al-Sharif, who won a prize for creative opposition in Oslo, quoted from the book *Inside the Kingdom* (by British author Robert Lacey), that all discrimination against women in Saudi Arabia stemmed exclusively from that moment Juhayman arrived. This narrative is consistent with liberal writings about the social changes in Saudi Arabia. For example, Turki al-Hamad, a liberal government with a soft reformist tone, said that the Saudi society before this incident was not “closed or fanatical, but tolerance prevailed in it more than intolerance and hostile attitude toward the other.” The Saudi society at the time was “a Muslim society whose members practice the pillars of Islam and lived according to their teachings.” But it was not an Islamic society that held religion as a command from God or politicized religion according to a certain interest (Alamer, 2012). Al-Hamad summarizes the legend of Juhayman with an eloquent line: “Juhayman was physically eliminated, but he triumphed intellectually and culturally. Fanatic religious discourse has become dominant in the Kingdom” (Alamer, 2012).

Al-rashed (2014) added that the most fallacious on Juhayman’s topic is its exaggeration in Saudi society. Importantly, the Juhayman debate have come in the context of huge regional and

global transformations, which make their consideration a focal point in the Saudi Kingdom's history but need to be revised. Juhayman's moment coincided with two phenomenal events. First, when the Grand Mosque in Mecca was occupied by Juhayman the impact of this cannot be described as an abstract event. Second, when the Soviet Union occupied Afghanistan and created a new generation of Salafi fighters. These two events would later affect Saudi Arabia than the impact of the event when the Holy Mosque in Mecca was occupied. Juhayman's moment was the moment that everyone later used, and from angles that often represented an ideology seeing it as an extension of tribal conflicts, or as a result of the purely religious radicalization of the Salafi group.

Alshaalan (2014) also believed that Juhayman's movement was extremely social. The social movement is broader than religious movement because each social movement has a doctrine that plays a key role in shaping the movement—for example, the doctrinal justifications to support the movement's goals, beliefs to support field operations, and the ideological myths. Like other extremist social movements, Juhayman's movement was based on discontent with existing forms and aimed at radical social change using force and violence.

In my view, Juhayman's collective defense is a ploy to counter cultural change that has ravaged the Kingdom since the mid-1960s. Especially because Commander Juhayman was from an austere living environment, he and his group, see manifestations of modern civilization as what can be interpreted as the signs of doomsday. Alshaalan (2014) added that it should not be forgotten that the refusal of modernization was a cognitive component in Juhayman's ideology, as it was in the minds of those who fought the "Sabla." Rejection has become more impulsive in the minds of young people because modernization is no longer only technical but also has begun to escalate in the political and social systems (Alshaalan ,2014). According to Alshaalan (2014), the context of



social change in Saudi has been dramatic since the early 1970s, cultural change has been intensifying, pushing the Kingdom toward modernity, causing high oil prices and the rise of the middle class and change in lifestyles.

Alamer (2012) agreed with Alshaalan (2014) and Al-rashed (2014) gave a broader context that explained the diverse and overlapping factors that were involved in the building of the complex movement in Saudi history. For example, Alamer revealed that from 1950, scientific institutes began throughout the Kingdom and was joined in 1953 by the Faculty of Sharia to strengthen and sponsor the enlargement of the Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (Alamer, 2012). However, the influx of religious institutions further increased in the 1960s due to the Islamic discourse that the Kingdom, which increased its oil revenues, has decided to adopt education in its Cold War against the nationalist tide of Nasserism. The adoption of this stance against Arab nationalism made Saudi Arabia a haven for all those expelled from their countries. Islamic movements from Iraq, Syria and Egypt and a group of various Islamic cadres consented to Saudi's adoption of education. A committee under the supervision of Prince Fahd bin Abdulaziz in the early 1960s wrote a policy document on education in the Kingdom which stressed the provision of "types of education appropriate to the nature of women," and that it is prohibited to mix boys and girls at all levels of education, except in nurseries and kindergartens" within the anti-nationalist Islamic campaign led by the Kingdom. Also, Alamer (2012) highlighted the vast oil revenues—along with the death of both Nasser—as another factor that facilitated the acceleration of King Faisal's project which began in 1962. The project's aim was to build a new political legitimacy for the state, rivaling religious legitimacy at home and offering a rival model for Arab republics abroad that claim to be "progressive" based on development.

The first five-year plan, which began in 1970, was launched to achieve comprehensive development in many areas. The features of the second five-year plan were completed in 1975, before the assassination of King Faisal and the reign of King Khalid after him. Despite all the objections of the religious establishment to the state's attempt to proceed with the development plan (opposition of newspapers, cinema, television, radio songs, football, etc.), the state continued its steps gradually.

Alamer (2012) concluded that the magnitude of superficiality and intellectual shallowness in the interpretation of all social and political phenomena occurred in the 1980s and 1990s when a group of liberal writers emphasized Juhayman's moment. The liberal writers opined that the cultural changes were mainly due to the regional challenge posed by Iran and the threat posed by the Soviet Union when Afghanistan was occupied. They believed this prompted the state to return to the sources of old legitimacy and intent on religious discourse (Alamer, 2012).

In summary, according to Alamer (2012), Alshaalan (2014), and Al-rashed (2014) analysis, Juhayman's event should not be viewed as the only historical turning point that shaped the value system and changed the Saudi society to an oppressive religious society because there are other historical and political factors that led to the manifestation of religion as key element of the Saudi political agenda in different periods of the Saudi's history.

## CHAPTER THREE

### INTRODUCING SAUDI WOMEN WRITERS AND THEIR TEXTS

#### UMAIMA ABDULLAH AL-KHAMIS

Al-Khamis earned her BA in Arabic Literature and worked as an academic and an administrator with the Department of Educational Media through the Saudi Ministry of Education. She has published four short story collections and has many other publications, including the novels, *Al-Bahriyat* (2006), *The Leafy Tree* (2008), *Saja's Visit* (2013), and *Voyage of the Cranes in the Cities of Agate* (2017). In 2010, her novel, *Al-Wārifah* (2008), was longlisted for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, and won the Arabic Man Booker International Prize (Alaki, 2018). In 2018, she became the first Saudi woman to win the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature. Al-Khamis also writes a weekly column in the *Elaph* newspaper (International Prize for Arabic Fiction, 2019). Some of Al-Khamis's works have been translated into Italian, English, French, Czech, Japanese, and Korean (Alkhamis, 2014). She is one of the most influential writers in her country, a true luminary in the Saudi literary scene. Al-Khamis has a high profile both inside and outside of Saudi Arabia because of her novels.

Al-Khamis was born in Riyadh in 1966 (Qrtopa,2019). She described her Riyadh neighbourhood of Al-Malaz<sup>2</sup> as rapidly changing as cement and electricity appeared, so the streets become paved and palm trees grow upon them. Mourning the loss of a sense of the Najd region, she appears to connect emotionally with the loss of tradition resulting from rapid modernization.

<sup>2</sup> The Al-Malaz neighbourhood is one of the oldest neighborhoods within the city of Riyadh, in central Saudi Arabia. The neighbourhood is located in the centre of the city and is considered the governmental centre, where government ministries and private establishments meet in the city of Riyadh (Aleiad,2017).

This tendency to romanticize the traditional can be seen only when she mentions city life, confining the connection to tradition in façade only, not as a personal identity.

Al-Khamis is the daughter of Abdullah al-Khamis, poet and founder of the Saudi *Al-Jazeera* newspaper, and her mother was Palestinian (Al-Rasheed, 2013). Her family was interested in literature and current affairs and supported her writing career; their connections with publishers facilitated the publication of her novels, *Al-Bahriyat (Women from Foreign Shores)* and *al-Warifa (Lush Tree)*, both of which were published in Damascus (Al-Rasheed, 2013). She was raised in a highly educated and intellectual family, which gave her the opportunity to express her freedom of choice at an early age. She writes:

in my childhood, when I came home after school, I felt that my home was like an island and that I could float away from the great drowning. The island had colourful boats, a balloon, and butterflies. I wore what suited me, ate what I desired. (Al-Khamis, 2011, p. 73)

She describes her house as a celebration of knowledge, filled with books and poems, and where symposia were held. The *Al-Jazeera* newspaper also grew with her as another one of her father's daughters (Al-Khamis, 2011, p. 73). She acknowledges the impact her educated family had on her career by noting that the

atmosphere in which I grew up, and which had a positive impact on my writing career, was almost the way for me. It had been rooted in my awareness that the pen and the task of writing have high requirements, responsibility for social enlightenment, and an aesthetic framework (Alwatan, 2016).

When asked if her father interfered with what she read, Al-Khamis says,

He never discussed my reading choices, and he did not stop my curious hand as it was filled with passion in his library. I was dribbling between the shelves here and there. On the contrary, I could see my father's admiration, as he contemplated his daughters with the same passion for books. My father was content to pass his set of values and principles through conversation or behaviour and asked us to strictly adhere and obey (Al-Khamis, 2016).

Al-Khamis also notes that her father was an influential role model for her, saying,

As I contemplate my journey with reading and writing, I remember very well that my father is the symbol, the value, and what I am trying to do is line a few characters on his wall. My father had a hard voice in terms of the public right. Therefore, he had the right point of view and touched on national issues and public interest. I tried to own the high job that he had (Al-Khamis, 2016).

Here, it seems Al-Khamis not only admires and respects her father's career journey but has also attempted to follow his path. It is important to note two points here: first, the impact of her father's feminist values because he gave women a voice and a space in his newspaper *Al-Jazeera* and how that affected her perception of men's roles in her life; and second, the benefit of having a supportive and elite family, which not every writer has. For example, Al-Khamis admits that her father supported her career, but she refuses the claim that her father helped her achieve media recognition. She states that she received that recognition because of her talent and skills:

I remember my first article, which was published in the *Al-Jazeera* newspaper under the name of Omayma Abdullah. I was running away from his great name. I was afraid that he

would be interpreted as an entry card into the world, which I consider a very strong and painful space (Al-Khamis, 2016).

