

Universal Elements in Saudi Novel: A Study of Al-Gosaibi's "Freedom Apartment" and Alem's "The Dove's Necklace"

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Received: 18-11-2014

Accepted: 29-12-2014

Published: 01-01-2015

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijclts.v.3n.1p.55

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijclts.v.3n.1p.55>

This research is supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research at Salman Bin Abdulaziz University under the research project No. 2014 / 02 / 1480.

Abstract

In spite of the short history of the Saudi fiction, compared with the genre of poetry and with the rise of novel in other Arab countries like Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq, Saudi novelists start to occupy a remarkable part of the space of Arab narration. Although Saudi novelists face the challenge of a restrictive cultural milieu, they seek to go beyond the local and regional levels and maintain a real significant universal presence. This study is a critical reaction to an outstanding attitude that colors the reception of Saudi fictional works. In reading of Saudi narrative texts readers, critics and scholars obviously focus on the local and regional aspects, and consciously or unconsciously ignore the universal perspectives that characterize their thematic and technical concerns. The study, accordingly, explores the world of Saudi fiction, concentrating on the question of universality, a concern which has been and will remain a core issue of critical and scholarly controversy. With reference to selected works, the study is an attempt to shed light on the universal aspects in Saudi novel. The basic and core premise of the study, then, is that the production of some Saudi novelists is rich in universal elements. The study concentrates on Gazi Al-Gosaibi (1940 – 2010) and Rajaa Alem (1956 – present) as writers representing the search for universality in Saudi novel. Al-Gosaibi's *Freedom Apartment* (1994) and Alem's *The Doves' Necklace* (2010) are works rich in persistent universal narrative themes and images. The main objective of the study is to show how these two texts, like many others, incarnate and present both Saudi culture and universal human values. With reference to these two novels, the researchers seek to prove the reliability of the main premise of the study.

Keywords: Challenge Saudi novel, Universal elements of novel, Human values, Culture, Comparative literature

1. Introduction

Among all genres of literature, the short story and the novel are the arts that seem to dominate the modern and contemporary literary scene in Saudi Arabia. In a conservative society, where writers face a challenging and sometimes restrictive cultural milieu, Saudi novelists seek to maintain a real significant presence, not only on the local and regional levels, but at the international one as well. The authors struggle to break the walls confining, them and to open windows to the world of creativity and universality. They try to extend the realm of their fiction from the past and the present, to the future creating unfamiliar worlds for those who believe that Saudi writers represent a surface reality of black and white and never touch the core of truth. Thus, in spite of the short history of the Saudi novel, compared with the genre of poetry and with the rise of the genre in other Arab countries like Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq, Saudi novelists start to occupy a remarkable part of the space of Arab fiction. It is enough to say that the number of Saudi novels written and published in the twentieth century is more than 200, and that the Arabic reading public and the critics start to recognize, read and follow the works of Saudi novelists like Abdulrahman Munif, Hamid Daminhuri, Ibrahim Al- Nasir, Hamza Boqari, Abdulaziz Al-Mishri, Gazi Al-Gosaibi, Turki Al-Hamad, Abdo Khal, Yousef Al- Mohaimeed, Leila Al-Johani, Rajaa Alem, Rajaa Al-Sanea, Mohamed Hassan Alwan, Fahd Al-Ateeq and Badryah El-Bisher among others.

This study explores the world of Saudi fiction, concentrating on the question of universality, a concern which has been, and will remain a core issue, and a living construct around which much critical and scholarly controversy ever revolves. Reflecting the centrality of this issue in literary thought, the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (384 B.C – 322 B.C), who with Socrates and Plato laid the groundwork and roots of Western philosophy and thought, sees poetry as finer and superior to history, saying in his *Poetics*: "Poetry is something more philosophical and of graver import than history, since its statements are rather of the nature of universals, whereas of history are singulars" (1984: 5). The words of

Aristotle show that the question of the universality of human discourse, or the character or state of being universal, has been the target of artistic creation since the Greek time. The American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896 – 1940) also assures that universality is part of the beauty of literary creation, when he states: “That is part of the beauty of all literature. You discover that your longings are universal longings, that you’re not lonely and isolated from anyone. You belong.” (2014: 1) The great German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 – 1831) describes universality as a meeting point of needs and means. He writes:

When needs and means become abstract in quality, abstraction is also a character of the reciprocal relation of individuals to one another. This abstract character, universality, is the character of being recognized and is the moment which makes things concrete, i.e. social, the isolated and abstract needs and their ways and means of satisfaction. (1952: 127)

As it is evident, Hegel sees universality as an abstract construct. Yet, this construct is only realized when creative writers succeed in presenting a literary image that touches all human needs including physical, social, psychological and philosophical aspects and how to satisfy them. The universal image, in this respect, moves from the state of abstraction to that of concrete reality.