[H]ere, the historical framework must be mentioned, as my mother was not only the first woman to write for *Al-Jazeera*, but the first woman to write for any Saudi newspaper under the signature of “Hwa,” the women's corner. The credit here goes to my father, who first confronted and challenged and gave women a voice and a space. However, when my father was asked in interviews, “What do you think of what your daughter, Umaima, writes?” he answered spontaneously and simply: “I am not satisfied with it, but this was accompanied by a prayer for conciliation.” (Al-jazirah, 2011, p.1). He may announce his dissatisfaction with some silence or disregard, but he never put a single dam in my path and did not send any wind except to push my sails and protect them (Al-jazirah, 2011).

As Al-Khamis’s father, Abdullah Ibn Khamis, was known to support women’s rights, he chose to support his daughter even when he did not agree with her literary path. In the 1980s, Al-Khamis was considered one of the modern writers although her father, Abdullah, was conservative. When he was asked about his daughter’s literature, during the confrontation between modernism and conservatism, his short and intensive answer was that she had her own kind of literature, as did he. He also mentioned following the Islamic principle of not judging your children based on your morals, as they were born for a different time.

Al-Khamis states that her father gave her autonomy and treated her as a mature adult, as someone who was aware of her choices and knew how to make those choices, and as someone who knew how to live in the time that was created for her (Al-Khamis, 2016). Al-Khamis waffles between giving her father and her mother credit for providing her with a powerful platform, though she denies that any help was given to her writing career. Although she was given an opportunity

to write for a very well-known newspaper during the early part of her career, she denies that her parents' network and knowledge smoothed the road for her. She gives her father credit for helping her mother along her writing path, but denies that he helped her, saying that "he just gave me what

a father can give." (Al-Khamis,2016) This statement can be interpreted as her method of distinguishing her writing style and framing her writing experience; i.e., she is not a standard Saudi woman writer who has to be elevated in order to write, or who has to be exhibited only in male-dominated space, but is instead a writer from a good socioeconomic background who has the knowledge and talent to be a well-known writer. Al-Khamis summarizes her experience by saying,

Through my experience, I fell in love and married my husband, gave birth to my children. I read banned books, sometimes I brought them to school when I was student and later as a teacher, and wrote my inflammatory articles that challenged traditional institutions and authoritarian structures (Al-Khamis, 2011, p. 16).

**AL-KHAMIS: "IDEOLOGY CAN DAMAGE THE TEXT."** Regarding her writing style, Al-Khamis notes that

text is seriously damaged by ideology, which simply transforms it from artwork to a political statement with a loud noise, so that it becomes a fragmented work and the character becomes a boring, rhetorical ideal that does not touch the soul of the recipient and does not affect the reader's feelings (Alkhamis, 2014).

This statement "ideology can damage the text" was the opposite of her experience and goals while writing her autobiography. Al-Khamis questions,

Is what I write a historical testimony? Or proof of a disconnection from, or maybe a devotion to, all human values, which are absent from educational institutions. Or am I

sending a message to those who are accustomed to the atmosphere of that institution until it is an irrevocable obligation? I will not be able to leave this place without declaring my position; the silence of the page is complicit with practice. (Al-Khamis, 2011, p. 6)

Al-Khamis attempts to politicize her experience and show her position. However, regarding her writing style, she notes: “I continue to evade the taboo to avoid a direct intrusion and collision. Instead, I work within the available current stage and its requirements” (Ahadi, 2017). This idea will be thoroughly discussed in the analysis section of the thesis.

The title of Al-Khamis’s (2011) autobiography, *Past, Single, Masculine*, is a metaphor that refers to the marginalization of women in society. She explains that the root of the Arabic verb is singular, masculine, and past tense. Thus, society and culture have been formed and controlled by old, inherited traditions, a single opinion, and as a form of male domination. She writes:

I will not arrange the chapters of this book in chronological order because I feel like a patient who cannot fully distinguish between the taste of the first or the final medicine because the two have the same bitterness. What I knew, throughout the writing of this book, was that I had a negative and passionate feeling. I was hurting and I poured it onto paper, as if I were talking about a colonial period that occupied many islands in my life before I became independent, or like I was an addict who was subjected to long sessions in order to purge his blood of poison. I will not attempt, in this book, to describe the details of my experience from the perspective of the victim in order to act as a martyr over the cross of circumstances. Throughout the writing period, I was enveloped by angry feelings. Those feelings were an extension of a state of futility and indifference (Al-Khamis, 2011, p. 17).



Here, Al-Khamis claims to be an empowered person who should not be seen as a victim. Although she uses anger and passion to talk about her experiences, she writes in a very rational way, which makes her work much more powerful.

Al-Khamis's autobiography describes the hidden world of women's spaces and provides a clear picture of girls' schools by documenting her life as a student, as a teacher, and through her position with the Ministry of Education. She does not consider her text to be an autobiography because she believes this genre is a way for a writer to cover many life stages or to talk about a significant experience. However, as she says, her experience in the education system covers almost all of her life, from the beginning of her awareness as a student until she became an educational authority. She does not consider this partial autobiography or historical testimony. She rejects the claim that she is writing an autobiography. She distances herself from her work even though she writes about her life. She attempts to portray it as beyond herself, claiming that she is writing about Saudi women's lives, the education system's approach to women and the society in general. This strategy rejects the framing of autobiography and emphasizes women's lives. On writing about women's lives, she is also claiming to speak for other women who cannot speak; this strategy allows her to be reasonably understood as a feminist woman who is wise and smart and is capable of documenting modern societal events.

**RECEPTION OF AL-KHAMIS'S WORK.** Alnaqbi (2014) examines her statement through three important points: first, Al-Khamis refuses to consider her text autobiography, even though she admits it covers almost all of her life experiences; second, Al-Khamis declines this designation because she believes that writing this experience was a way to purge her soul of her negative experiences in the educational system and, as a result of the marginalization that she faced

within educational institutions, she is reticent to embrace her experience and does not consider it part of her autobiography; and third, refusing to place her writing within the context of autobiography reveals her dissatisfaction with almost all of her life experiences. Thus, she wrote this work in order to expunge herself of her negative experiences. Alnaqbi (2014) notes that Al-Khamis has ignored the fact that autobiography usually includes many experiences with which the writer is dissatisfied. However, these experiences are included as they are part of the writer's life. Al-Khamis's rejection of her experiences within the education system and of the autobiography label became clear when she expressed her discontent by saying that she refuses to be introduced at intellectual events or media interviews through her educational job title as she does not want to associate this experience with her creative writing. She does not want to bear the weight of the education system's failures and does not want to represent these failures (Alnaqbi, 2014).

Al-Khamis's autobiography is recognized among Saudi intellectual audiences because of its level of disclosure and transparency regarding her personal experiences in segregated spaces and her experiences in girls' schools. Al-Shamlan (2016), for example, relates her own experience in the education system to Al-Khamis's, and considers her book a documentation of the status of education and, hence, documentation of the social situation since the 1980s. Alharbi (2013) also believes it could be a valuable source for research into educational and social developments and their obstacles:

I call upon all officials in this country, foremost among them the Minister of Education and his deputy, Noura Al Fayez, and the Army of Agents and Education Directors, to acquire the book written by literary and educational expert, Al-Khamis. I also call upon distinguished religious leaders, intellectuals, school principals, and male and female teachers to read it because it is a heavy book about the challenges that are facing the

educational movement in general and girls' education in particular. It is a wonderful human experience that is rich and frightening (Alharbi, 2013).

Al-Khamis concedes that her text might be a historical testimony that speaks to the absence of human value in girls' educational institutions. For instance, she talks about how men challenge women's wills in these spaces and offers examples of the obstacles that hinder and limit women's agency and status. She likewise demonstrates how societal expectations of women start at an early age within the school system. Her work can therefore be read as testimony, regardless of the tone of victimization that is associated with blaming traditions and religion. Moreover, this text can represent an independent voice within the educational system that calls for change for the greater good. However, there remains a certain type of criticism—one focused on traditions and religion as obstacles—that is present in her work and that is socially accepted among liberal intellectual writers in public discussion.

### **SAMIA AL-AMOUDI**

Dr. Samia Al-Amoudi is a Saudi woman and Associate Professor at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah. She is also a consulting obstetrician and gynecologist who became known for her work in the field of breast cancer research and who has used her status as a survivor to raise public awareness of breast cancer. She was a weekly writer for the *Al Madina* newspaper and, in 2006, she was a public figure who appeared on a Saudi television program. Al-Amoudi became well-known through the Western media after she was chosen as a courageous woman from Saudi Arabia and one of the eight most courageous women in the world. At an International Women of Courage event, held in Washington, DC, US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, awarded Al-Amoudi for her courage (Shalhoub, 2007). On 5 June 2009, Al-Amoudi was invited by US Vice

President Joe Biden and his wife, Dr. Jill Biden, to become a global activist with the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation. Al-Amoudi was selected to become a member of *Arab Business Magazine* for the years 2012, 2013, 2014, and 2015; she was also recognized as the Personality of 2014 by the Zahra Breast Cancer Society and was invited by UNESCO to a Culture and Science event held in Paris in 2015 (Al-Haidari, 2016). Al-Amoudi has written several books, including *Breaking the Silence* (2007), *Memoirs of a Saudi Woman* (2015), *Empowering Girls Healthily, Psychologically and Socially* (2016), and *The Rights of Cancer Patients* (2016).

Al-Amoudi was born in April 1957 to a Saudi mother from Mecca and a father of Yemeni origin who came from an affluent commercial family. Along with her sister, she grew up in a family where education was stressed, as neither of her parents were able to complete their education. Al-Amoudi (2019) notes that her

father was one of the greatest advocates of girls' education, and his passing away was the first turning point in my life. I wrote in my memoirs: Yes, the father has an area in the heart of every daughter, and it is difficult for the men of the world to make up for it. However, my mother was a strong lady who educated me and my sister after my father's death. She insisted that each of us obtain the highest certificates. She would say, “take the certificate and put it in the kitchen if you do not get a job with it. The most important thing is that it is your weapon in life”. My mother's brother was the man who guided me, and he became my friend, counsellor, and an exceptional man who appreciates women (Arrajol, 2019)

Al-Amoudi (2014) writes that she was a normal girl with a normal mother who did not obtain any certificates and who married at the age of twelve. She notes that her mother saw what she and her sister could achieve with an education and, after her father died, her mother refused to

let Al-Amoudi's uncles arrange a marriage for her while she was still a child. She also discusses her mother's influence when she could not register for primary school because she did not have Saudi citizenship – at that time, according to Saudi law, women could not give citizenship to their children. Al-Amoudi's mother persevered and insisted on changing her daughter's reality. She used her network of contacts until she reached King Faisal, whom she asked for citizenship for her daughters. Al-Amoudi says that her mother had a positive influence on her future because, without that step, Al-Amoudi would not have been able to enter into medicine, as Saudi universities are only able to accept Saudi students.