The present study is a critical reaction to an outstanding attitude that colors the reception of many of the readers, critics and scholars of Saudi narrative works. In their reading of Saudi fictional texts, they obviously focus on the local and regional aspects, and consciously or unconsciously ignore the universal perspectives that characterize the thematic concerns and narrative strategies of these texts. The study, accordingly, is an attempt to shed light on the universal aspects in the works of some Saudi novelists. The basic and core premise of the study, then, is that the production of some Saudi novelists is rich in universal elements. The study is conducted through two research tracks. The first concentrates on Gazi Al-Gosaibi (1940 – 2010) and Rajaa Alem (1956 – present) as very much writers of the Saudi context and milieu. Through their works, they enrich the readers’ minds with the history and tradition of the Saudi scene and that of the Gulf region. The second track focuses on the fact that in spite of the seeming regionalism that their works reflect, Al-Gosaibi’s *Freedom Apartment* (1994) and Alem’s *The Doves’ Necklace* (2010) are rich in persistent universal/ human narrative themes and images. The main objective of the study is to show how these two texts, like many others, incarnate and present both Saudi culture and universal human values. Through a close reading of Al-Gosaibi’s *Freedom Apartment* “*Shiqqat-al- Hurriyah*” (1994) and Alem’s *The Doves’ Necklace* “*Tawq- al-Hamam*” (2010), the researchers seek to prove the reliability of the main premise of the study. To fulfill these objectives, the researchers adopt the interdisciplinary approach that allows them to explore the different literary, historical, cultural, moral, and philosophical factors that enhanced the advance of universal interests in Saudi fiction.

According to M. H. Abrams, the regional novel “emphasizes the setting, social structure and customs of a particular locality as important conditions affecting the characters and their way of thinking, feeling and interacting” (1988, 121). This is what most Saudi writers emphasize in their literary creation. Some Saudi novelists, however, struggle to go beyond local and regional horizons and aspire to create much wider universal themes and images. Gazi Al-Gosaibi and Rajaa Alem are two authors whose works reflect the Saudi context, milieu and culture, and at the same time approach relevant universal persistent themes. Al-Gosaibi is a liberal Saudi politician, diplomat, poet and novelist, who has become one of the prominent intellectuals in Saudi Arabia, the Gulf area and the Arab world. He published nearly 40 books in poetry, non-fiction, autobiography and novel. Rajaa Alem is also a prominent Saudi novelist. She started her writing career by writing essays in the cultural supplement of the *Riyadh Newspaper*. She published experimental plays, short stories and fiction. She won many prizes; in 2005 – the Arabic women’s creative writing prize of the UNESCO, the Lebanese Literary Club Prize in 2008 and the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), an annual literary prize run with the support of the Booker Prize Foundation in London. Both Al-Gosaibi’s *Freedom Apartment* and Alem’s *The Doves’ Necklace* were first banned in Saudi Arabia, and both were translated into English.

In his novel, *The Spire* (1964), the English novelist William Golding writes: “I am here; and here is nowhere” (1964, 18). This is exactly what universality means. It is the creation of a literary experience applicable to all and everywhere. Actually, the universality of human discourse, or the character of being universal, has been the target of great authors throughout the history of art and literature. It is the feature of becoming timeless, which gives eternity to writers like Sophocles, Chaucer, Dryden, Shakespeare, Dickens, Lawrence, Kafka, Melville, Faulkner and Eliot, and makes their works read and studied by different generations. This is what Al-Gosaibi and Alem struggle to achieve in *Freedom Apartment* and *The Doves’ Necklace*. They strive to make their particular point of view universal. These two selected works of Al-Gosaibi and Alem are diverse in many ways and rich in universal human concerns that go beyond the moralizing usually associated with Saudi writers. They combine imagination and emotion and seek to reach the horizons of “nowhere” stated by William Golding above. Both authors seek to free themselves from the traditional roles, and endeavor to create out of the geography and history of their regional setting a microcosm of the world. Such works endorse a new era in Saudi literature. In an interview with Fathi Al- Rahman Yousef, the Saudi novelist Abdulaziz Al-Sagabi, in this sense, says: “we started a new era, where quality and quantity meet. The creative writer starts to go beyond the borders of his country. Of course, time will have its turn in purifying creativity and preparing it to reach universal standards” (2010, 2).

With the publication of fictional works like *Freedom Apartment* and *The Doves’ Necklace*, a new kind of narratives appears in Saudi literature. They are hard, bright and witty works and imply a satirical attitude. The themes tackled in such works display images of society, many of which were difficult to tackle in literature. In his description of the

Victorian society in England of the nineteenth century, the critic G. C. Thornley states that “Victorian society stood as firm as a rock in its belief in its own rightness” (1968: 141). This is exactly the image of society that both Al-Gosaibi and Alem portray in their fiction. According to Robert Siegle, “the effort to establish what is really true is the root of all cultural fictions” (1984: 440). Al-Gosaibi and Alem struggle to create fictional worlds similar to the real ones they have already inhabited, but at the same time aspire to the much wider space of the human world. This is what makes Kata Kelsall refers to the world recognition that Saudi novelists recently achieve. He controversially argues that Saudi’s creative output is a direct consequence of 9/11 and a desire to lift the veil revealing the truth about a hidden world to an international audience. He also praises Saudi novelists saying:

Long encumbered by censorship and religious conservatism in relation to the arts, Saudi novelists have had to negotiate this treacherous terrain to produce fresh and exciting resonant writing ... These writers are increasingly recognized for the quality of their work... Saudi Arabia with its stringent censorship and highly conservative attitude to the arts is not often considered of the forefront of Arabic literature but in recent years began to produce more innovative and compelling fiction (2014: 1).