**MEMOIRS OF A SAUDI WOMAN:** Al-Amoudi claims that her work, *Memoirs of a Saudi Woman* (2015), not only documents her own life, but also depicts various stages and conditions of Saudi society. She likewise states that the autobiography is not only her story, but also a story of the 1980s and of the first generation of empowered women to attend medical school. Her autobiography covers gender issues within Saudi Arabia, as well as the social and political changes that occurred in the 1980s. Thus, there are many rich aspects of her autobiography that warrant analysis and that offer insight into Saudi society.

Al-Amoudi (2014) notes that, despite the empowerment brought about by the women's movement, many Saudi women refuse to present their stories of success in the media; however, Western media continues to report about the lives of Saudi women. Therefore, Al-Amoudi's motive in writing her autobiography "is to write about Saudi women's identities, their lives, and their achievements. The other reason for writing this is that Saudi society has undergone several changes that the West and modern generations do not know about, especially regarding the influence these changes had on Saudi women's lives (Al-Amoudi , 2014).

Al-Amoudi's autobiography is divided into ten chapters that outline her childhood, education, marriage and divorce, her experience with infertility, and her breast cancer diagnoses and subsequent work in cancer research and awareness. She writes her story as a woman, a mother, a doctor, a survivor, and an activist and documents her life from her date of birth until she became a public figure. Al-Amoudi notes that she moved from her mother's kitchen to the White House, details her experiences in medical school, and outlines how Saudi society interacts with female doctors. She goes on to describe her marriage and divorce, as well as the consequences of divorce for women in Saudi Arabia, and her passion for literature and writing.

**AL-AMOUDI'S WRITING JOURNEY:** Al-Amoudi wrote her first article under a pseudonym while attending high school, which is consistent with the experience of most female writers in Saudi Arabia at the time. She writes that she met with a group of female writers, and they collectively established a section for women in the newspaper under the title "She is Veiled." Al-Amoudi explains that women were hiding behind pseudonyms because they were afraid of reprisals or attacks and wanted to be able to write freely about topics related to love and relationships with men. In her autobiography, *Memoirs of a Saudi Woman*, Al-Amoudi tackles feminist issues from an Islamic perspective, including issues such as women's custody rights and how Islam gave women the right to abortion during the early months of pregnancy, as well as other issues related to pregnancy which are relatively progressive compared to the western world where they are not necessarily open for discussion. Al-Amoudi believes that Islam has a variety of interpretations that can help women navigate their rights. Although she constructs these issues through the Islamic lens, she also fell in line with the construction of herself as a more modern woman who overcome difficulties and can rescue other women, a narrative that is acceptable in the west and in the Islamic world as well.

### **MANAL AL-SHARIF**

Manal Al-Sharif is a Saudi activist who is known as the first Saudi woman to specialize in information security. She started working for Aramco, the largest oil company in the world at the time. In 2011, she launched a Facebook campaign, women2drive, and was then arrested on 21 May for breaking the law prohibiting women in Saudi Arabia from driving. Following her arrest, she was chosen as one of *Time* magazine's "100 Most Influential People in the World" in 2012 (UN Human Rights, 2013). After her release from prison, she attracted global attention to issues of women's rights in Saudi Arabia and gave speeches to groups that included TEDxHarvard, the United Nations, UNESCO, the Obama Summit, Google, Yahoo!, Oslo Freedom Forum, WIRED, Trust Women, the Arab Institute in Paris, the Center for International and Strategic Studies in Washington DC, Roosevelt House, the Clinton Global Initiative, Women in the World, Dallas World Affairs Council, and many others (Manal Al-Sharif blog, 2019).

Although Al-Sharif came from a marginalized background, she managed to overcome her marginalized status; this represents another liberal story of independent woman empowering herself by taking on a repressive state. Al-Sharif was born in 1979, the second daughter of a Saudi taxi driver and a Libyan seamstress. They lived in one of the poorest districts of Mecca. Al-Sharif has described her feeling of belonging to Mecca by writing,

my town house was not the holy city of Mecca, my childhood home of twisted streets and thronging pilgrims, off-limits to all non-Muslims. Nor was it set amid the gleaming towers and sky bridges of the Saudi Arabian capital, high on a desert plateau. It was tucked in perhaps the most Western enclave in the entire kingdom, the pristine Aramco (Saudi Arabian Oil Company) that was originally designed by Americans.

It is important to note that Al-Sharif's descriptions of the Saudi cities where she grew up and studied often draw comparisons between Saudi and American facilities, such as the bright green golf courses, palm trees, parks, and swimming pools, though she also highlights the separation from Saudi culture and state sovereignty she experienced within the Aramco compound, as this was a location where men and women could mix and where women weren't required to wear the abaya and were allowed to drive. Additionally, the local police and the Commission for Prevention and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice were not allowed to enter the Aramco compound. Aramco had its own security force, its own life system, and its own fire stations. As Al-Sharif states, Aramco responded to affairs internally, as an independent and sovereign state.

It is clear that Al-Sharif writes primarily to attract a western audience. For example, in the Arabic version of her autobiography, she does not mention that Mecca is "off-limits to all non-Muslims," and in the English version, she describes Al-Khobar, located in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, as the city that is "perhaps best known for the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing, when a massive bomb that had been hidden inside a tanker truck by extremists killed nineteen American military service members," but fails to mention that one member of the Saudi military service also died in the explosion, although this information is included in the Arabic version. In providing both of these pieces of information, Al-Sharif is attempting to show a lack of tolerance on the part of the Saudi population toward Americans and non-Muslims. Why did Al-Sharif choose this specific bombing to describe the city, and not another series of bombings that have occurred in Khobar since 2000 and have killed more people who were not American

Through her autobiography, *Daring to Drive: A Saudi Woman's Awakening*, Al-Sharif (2017) documents her childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in different places. Al-Sharif



explains that her life was changed by the age of fourteen due to the influence of the Awakening Movement, her family did burn all the music and fashion magazines. The talented girl abandoned her passion for drawing the human images that were banned in Saudi Arabia and she began wearing the veil, which was not imposed by her family, but rather by the state. She writes boldly about being circumcised, which she describes as the most difficult part of her childhood. She also discusses the different spaces she occupied, from the segregated spaces in Aramco that were reserved exclusively for women and the areas of Saudi Arabia where men and women could mix, to her experience studying abroad in public spaces in the United States. She details her experience with starting a campaign to lift the ban on women driving and her motivations for advocating for women's rights. Her experiences illustrate a turning point for women in Saudi Arabia because she challenged and helped to change the state's attitudes and expectations of women.

In her book, Al-Sharif recounts the occupation of Juhayman of the Mecca Mosque in 1979, the region's transformation during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution, and the relationship between the ideology of Jihad and the generation of extremism in Saudi Arabia. She also recounts her experiences with education and society under the influence of the sheikhs and the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as her experience with the black Burqa that women were required to wear in response to fight Western ideology.

Al-Sharif's autobiography is the most complete of all the work included in the current study, with regard to meeting the standards of this genre. This completion may be due either to the fact that it was first published in English or because of the changing social limitations inside Saudi Arabia. It is also important to note that the Arabic version was released only after women were permitted to drive and after Al-Sharif acknowledged her attempts to lift the ban on women driving. She writes that she tried to record these experiences in order to explain the details of [her]

participation in the campaign She details her experience of driving a car by herself and discusses the courageous positions of women and men who have challenged injustice.

Al-Sharif states that, given the many lies and rumours that circulated about the campaign, she wanted to write her autobiography for her son. Encouraged by friends who suggested she publish her memoirs, Al-Sharif went to a number of Arabic publishing companies, where she was met with silence, disregard, or explicit rejection because the subject of the book was considered “too sensitive.” She explains that she

wrote it with all sincerity, and I tried to look at myself, with all my sins, fears, frustrations, and hopes... I wrote to express my rejection of fatwas, to look at myself in a subdued way, and I scrawled my voice of sedition and defiled my face. I wrote to women who paid dearly to have their freedom of choice.

Ultimately, she wrote her autobiography, she notes, because she loves her country; this was not an attempt to criticize Saudi Arabia. Al-Sharif constructed herself as a good patriot and a good mother. This is first seen in her status as an Islamic person who has the right to talk about and critique her society but, she embraces the modern version of Islam. She further consolidates her speech by claiming that she writes as a mother; that is, she writes for her son. Here, motherhood is a way to claim she is a good woman with the ability to speak. Her right to speak is thus supported by her patriotism, Islamic status and respectable femininity (through her motherhood).

### **HUDA AL-DAGHFAQ**

Huda Al-Daghfaq is a Saudi poet, novelist, journalist and academic. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Language and Arabic Literature and has published several books, including *The Shadow to the Top* (1993), *The New Flame* (2003), and *The Tale of Pain* (2011). In addition, she has published a collection of English and Spanish works, *A Feather that does not Fly* (2008), as well as other Spanish-language books, and she writes for several Saudi newspapers,

including *Al-Jazira*, *Riyadh*, *Al-Yamamah*, *Al-Bilad*, *Al-Hayat*, and the *Middle East*. The main focus of her writing is women's issues and women's rights in Saudi society. Throughout her writing career, Al-Daghfaq has experienced backlash from the public because of her opinions.

Al-Daghfaq was born in 1967 in Al-Kharj, a rural area near the capital. She describes her city through the hobbies that helped her to escape her rural world, saying,

since my childhood, I have been trying to discover a world different from the one I lived in. Not because I reject my simple rural world, but a passion that looks beyond the boundaries. At that time, my father had a radio, which I borrowed whenever he was busy or had abandoned it. I took the radio to my room for a private session decorated with music or poetry. I listened to the voices of the world... outside my country. Although I come from a religious family and should not listen to music, my father was not discouraging of my hobbies and remained neutral to my listening to music. I have been in contact with literature through listening to Arabic radio stations, such as Radio Cairo, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, and the Arabic-language international radio stations, including Radio Netherlands, Monte Carlo, India, and Iran. I have continued with some of these radio stations through correspondence or direct participation. All this noise came during my high school years. The radio was a companion to me, and I have always recorded important meetings, poems written by the poets I loved, and rich dialogues, and I listened attentively and carefully. I picked up literature and then wrote it and published it in the Saudi literary pages or in a new poetry text (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, p. 117).

Al-Daghfaq also highlights an emotional connection with the city through her friends, who not only shared the same intellectual interests but they have strong relationship (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, p. 136-137).

Al-Daghfaq was raised in an average-sized family, which usually consists of between 7-9 children. She notes that she was in the “middle [of] nine siblings: four males and five females. My father married a second wife at the beginning of the new millennium, so we increased later to thirteen siblings” (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, p. 83). In her autobiography, Al-Daghfaq describes her relationships with her brothers but does not mention her sisters. However, she has a different perspective regarding the effects of tribal families in central Saudi Arabia, which she compares with the western part of the country, where families are more exposed to other cultures and tend to embrace a more open-minded culture. For example, she writes that families in the western region of Saudi Arabia raise girls to have strong personalities and raise boys to respect their sisters, which allows them to have better relationships with their future partners. In contrast, tribal families in central Saudi Arabia raise boys to control their sisters’ lives, which can negatively impact the girls’ futures. She also compares Saudi and Arab women who have, to some extent, achieved freedom from family domination over their personal affairs. However, Saudi women are still subject to the authority of some personal status laws which are based on ancestral customs and traditions. These laws are unfair to women and exaggerate men’s rights by giving men the right to dispose of their affairs. Here, Al-Daghfaq does not provide examples of how personal status laws applied to “other Arab women” have advanced, and she dismisses the impact of colonialism in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, where there are laws that allow rapists to marry their victims.

Through her tribal family, Al-Daghfaq had the support of her parents as well as her older brother. She notes that

[t]here is a special pleasure to spending leisure time and sharing food with my father and brothers, although one of my brothers expels me whenever he sees me and tells me to go to the harem space as this is men's space. Sometimes my father protects me from my

brother's authority and sometimes he remains silent. [...] If my brothers played outside, I followed them and played defense or goalkeeper. In spite of the painful blows I received as a result of the violent game, I did not stop playing with my brothers. [...] My older brother was my role model, my second father, and my friend. He never reprimanded me, but always defended me and stopped some of my brothers from hurting me. [...] [My] relationship with my brother who was eleven months younger than me was dry and stormy with quarrels. We have fought each other, but I did not let him get anything out of me. The quarrel between us continued until he married and changed his position; after that, he became more affectionate and appreciated me. (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, pp. 83-84)

Despite the fact Al-Daghfaq's father did not obtain higher degrees and came from a tribal family and a conservative society, he supported Al-Daghfaq's education and career choice. She believes that her father is more well-rounded, and states that he

did not complete his studies and was not well-educated. But his cultural behaviour made me dream of marrying a man like him. His culture was not a culture of names, books, concepts, or templates of words and ideas, but was instead a culture of reality and life. (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, p. 86)

There was another male figure in Al-Daghfaq's life who provided her with the newest and most well-known books and magazines and who supported her when she eventually revealed her name in the newspaper:

My mother's brother had a great influence on my education and my passion for reading and self-awareness. He had a different attitude toward women. He used to work at Dhahran Airport and every time he visited us, he provided us with Gulf cultural books and

magazines. He encouraged me to write and criticized the positions taken by some of my negative brothers after I published my name. (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, p. 87)

This relationship with her uncle provides another indication of how Al-Daghfaq's family interacted with her desire for freedom and choice to expand her opportunities. Al-Daghfaq notes that she always found a middle ground:

When I was 16 years old, my family accepted my desire to be alone in my own room. I had long vacated myself in the upper room of our house and called it a monastery. If my family was leaving the house, traveling to Riyadh or elsewhere, and I did not want to go, my father did not force me to do so. I had unleashed the birds of liberty in the skies above my family, and they embraced me. (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, p. 144)

Al-Daghfaq also writes about expanding her educational opportunities:

After graduating from high school in 1986, I wanted to complete my university studies in the city of Riyadh. However, my family refused to stay in the student dormitory, which was set up by the university for those who came from outside Riyadh. After my enrollment, I learned that there was a bus that would transport students from Al-Kharj to Riyadh every day. I went to university at dawn and came back to our house in the evening. (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, p. 95)

Al-Daghfaq notes that her father judiciously regulated her relationships with other men, which she is very proud of. She writes, "my father gave me rights that no other father gave to his daughter at the time. He authorized me to talk to some intellectuals and the media and he and my mother took turns listening to my calls" (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, p. 86).

Al-Daghfaq's autobiography criticizes the social reality and traditions, such as the laws regulating women's personal status in Saudi Arabia, and she addresses the patriarchal legal system.

She likewise details the support offered by her family, as well as their resistance to her publishing her name in the press. In addition, she discusses her experience as a female writer in the literary world and addresses the opportunities that she was given, both inside and outside of Saudi Arabia. Like the other autobiographies featured in the current study, there is a certain emphasis on collecting images associated with Saudi women's lives, which includes the hindrance of the hijab, the impact of Wahhabism, and the negative influence of tribalism.

Al-Daghfaq's autobiography is divided into five chapters: "An Apple of My Deferred Life," "Out of the Tent," "My Blackness and his Whiteness," "My Incomplete Autobiography," and "Last Stand." The first chapter begins with a homogeneous image of all Saudi women, which Al-Daghfaq considers the Saudi female identity. She assures the reader that she is not from another planet, nor is she geographically obscure; she is simply a woman from Saudi Arabia. She goes on to challenge the reader's conception of Saudi women through a poetic monologue:

A woman, like thousands of women in this Holy Land. Look at the hump of taboos on my back, I almost sway under their weight. My female ancestors in the Jahiliyyah were prone to female infanticide at the moment of their birth, but I am fed up being killed every day in this rigid, maddened, violent society. The society that seeks to deprive me of oxygen. I could be choked by the burqa. I look with cloudy eyes at the mirage of my deferred life and it seems like there is always a wind of change (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, p. 13).

In the first chapter of her autobiography, she describes the lack of opportunities available for women in Saudi Arabia and notes that she wanted to seize every opportunity she could, such as studying abroad. She writes that she felt oppressed by her family and mentions that as in, Al-Daghfaq got married and divorced after a while. Al-Daghfaq also provides a glimpse into the typical events of a Saudi woman's life by describing her own life without overtly stating that the

narrative is about her. Thus, by referring to the general image of a Saudi woman, she does not associate herself explicitly with the same experience, which can be read as a method of homogenizing Saudi women's experiences even though Al-Daghfaq has experienced different forms of freedom through her family. She questions how she can reveal herself within a masculine society, and she refers to herself as a subaltern who does not have freedom of expression.

Here, Al-Daghfaq not only produces homogenous/stereotypical images of Saudi women, but it is also her strategy to claim that she is one of them. She establishes her right to speak like any other Saudi woman because she is one. Therefore, she has the right to speak about Saudi women's experiences. By claiming the status of a Saudi women, she is also representing them as a large homogenous group. As she mentioned, "I am one of them I am subaltern." Al-Daghfaq (2011) notes,

I feel disappearance and death over the long distance between what women have achieved in other geographic spaces and what I miss here in this desert that corrupts the spirit. I am an oppressed woman who lives in double sorrow: sorrow from living in a very closed environment and feeling overburdened with taboos, and a feeling of sorrow for being a writer in a masculine society that invades with all its weapons and ammunition just because my name was in the newspaper. What if my picture appeared along with what I write? (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, p.15)

Al-Daghfaq (2011) says that her motivation for writing this autobiography to document her experience as a woman in a thousand chains, she says that she "will venture and confess, discuss and shake my tree of pain and wait for an apple of my deferred life." (Al-Daghfaq, 2011, p.15)



Here, she not only represents Saudi women's experiences through the inclusion of stereotypical images, but she also creates an Orientalist binary between her oppressed geography and a place where she assumes that women can live without any kind of social limitations or gender discrimination.

When Al-Daghfaq was asked in an interview why she chose the title, *I Tear the Burqa... I See*, she answered,

The title - from my point of view - is a radical addition to the book and a key to the general ideas within. In the book's introduction, I wrote: "Everything that prevents myself, everything that prevents my vision, I will close within a veil, to see and to be seen" (Al-Daghfaq, 2011).

This opening explained that the meaning goes beyond a veil that covers the face, to the veil that covers the vision. The veil of the self from others. Using that metaphor, I wanted to point out the obvious differences, and the duality of our Arab societies in general, in a way that mixes the ideological with the purely traditional. This led them to come out of my senses in the Arab mentality, which led to their backwardness and the destruction and framing of their cognitive, intellectual, and humanitarian framework with the framework of extremism, sectarianism, and so on (Al Abdali, 2013).

When asked whether her work has provoked controversy, Al-Daghfaq answered,

There are readers who deal with the thought - especially the literature from the sense of retaliation. So, they survey and become hostile. They tend to distort the writing in general. I almost realized that this is a characteristic of readers from an ignorant society, where

readers and commenters find a healthy environment to encourage their persistence, and where subordination is not discussed, but is followed and believed. My book was preoccupied with young Saudi society, with the tools of social media, and its launch coincided with the Arab revolutions. In our local Arab societies, portraying women in any form can alert the state to elements of honour, masculinity, and false tribalism (Al Abdali, 2013).

#### **RECEPTION OF AL-DAGHFAQ'S WORK:**

Ramadan (2011) believes that Al-Daghfaq's book can be classified as a kind of cultural biography that intersects with social anthropology and creativity on one hand and with human thought and reality on the other. It is a book that establishes a confrontation between the creative self, placed inside an analytical laboratory, and censorship in its most conservative form. Al-Ghamdi (2017) points out that autobiographical books are now ranked first or second on the list of best-sellers in Saudi Arabia, especially autobiographies written by writers who desire to reform and contribute to the development of their society. He stresses that the act of writing an autobiography is an experience that enriches the author's self-knowledge and states that Saudi writers try to write about themselves but do not disclose their personal identities, relying instead on multiple tricks to camouflage these identities. Al-Daghfaq's book, *I Tear the Burqa... I See*, is a model for writing an autobiography. She has the courage to talk about herself and her life in detail. Al-Ghamdi (2017) notes that this writing enables the writer to eliminate the state of fear that inhabits it and to show its march in the form of multiple chapters, although the chapters are short.

## CONCLUSION

To better understand the common themes shared by these four writers, I will analyze each author's writing style and the issues each author addresses. Al-Amoudi's *Memoirs of a Saudi Woman* was published at a time when certain Saudi women were being categorized as "the first Saudi women" to raise their voices. This depiction can be seen even on the book's cover, which features a photo of the author without a veil in order to market the Saudi woman's experience. Al-Sharif, Al-Khamis, and Al-Daghfaq incorporate the stereotypical image of a Saudi woman in the titles of their books, drawing on ideas of the veil, freedom, and masculinity. The cover of Al-Daghfaq's book shows a woman's eyes covered by a colourful veil, which is a departure from the black veil that Saudi women typically wear. The cover of Al-Sharif's book also shows a woman's eyes, but in the reflection of a car's rear-view mirror to symbolize Saudi women's freedom to drive. The Arabic title of Al-Sharif's book is also different and translates from *Daring to Drive: A Saudi Woman's Awakening to Driving Toward Freedom*. The modification of the book's title may be related to a desire to remove the emphasis on rebellion in order to publish the book in Saudi Arabia.

Al-Khamis, Al-Daghfaq, and Al-Amoudi share similar feminist ideas in their books, including giving women custody rights or the right to hold their own passports and travel independently. In the early 2000s, discussing these issues was not considered problematic, and there were not considered sensitive topics. On the contrary, these issues were discussed on a daily basis in the newspapers and on talk shows. The trajectory of the discussion shows that women were living as victims of certain interpretations of Islam and of tribal principles that hindered their rights. Thus, discussions of women's rights did not have the same political stigma as did foreign interventions. However, in 2016, Saudi feminists like Al-Sharif began using different platforms, such as Twitter, to mobilize their audience both inside and outside the country. Digital space

allowed women's rights to become a politicized issue on a larger scale, which was not available before 2016. Therefore, discussions of women's rights become problematic as the media portrayed feminist activities outside of the government narrative of empowerment as an attempt to sabotage Saudi women's minds.

The style of writing used by Al-Khamis and Al-Daghfaq occasionally involves the use of a third-person narrator and creative writing that relies on metaphorical images and complex Arabic language. Such use of complex language implies that these works are mainly geared toward an intellectual audience, which helps the writers avoid restrictions and censorship because this language depends on an open interpretation. Al-Amoudi and Al-Sharif, by comparison, use very accessible language that is fairly easy for a general audience to understand. The authors' different experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives does not affect how each reads the status of Saudi women as each focus on common themes of women's oppression.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **ANALYSIS OF COMMON THEMES ACROSS FOUR AUTOBIOGRAPHIES**

#### **IMAGES OF CONSERVATIVE SOCIETY**

Each of the four female authors included in this study seem to believe that images of conservative society can be seen in girls' education. For example, Al-Khamis (2011) documents intellectual references in the girls' educational system, noting that the pedagogical model employed by this system is deeply influenced by the ideological conflicts that exist in the Arab world: the conflict between the leftist and nationalist parties on one side and the Islamic party on the other. Hence, education has been used by Islamists as one tool of confrontation against the counterparty that is trying to undermine the legitimacy of the state. Al-Khamis (2011) argues that, in 1958, there were social concerns about girls' education as many of the groups and individuals who formed the intellectual foundations of the Islamic ideologues that politicized Islam were living in Saudi Arabia as political refugees. Therefore, King Saud sought to reassure these opponents by establishing a supervisory body headed by the country's Grand Mufti, who was assigned the task of organizing girls' schools, developing the curriculum, and monitoring their progress. Thus, the authoritarian image of women's education has become a bearded sheikh who is a graduate of a religious institution. Al-Khamis admits that this approach helped girls' education to achieve social acceptance and overcome many obstacles.

Al-Sharif (2017) likewise explains how religious orientation changed girls' education and made girls' schools look like detention centres, where the female students were ignored. Girls' schools had solid gates and the only men allowed on the grounds were the school guards, who stood in front of the entrance. The school windows were closed, and there were no playgrounds for sports nor spaces for recreational activities because of the religious orientation of the country

as a whole. Al-Sharif claims that this climate of extremism was created by the Awakening Movement of the 1980s.

According to Al-Amoudi, education in Saudi Arabia is hijacked by a single-minded militant group. This group chooses religious texts with no flexibility or centrism, which is consistent with hard-line thought, and excludes texts that provide space, freedom, and social enlightenment. This is what we see in our educational curriculum.

Al-Daghfaq (2011) notes that, during the 1980s, the Juhayman incidents were exploited by extremists, which had an influence on public awareness, future generations, and the production of creative and literary works due to the rising trend toward publishing religious fatwas that criminalized certain thoughts and intellectuals. Al-Daghfaq admits that, as an adolescent, she was affected by religious ideology and allowed that ideology to influence her awareness when it was promoted in the schools.

Al-Ibrahim (2014) believes that there are similarities between Al-Khamis's autobiography, and the experiences depicted by Azar Nafisi in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Nafisi writes about her attempt to read the reality of Iran following the revolution, when the Mullahs controlled, governed, and changed the shape of the state. Nafisi was studying and reading the novel, *Lolita*, in Iran after the Islamic Revolution, an act that was itself taboo. Nafisi considers teaching an act of resistance to the state system. Nafisi considers teaching an act of resistance to the state system, unlike Al-Khamis, who, despite her attempts to resist the marginalization of women, eventually surrendered and admits that her work was monotonous and automatic. Thus, Al-Khamis resigned from her job with the educational system. Al-Ibrahim (2014) considers these two writers similar in many ways, the first religious character of the two countries, and believes their experiences were similar to Al-Ibrahim's experience of growing up in Syria, a country that does not have the same religious

character. In the 1980s, the same period that Nafisi and Al-Khamis write about, Syria was fighting everything Islamic, starting with removing women's headscarves on the street and forcing women to remove their headscarves before the flag or while chanting. "We began our school day by pledging to eliminate the Muslim Brotherhood, a criminal gang". Rather than missing out on extracurricular activities, as was Al-Khamis's experience, Al-Ibrahim was provided with a military education and was taught to dismantle and reassemble a weapon. There was no distinction between female and male students, as all were considered "soldiers of the country." These experiences were not directly related to a religious system, but to a system that takes the form of a dictatorship, either directly or indirectly, which I believe is wrong. How is it possible to have a system without any ideology?!

Al-Ibrahim shows that it is not only in cases of extreme religious ideology that women's education is affected, as Nafisi and Al-Khamis claim, but it is also in their personal experiences of a radical secular state that women find their rights and choices limited.

### **THE IMAGE OF THE VEIL**

In Al-Daghfaq's (2011), Al-Khamis's (2011), and Al-Sharif's (2017) respective autobiographies, the image of the veil constantly appears as a symbol of oppression, not as a choice. Al-Amoudi (2015), however, mentions the veil as her personal choice, writing,

When I was a medical student, I was in training at the military hospital in Jeddah. One day, a British nurse said to me: "One day I will see you in London, wearing jeans and without this hijab". I told her it will not happen. After more than forty years, I am giving thanks to God for the blessing of the hijab.

Al-Amoudi (2015) goes on to say,

When I got married, my husband asked me to wear a veil. I was young and beautiful. I agreed and said to myself it is an increase in credit, but it does not mean that I am forbidden from exposing my face, because the beauty of this religion is that it is a religion of multiple choices. So, I stayed behind the niqab after my divorce because I was used to wearing it. But after a period of time, when I decided to enter the media and raise awareness, I had to show my face without the veil.

I believe that Al-Amoudi (2015) sacrificed her choice in order to be present in the Saudi media after 9/11, as demonstrated by the fact that she uncovered her face when she received her International Women of Courage award in America.

In Al-Daghfaq's work, the image of the veil is associated with the idea of an oppressive society. Even though she does not wear the burqa in her daily life, she believes the burqa symbolizes the harsh traditional values that deprive women of their rights in society (Al-Ghamidi, 2017). Al-Sharif (2017), meanwhile, illustrates how the different stages of her life, her experiences, and the places she has lived, both within and outside of Saudi Arabia, have changed her perspective regarding whether to wear the veil and hijab. In her early adolescence, Al-Sharif chose to wear the veil, though she changed her mind after living in the Aramco compound, which was dominated by foreigners who were not committed to the Saudi social and religious dress code.

I believe the static image of the veil as a symbol of oppression, lack of agency, and opposition to modernity, as presented in Saudi women's narratives, is linked to the legacy of colonialism. Grewal (2005) traces this idea historically and compares the freedoms gained by English women in the nineteenth century to the lack of freedom experienced by colonized women, noting that the practice of unveiling has long been a colonial method of exercising power either to "save" or to "destroy" colonized women. Hoodfar (1993) explains that the colonial context



produces the static and unchanging meaning of the veiled woman, which does not reflect the function of the veil within Muslim cultures, wherein it has multiple meanings that are full of contradictions. Although the veil used to serve the patriarchal system and control women's lives, Muslim women now utilize the same social institutions to dismantle the constraints of these very patriarchies (Hoodfar, 1993). For example, one woman may see the hijab as an essential example of the patriarchal oppression of women, while another woman may see the veil as a way to free herself by protecting her chastity and may believe that wearing the veil in public is a religious and noble act. She may believe the veil highlights her piousness and her presence as an individual, rather than acting as a static thing (Doaiji, 2014).

Nevertheless, through the colonial context, we can perceive the veil as a marker of oppressive religious practice, despite the reality that veiled Muslim women, “like all other women, are social actors, employing, reforming, and changing existing social institutions, often creatively, to their own ends” (Hoodfar, 1993, p. ). This understanding forces us to question how the veil is presented in each of the four autobiographies, as each author first considered the veil a method of obstructing Saudi women’s agency. Questions arise regarding the correlation between discussions of each woman’s choice to wear the veil and the level of modernity and liberation presented in each of these Saudi women's narratives.

According to the historical and political review provided in Chapter Two, there are three phases to the development of the veil in the context of Saudi Arabia, two of which are included in the four autobiographies. The first phase is the compulsory veil, which has been intensely promoted in girls’ schools, mosques, and nearly everywhere else in Saudi Arabia as a result of the Awakening Movement of the 1980s. However, there are two misconceptions about this phase. First, it is assumed that the veil was worn identically across all parts of Saudi Arabia before the

1980s; this is not accurate. Each part of Saudi Arabia had its own religious interpretation of Islam and its own social contexts, which resulted in veiling in some parts of the country and unveiling in other parts. Second, the compulsory veiling of the 1980s was not confined to Saudi Arabia and occurred in several Muslim countries as a response to global religious changes, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

The second phase of development of the veil occurred after 9/11, when it became a heated topic of public discussion as part of the changing image of Saudi Arabia as a conservative country. However, two conflicting trajectories developed during this period, wherein Saudi media highlighted the roots of compulsory veiling as an indication of the lack of tolerance or acceptance of women's decisions to unveil themselves, which was primarily because the country was perceived as a religious and tribal society. Meanwhile, women in Saudi Arabia were forced by the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, which is governed by the Saudi state, to wear the veil.

The final phase of the veil in Saudi society came about after the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice was suspended in 2017. Women in Saudi Arabia have since been seen wearing different coloured hijabs, both with and without the veil. Public discussions now focus primarily on the perception of women's choice to wear the veil as indicative of family oppression and on the idea that veiled women are forfeiting job opportunities because of their personal or familial choices regarding the veil. These questions, however, have not been the central focus of liberal and Western feminists, who demand respect for each woman's decision of whether to wear the veil. Al-Ghadeer (2018) concludes that there are continued attempts to understand and defend Saudi women and their rights across most Western and local newspapers and in cyberspace, including social media campaigns. This continued attempts to understand Saudi

women's rights raises the question of whether Saudi women who choose to wear the veil will continue to be supported by Western feminists.

### **THE DILEMMA OF GENDER SEGREGATION**

In each of the four autobiographies discussed in this study, gender segregation is the main issue as it affects women's roles within their families, changes how men and women communicate with each other, reduces women's job opportunities in mixed spaces with men, and affects both men's and women's sexual orientation.

Al-Sharif (2017) writes that "when the Americans sold Aramco to the Saudis in the 1970s and 1980s, part of the agreement required the Saudis to continue to employ women" (p.). In the Arabic version of this text, she adds, "because of that, I was able to work for the company and live in the compound, which has a different situation." Not only does Al-Sharif recognize the influence of American culture for empowering her in a non-segregated space that had been founded because of Saudi resources, but she also ignores the fact that she earned her degree in computer science from a segregated space where she was not required to pay tuition fees, as education is free in Saudi Arabia. It was her degree in computer science, not the fact that she was a woman, that allowed her to work for Aramco, a company with high standards of employment that targeted highly educated people.

On the other hand, Al-Khamis's (2011) work provides an essential description of women's agency within the private sphere. She writes that

the educational institution has discovered the map of the mysterious cities of women and has given them the opportunity to enter formal text. Before that, women had been submerged in the margins of history for a long time. There is no female in Saudi Arabia who has not been marked by the stamp of the General Presidency of Girls' Education, including those who have worked or taught in private schools. (p. 15)

Al-Khamis notes that, although tribal families have raised questions about girls who work in hospitals and banks, and have sometimes even interrupted their engagement on the pretext of mixing with men, the ideal model would seem to work and to have a steady income, but on an island, completely disrupted by men. As teachers, women's work has social value because of their economic value.

I believe the private sphere allows Saudi women to advance their role in education, as demonstrated by Al-Daghfaq (2011) and Al-Khamis (2011), who both hold higher positions because of the demand for educated women to serve the same gender. Al-Khamis's experiences, for example, show her agency: first, through her personal education journey; then through her leadership journey; and finally, through her career writing about women's issues.

However, Al-Amoudi (2015) explains the changing rules of gender segregation from what she considers the norm for Saudi society before the 1980s, when men and women were able to mix, to what she considers abnormal which the gender segregation. She notes that, in the 1970s, we had a blind male teacher enter the girls' school and that was a normal thing. As he was entering the school, one female student held his hand and led him to the female classroom. There was a room for male teachers next to the room for female teachers. Al-Amoudi (2015) goes on to write, "when I say this to my children, they wonder how mixing between men and women was possible in the 1970s."

Al-Amoudi notes that there was no gender separation within Saudi homes. For example, in her family, men and women sat together and drank tea together. Then, in the 1980s, gender separation happened everywhere in Saudi Arabia. The Faculty of Medicine and work at the hospital, however, did not change as it was not possible to say that a certain surgery could only be attended by female doctors or by male doctors. Similarly, Al-Daghfaq (2011) notes that gender

separation contributed to the breakdown of the family because there were no family or cultural recreational clubs that allowed both sexes to attend together. Commercial places and malls had certain set times for men who were not in the company of a female relative which called family hours. Here, Al-Daghfaq attributes the disintegration of the family to a lack of accessible public spaces that allowed for the inclusion of all family members. For example, male teenagers could not meet their male friends at the mall during the designated family hours, so their mothers did not know about their behaviours and activities because of gender segregation.

Each of the four writers had different experiences in private spaces within different areas of Saudi Arabia and different cultural environments. However, they tend to paint a similar image of Saudi conservatism. For example, Al-Sharif notes that girls had the opportunity to play sports and attend plays at a public university in Jeddah because King Abdulaziz University began as a private university and continued to offer the same facilities when it became public, choosing not to follow the religious regulations imposed on society. This is the opposite of Al-Khamis's and Al-Daghfaq's experiences of attending girls' colleges in the capital city, which included some limitations. The differences between these women's experiences challenge the stereotype that all women's spheres in Saudi Arabia are subject to the same rules and restrictions simply because of culture or religion.

Al-Daghfaq (2011), Al-Amoudi (2015), Al-Khamis (2011), and Al-Sharif (2017) all agree that gender separation led to the phenomenon of *boyat*, which comes from the English word, *boy*, and describes a girl who acts and looks like a boy and has emotional and sexual relationships with members of the same sex. Al-Khamis (2011) argues that this phenomenon is not only limited to students but exists even among teachers. She believes that gender separation led women to engage in same-sex relationships because they could not engage in relationships with men and led men to

commit acts of pedophilia because they could not engage in relationships with women. Al-Khamis (2011) assumes that homosexuality is caused by gender segregation, and that these barriers create changes in human nature that are both anomalous and perverted.

Building on Al-Khamis's position, Youssef (2017) offers a reinterpretation of the Qur'anic position on homosexuality, using Arabic lexicography and the readings of medieval Muslim scholars like Tabarī and al Rāzī, who believed that the Qur'an denounced rape rather than homosexuality. Youssef argues that semantic methods are used to demonize homosexuality in modern Islam and highlights a discrepancy between the meaning of homosexuality in the Qur'an and the current definitions proposed by religious scholars, which contradict the essence of the Qur'an and medieval Muslim acceptance of homosexuality.

Youssef has proposed various interpretations of the Qur'an. For example, in the Amramites 3:14 (*Qur'an*, Edition), God says, "[a]lluring to the people are worldly pleasures such as women, having children, piles upon piles of gold and silver" (Qur'an 3:14, Oxford World's Classics edition p. 106–107); here, God deems the love of women a pleasure for all people, and since women are included among the people, Youssef claims that this verse indicates that women are also attracted to other women as they are attracted to the pleasures of children and gold. This assumption is based on Arabic dictionary definitions of the word, *people*, which is not restricted to one sex or group. Instead, the Arabic word, *qawm*, is used to describe a group of men, such as in the following passage from the Qur'an (Qur'an 49:11, as cited in Youssef, 2017, p. 107): "O you who believe! Let not a people [*qawm*] deride other people, for they may be better than they. Nor shall any women ridicule other women, for they may be better than they" (Youssef, 2017, p. 107). In this way, Youssef questions why modern Arabic readers and classical commentators have not paid attention to the language used in the Qur'an in an attempt to prove that the Qur'an is a linguistic statement

that is subject to various interpretations. Thus, defining one specific truth in the Qur'an is impossible because only God possesses absolute knowledge.

Although the word, *people*, is used in the Qur'an to signify all people, not only men, modern Islamic scholars interpret this word as referring to men only; thus, in the Muslim world, the "signified" mental image for *people* refers only to men. This relationship is arbitrary in the sense that the meaning of the word, *people*, has been developed and agreed upon by modern Islamic scholars. These same scholars have defined the meaning of the Qur'an and explained the social conventions of this meaning: "to the word 'ennās' (people) as signifier and the word 'al rijāl' (men) as signified" (Youssef, 2017, p. 107). Therefore, Youssef proposes a masculine domination of modern Islamic interpretations of Qur'anic linguistics.

The meaning of the homosexuality narrative is further dismantled by Muslim scholars, who refer to homosexuality by tracing stories of *liwāt* in the Qur'an. Youssef (2017) denies that there are any explicit rules about homosexuality in the Qur'an and distinguishes between *liwāt* as an abomination and *liwāt* as homosexuality. For instance, Youssef shows how different verses in the Qur'an recall the abomination committed by the People of Lot: "[a]nd Lot said to his people, 'You commit an abomination that no one in the world has ever done before! You lust after men and not women. Surely a wanton people you are'" (*Qur'an* 7:80-81, as cited in Youssef, 2017); "[d]o you lust after men of all people and leave your wives which God created for you? Surely a transgressing people you are" (*Qur'an* 26:165–166, p. 108–109); "[a]nd Lot said to his people, 'How could you knowingly commit such an abomination? You lust after men and not women. Surely an ignorant people you are'" (*Qur'an* 27:54–55, edition); "[a]nd Lot said to his people, 'You commit an abomination that no one in the world has ever done before. You lust after men and commit robbery on highways and evil in your meetings'" (*Qur'an* 29:28–29, p. 109). In each of these passages, the

meaning of *liwāt* refers to the abominations associated with the activities of Lot's People when they "[lust] after men, [commit] highway robbery, and commit evil acts in gatherings" (*Qur'an* 29:29, edition).

Youssef (2017) clarifies that the abomination committed by the People of Lot was not about homosexual desire, but about condemning activities that intimidate and threaten others, either physically or psychologically, including raping, insulting, and throwing stones. This is illustrated by the use of *Tabarī* (a Muslim scholar) in the story of Lot's People, when Lot was concerned about his guests' safety and was supposed to defend them, as the core idea of defense lies in protecting those who are prone to certain dangerous actions, not those who have the option of refusing to perform an action. Youssef notes that al *Rāzī* confirmed that Lot "was worried about them [the guests] from his people's wickedness and that they may be unable to defend themselves" (Youssef, 2017, p. 112). Youssef underlines the impossibility of developing resistance among people who desire to perform, or to accept, an act and expands on *Tabarī*'s meaning of Lot's statement as an explicit discussion of rape: "[d]o not shame me through my guests ... Do not humiliate me! In riding my guests against their will, you are riding me" (Youssef, 2017, p. 112). *Tabarī* may also refer to the guests' hatred of the People of Lot's desires:

Lot said to his people: "Those you came to rape are my guests. It is a man's duty to honor his guest. Do not shame me, o people, through my guests. Honor me by renouncing your intent to harm them." (Youssef, 2017, p. 112)

Based on these demonstrations of Islamic heritage, Youssef (2017) concludes that the abomination committed by the People of Lot was not only about beating, stone-throwing, and raping men, but also about robbing people. The view of other Islamic commentators is that God punished the People of Lot because of their infidelity.



Throughout the long history of Islam, same-sex relationships have been accepted and accommodated. Examples of this acceptance can be found in the poetry of Abū Nawwās (756–814) and in the work of Andalusian scholar Ibn Hazm, whose book, *The Ring of the Dove* (994–1064), provides “his famous treatise on the philosophy of the Arab love story about Hippocrates and a man who had fallen in love with him without any indication that same-sex love was even a moral issue from his medieval Muslim perspective” (Youssef, 2017, p. 12). According to Afary and Anderson (2005), Islamic heritage is rich with homosexual literature. For example, classical Persian literature includes poems written by Attar (d. 1220), Rumi (d. 1273), Sa’di (d. 1291), Hafez (d. 1389), and Jami (d. 1492), which were full of homoerotic allusions and described the beauty of sodomy. Annemarie Schimmel notes that several books from the Abbasid period feature love stories about “Sufis” (Islamic mystics), who directed their admiration toward boys, disciples, and foreigners (Afary & Anderson, 2005, p. 156).

Furthermore, Islamic classical poetry includes some well-known love relationships between kings and their male slaves, indicating that homosexuality and homoerotic practices were acceptable outside the court and in public spaces, such as seminaries, taverns, military camps, bathhouses, and coffee houses. During the Safavid period (1501–1722), there were legal houses of male prostitution that paid state taxes (Afary & Anderson, 2005, p. 156). Bathhouses and coffee houses were also popular places to engage in “illicit sex” (Afary & Anderson, 2005, p. 156). Thus, throughout Islamic and Arabic history, there is an abundance of evidence to suggest that homosexuality and homoerotic practices were acceptable. As Youssef notes in *The Perplexity of a Muslim Woman: Over Inheritance, Marriage, and Homosexuality* (2017), the difference between *sihāq* and *liwāt* is that *liwāt* is mentioned several times in Qur’anic verses, while the *sihāq* narrative remains absent. Youssef questions why we accept that *liwāt* signifies male homosexuality in the

Qur'an but do not mention female homosexuality or *sihāq*. Is this because *sihāq* contradicts the values of the Qur'an, which include obedience and punishment between men and women? For example, God says,

Whoever does righteous acts, whether male or female, while he is a believer, verily, to him We will give a good life, and We shall pay them certainly a reward in proportion to the best of what they used to do. (*Qur'an* 16:97, edition)

Through her interpretations of medieval Muslim scholars, including Tabarī and al Rāzī, Youssef argues that the Qur'an condemned and punished Lot's People for their behaviour – beating, stone-throwing, raping men, and highway robbery – and not for their sexual orientations. The differences in interpretation and experience of homoerotic relationships and spaces and the fluidity of gender distinct from western conceptions point to the necessity of more exploration of segregated women's spaces with a sensitivity to Islamic traditions and histories, as these spaces may not necessarily be oppressive by definition. Framing these issues from the Islamic perspective opens up the possibilities for alternative understanding not completely overwhelmed by Orientalism.

### **UNDERSTANDING SAUDI WOMEN'S AGENCY, REPRESENTATION, AND RESISTANCE**

Vishwanath (2012) defines agency as “the capacity and authority to act” and states that this agency “underpins an individual's ability to shape her own life: freedom of choice, expression, and decision making” (p. 55). In each of the autobiographies included in this study, there is a tendency to act against the state and to counter the state's discriminatory policies against women. For example, Manal Al-Sharif documents the journey of a Saudi woman who is unhappy with the double standard that allows female American soldiers to drive freely on Saudi streets while prohibiting Saudi women from doing the same. Consequently, a campaign was launched in November 1990 in which 47 Saudi women drove through the streets of Riyadh to protest the ban

(Begum, 2107). The police arrested the women and required their guardians to sign pledges that the women would not drive or organize further protests under threat of losing their passports and their jobs. In 2011, Al-Sharif found other women who were willing to challenge this policy and drive their cars along with her. In her autobiography, Al-Sharif (2017) mentions that a police officer told her not to worry because she would “be here for a couple of days. It is just pinching your ear” (p. 14), referring to a mild form of punishment. She adds that when the officer verbally abused her and refused to allow her to talk to her son, she remembered the advice she was given by an activist friend who had been in a similar situation. This friend had advised Al-Sharif to “give them two tears, say she was sorry” (Al-Sharif ,2017, p.25), and the police [or whichever agency had her imprisoned] would pity her and let her go. Al-Sharif (2017) writes that she had never cried at work, in front of her male colleagues, or in front of her husband. Thus, rather than crying and appealing to an accepted form of feminine behaviour, she said,

I'm not a criminal. I am the first woman to work in information security at the State Oil Company. I've been assigned to work in a very sensitive and important department. My company is very proud of me. I've written about in newspapers for my work, and I've done interviews with magazines. I do not deserve to be standing here being shouted at by you (Al-Sharif ,2017, p. 25).

Al-Sharif challenged the expectations of proper Saudi femininity and refused the submissive role even though it may have helped her.

Likewise, Al-Amoudi (2015) refused to be a minor and give up custody of her children after she divorced her husband, who refused to grant travel permits for them. For years, Al-Amoudi was unable to travel with her children, without justification. Then she decided to challenge the

system and used all of her network resources until she received help from the royal family, who gave her the right to be responsible for her own children.

Also, Al-Daghfaq (2011) attended a poetry event at the Al-Janadriya festival, which is the most important festival in Saudi Arabia and celebrates Saudi traditions and art. Al-Daghfaq insisted on reciting her poetry from the pulpit, which was reserved for male poets, and decided to challenge the gender separation. At that moment the moment when she attempted to read from the pulpit, the hall erupted in screams, some in support of Al-Daghfaq and others in opposition to her. The debate continued in the newspapers and online, where Al-Daghfaq was attacked as some people believed that her actions were a form of sin. However, Al-Daghfaq believes that, through this experience, she regained her authentic image of herself, without fear. That image showed her that she wanted to challenge barriers and challenge the images of women who are hidden behind walls. Al-Daghfaq challenged the social and political code and demonstrated that the representation of Saudi women.

### **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SAUDI WOMEN'S LIFE WRITING**

The current study analyzes four different autobiographies as distinct samples of life writing: *I Tear the Burqa... I See*, by Huda Al-Daghfaq (2011); *Memoirs of a Saudi Woman*, by Samia Al-Amoudi (2015); *Past, Single, Masculine*, by Omaima Al-Khamis (2011); and *Daring to Drive: A Saudi Woman's Awakening*, by Manal Al-Sharif (2017). In this study, I examine Saudi women's voices in life writing and discussing social and political changes from the 1960s to the 2000s and have considered factors that have affected women's writing in Saudi Arabian society from the 1960s to the early 2000s. The current study has explored education, Saudi nationalism, cultural wars, and geopolitical context, as well as other issues. I have also highlighted how Saudi

women have described the effects of their social-political history/context on their lives and how they have represented women's place in that context. I found that Saudi women have been raising their voices since the 1960s to discuss women's issues and other social issues. However, since the 2000s, these voices have been affected by and have interacted with global and local changes.

The four autobiographies I have considered illustrate three things. First, they show a rejection of the historical perception of Saudi women as submissive and as objects rather than subjects who can contribute to national discussion toward social issues. Second, they have contributed to recent changes, such as lifting the driving ban and appointing women to leadership positions because women have not been silent and have been a part of this evolution and changes for women's rights. Third, they show the importance of Saudi women's writing, which explains their lives and gives meaning to their experiences inside Saudi society. However, it cannot be neglected that women's writing describes how their lives have been somewhat restricted within Saudi Arabia and exploited outside of the country, which has perpetuated an extended national discussion between liberals and conservatives. Nevertheless, Saudi women's writing counteracts and resists the ways they are represented and understood both in Saudi Arabia and around the world. Despite this, there are some themes in their writing that may rely on the misrepresentation of a liberal, feminist framework to make a point, which, as a result, reproduces these problematic representations.

#### **THE PROBLEMS OF A LIBERAL/WESTERN FEMINIST FRAMEWORK FOR READING THE OPPRESSION AGAINST WOMEN:**

As Al-Ghadeer (2018) claims, Western speech cannot eliminate Orientalist metaphors about Saudi women, and Western commentators will not stop comparing Saudi gender equality issues with Western cultural principles. In addition, Al-Ghadeer (2018) explains how Saudi

women in Western and local Saudi discourse have become heroines of dramatic works. She argues that both discourses reduce the variety of representations and experiences of Saudi women to a homogeneous group with the same standards of suffering, the same class, and almost the same experiences.

I also believe that Western knowledge about Saudi women's lives has affected how Saudi women understand their lives within their own society. Firstly, it offers a different perspective from that which can be found inside the society where the Saudi state addresses the gender inequality issue by empowering women, despite all the discriminatory rules such as the male guardian system imposed by the state. The conservative, religious Saudi society is not ready for a change toward women's equality. The culture of the Saudi society is the main obstacle.

Secondly, the reason why Saudi women tend to believe the Western perspective is because of the feminist promise it offers. However, Saudi women come from different cultural contexts and subsequently have different avenues of social mobility and political agency in their society.

Al-Ghadeer (2018) illustrates how Saudi women are being marginalized, not due to the limited presumptions about their lives and agency, but because of the hierarchical social structure that continues to hinder women's agency within their society. In contrast, Al-Duaiji says that liberals necessarily view the oppression of women as a result of patriarchal and religious culture. Thus, the choices of Arab women to adhere to religious or cultural dictates will be seen not as real choices but as false choices that need to be addressed from the perspective of Western feminists. Along those lines, Alrashed (2017) believes that the state is not required to impose either a conservative or liberal vision on society; rather, its intervention must be minimized to the extent that it helps marginalized groups to advance themselves and gain their rights without imposing a

certain lifestyle upon them. This can only be done by repealing laws that discriminate against citizens.

### **LIBERAL FEMINIST FRAMEWORK AND HOMOGENOUS IMAGE:**

The four autobiographies offer different experiences and show women's advancing status in Saudi Arabia from different women's perspectives and experiences. For example, the poet Al-Dughafat (2011) and novelist Al-Khamis (2011) represent themselves as liberal women who are more concerned about issues that are available in the intellectual sphere. However, Al-Dughafat (2011) tries to present her experience as a poet heroine who challenges the social code, whereas Al-Khamis relates her experience in a girl's educational institution as a witness who is looking for reform. Al-Amoudiy (2015) considers herself a liberal, nationalistic woman who utilizes the Saudi project of promoting successful women in the media, her survival of breast cancer, and her role as an activist for the rights of female patients. Al-Sharif (2017), a liberal feminist activist, who is the youngest of the four women, has seized open online spaces, the environment of the Arab Spring, to launch a campaign to lift the ban on women driving cars (p. 207). Also, Al-Sharif, who is well known in the West (as is Al-Amoudiy) did not gain her fame in the West first, but was already well known in the Saudi media as the first successful women consultant for online security for Aramco. At the moment of her driving and arrest, she became controversial inside Saudi Arabia and a heroine outside Saudi Arabia.

Each of the four female writers included in this study came from different backgrounds, classes, perspectives, and social expectations, but each had a supportive family that allowed her to pursue a better future. For example, neither Al-Sharif's nor Al-Khamis's mother, nor Al-Amoudiy's father was a Saudi citizen, yet these authors grew up in Saudi Arabian society, which impacted them differently from the way in which Al-Daghfaq's upbringing impacted her. It was

the background of Al-Sharif's mother, not Islam or Saudi culture, that affected her decision to circumcise Al-Sharif, as Islam prohibits female circumcision (which Al-Sharif's mother admits). Al-Khamis's mother was educated in foreign English schools and emigrated to Beirut in 1948 after the Israeli occupation of Jaffa. I believe her mother's educational background during the British Mandate has affected how Al-Khamis perceives Saudi culture. Al-Amoudiy's father was from Yemen and was raised in a mix of Ethiopian and Italian cultures, which, according to his daughter, gave him a different ideological character. Al-Sharif, Al-Amoudiy, and Al-Daghfaq all came from less-educated families, whereas Al-Khamis's family was highly educated. However, all four of these writers had the opportunity to achieve their career goals despite cultural and religious regulations.

I found that each of the four writers mentioned had a good male figure in her life who not only supported her financially and emotionally but also had a significant influence on extending their possibilities. However, they did not emphasize their mother's influence as a well-educated role model or for being persistent in educating their daughters. Perhaps women's support is taken for granted more than support from male figures. Nevertheless, this implies the importance of having supporting men in their lives.

A common theme in the four writers' relationships was that they negotiated with their families to change their conditions. The core of this negotiation was to find a common ground where the families can accept the dynamic social changes in society and the female writers also can respect their families' concerns and rules. Family support was of key importance in their ability to write.

These are the unique qualities and differences among the four women; yet, they all have in common that they tend to fit the dominant narrative of the 2000s of successful and exceptional



women who fight against the traditional society. They also portray Saudi women as a homogenous group with the same standards of suffering, the same class, and almost the same experiences. This is linked to the Saudi state's interest after 9/11 and represents Saudi women within that framework. Also, this is based on a review of the prizes they have received from outside Saudi Arabia and the publishing houses' eagerness to publish narratives accusing religion and the Saudi culture of gender oppression and marginalization of women. It seems that there are constant attempts to perceive Saudi women as oppressed victims or products of heroic or more limited and simplified knowledge when related to a Western liberal feminist framework.

#### **READING THE OPPRESSION AGAINST WOMEN:**

It is clear from the contexts of the four women that Saudi families of different social and political viewpoints can contradict the static images that these authors use to represent Saudi society in their works. This contradiction raises the question of a common theme of societal accusation that runs through their narratives and portrays Saudi women's families as oppressive and limiting. By covering the themes associated with Saudi women, such as the image of the hijab, the role the tribal culture, and the impact of gender segregation, the four autobiographies show an internalized Orientalism in their discussions of these themes.

All of these images of a conservative society that each of the four authors present are the result of a Orientalist liberal understanding of society, which assumes that some part of Saudi culture led to the deterioration of Saudi women's rights. Even though the degrees of closeness and/or openness in Saudi society have changed dramatically since the 1980s, there is a value-judgement which assumes that if Saudi Arabia does not become like the West or like another modern Arabic-speaking country, Saudi society will continue to adopt antiquated views about gender that marginalize women. Thus, Al-Khader (2010) notes the importance of analyzing issues related to Saudi women's status alongside both historical and political contexts in order to

disassemble the social and political factors with which these issues are associated. This is because the state blames society's unwillingness to accept changes to women's status, which is not accurate, especially given the changes that have already taken place within the educational system (Al-Khader, 2010). I believe the repression of women should not be read off of wearing the hijab and the imposition of gender segregation as due to either the disappearance or emergence of economic or religious reasons. The repression of Saudi women must be read and analyzed within the internal or external political contexts that have influenced the choice of women to be in a public/private space or to wear the hijab or not.

### **INTERNALIZED ORIENTALISM**

Even though I perceive them to be reproducing an Orientalist discourse, the act of writing for these Saudi women is itself an exercise of their agency as it allows them to be heard, despite the polarization of their issues and the constraints of the state. I found all four writers used the Orientalism framework of "oppressed Saudi women," which allows them to speak so that others will listen. This shows that Orientalist discourse based on the four women's writing is not simply internalized; rather, it prompts women to rely upon this Orientalist framework to interpret or make claims to speak. In doing so, they reproduce Orientalism, but they offer resistance.

I found that in order to legitimize their critique, these women strengthened their voices through an Islamic framework and claiming to represent Saudi women in general, rather than displaying a personal agenda, as well as showing their lack of desire to become a public figure in politics. Simply put, to make their critique more powerful, they must be considered a modernized Islamic woman, which is part of the Saudi modernism project, including allowing this concept of modernized /Islamic women to represent. Therefore, what these four female writers are trying to do is use the allowed type of feminist voices, both "modern and Islamic," to gain their rights in Saudi Arabia now.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I discussed the periodization of women's writing by looking at three generations of women's writing, which included the 60s, the 80s, and the post-911 period. I focused on the changing social context and the types of writing that Saudi women were able to write. I also discussed their purposes in writing and how these various types of writing revealed the power women had in society. I incorporated quotes and specific examples from the autobiographies discussed to enliven the women's voices and to reveal their unique situations and contexts. I highlighted their unique features and also, the differences and similarities between the women. In writing about the contexts of the four writers selected, I started with their socioeconomic position, their background, and included their writing style, audience, and how their work was received. I ended with the narratives that they employed to justify their writing and their perspectives and the different types of authority they used to give themselves the right to speak out. I utilized all these dimensions in explaining the complexities and the differences among the women. This supports the argument of my thesis that the lives and experiences of Saudi women cannot be seen as homogenous. It shows the nature of the liberal Islamic feminist discourse within which they write and also, how they are able to challenge their constraints through that discourse. I discovered that some of the female writers did not want to state that their writing was autobiographical in order to distance themselves from the critique. Yet by refusing to be categorized as autobiography writers, they were exercising their agency. As mentioned before, this is a strategy through which they were able to legitimize their voices to be heard in Saudi society.

There are several limitations to this study. First, in this study, I did not compare and analyze the autobiographies of Saudi women in 1980 with autobiographies after 9/11. It would enrich the

study's outcomes in terms of examining the social issues on which they focus and explaining how they interpret the social and political contexts. Second, I did focus on Saudi women citizens autobiographies, which excludes immigrant women who live in Saudi Arabia and face the same challenges while contributing to women's agency in Saudi society. Third, in this study did not consider autobiographies of western women who lived in Saudi Arabia and contributed to spreading the misperceptions about Saudi women's lives. Finally, this study does not involve interviews with the authors of the autobiographies in order to detail the findings in a more in-depth way.

Many areas needing further study arose from this thesis: for example, how Saudi women translate their culture depends on whether they are writing for the Arabic reader or for the west. Do they do this as way of revealing the "secrets" of Saudi society to outsiders? Another question is whether the current progressive discourse empowering women is accessible to all Saudi women? Which women can progress and benefit from this discourse? Does the discourse serve the interest of the women themselves, the agenda of the Saudi state, western feminist interests, or something else? Alternatively, is there a wider Arab or Islamic discourse through which women can achieve the goals of feminism without referring to the typical western feminist framework? This could enable them to move away from labelling various religious, cultural, or personal practices as oppressive.

I noticed that, for some time prior to the 80s, men used to write under women's names, and this phenomenon needs further study. Was this because of a market demand for writing by women and there were not enough female writers to meet that demand? Or did the men choose to write with a woman's voice because they wanted to portray themselves as female writers? Or, did the

men choose to write through women's voices because it gave them a different space within which to discuss issues that could not legitimately be discussed under a man's name?

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