Al-Gosaibi’s *Freedom Apartment* and Alem’s *The Doves’s Necklace* clearly arise out of a rebellious mood that starts to color the production of Saudi modern fictional thought. This rebellious attitude that flourished in the last decades of the twentieth century appeared in the treatment of radical cultural and social issues. In a world changing quickly, some novelists saw that their culture had to re-define itself constantly in order to keep pace with the spirit of the age. The result was new fiction that appeared at the beginning strange and radical to whoever experienced static and restrictive patterns of expression. Al-Gosaibi and Alem, thus represent a new era that changed the way reality was perceived and portrayed. In his book, *Saudi Fictional Discourse and its Transformations* (2013), Sami AL-Gamaan describes this era as a critical time, and expounds that “the narrative discourse reaches in some cases to the stage of chaos, which is an expression of the shift from the portrayal of the stereotypical patterns to the multiple and variable in the intellectual milieu” (2013: 556). This is what characterizes both *Freedom Apartment* and *The Doves’ Necklace* and the stands behind their choice for the argument raised here about the universal elements in Saudi fiction. In his book, *Manifestations of Modernism in Saudi Contemporary Novel* (2013), Saud bin Misfr Al-Abdullah divides Saudi-story tellers into three generations; the first bases narration on the traditional structure, the second moves between realism and romanticism and the third struggles to keep pace with the great philosophical, intellectual and cultural transformations created by modernism. Among the most experimental authors of this era are Ahmed Al-Doeikhi, Abdo Khal, Gazi Al-Gosaibi, Turki Al-Hamad, Abdulaziz Al-Sagabi, Rajaa Alem and Lila Al-Gohani. About this generation of Saudi writers, Alabdullah states:

The third generation witnesses the economic changes in Saudi Arabia, the invasion of science, inventions, technology, and means of communication from everywhere. Storytellers sought to know the other. They have trodden every valley looking at what others had. They got the scent of different fields which, affected their culture and created a persistent need for change. Their writings and attitudes became variable, and it became difficult to classify them under a limited category... thus, in the modern Saudi novel one can find different colors inspired by serial, existential and psycho-analytical imagination (2013: 13).

2. Universal Elements in Al-Gosaibi’s Fiction

Freedom Apartment or “*An Apartment Called Freedom*” (1994) is one of Al-Gosaibi’s most famous and critically – celebrated works. It is also one of his best-selling novels. The novel tells the story of four Bahraini students who live in Cairo in 1960s. They come to study in Cairo at a time of revolutions, coupes and political transformations in the Arab world. It is the journey of search for self-realization and freedom in the open atmosphere of Cairo, which witnesses the rise of their consciousness. The work which portrays their life and adventures during their university study is a novel which gives a satirical representation of some social, political and cultural aspects of the region. That is why it was banned for a long time, and it was only in August 2010, just two weeks before the death of Ghazi Al-Gosaibi, that this ban was lifted due to Al-Gosaibi’s contribution to his country as a diplomat, politician, technocrat, poet and novelist.

The universal nature of Al-Gosaibi thought in general, and his fictional experience in particular, may be a natural outcome of the universal character of his education and life. Al-Gosaibi received his primary and secondary education in Bahrain, got a university degree from Cairo University in Egypt in 1961, graduated from the University of Southern California in America with a degree in international relations in 1964 and finished his PhD in law about the Yemen crisis (1962 – 1967) at the London University College in 1970. Thus, he aspires in his fiction to appear as a leading liberal figure, and as a voice of enlightenment. Commenting on Al-Gosaibi’s death and the universality and liberalism of his thought and literary vision, Sarah Al-Deeb writes in *The Washington Post*:

He was an apparent critic of Saudi conservative society. He was an ally of King Abdullah in regard to his reform initiatives and known for his liberal religious views. He was against terrorism and extremism and called for democratic reform in the kingdom, although he argued that it needed to be very gradual (2010: 2).

As a sign of the search for a wide space for Saudi fiction, and as a mark of aspiration to universal horizons, some Saudi novelists start to move their narrative experience to other fictional settings that give their characters freedom of action, thought and expression. Thus the strategy of moving to a foreign land for study or trade appears in works of some writers like Essam Khokeer, Mohamed Abdo Yamani, Foad Sadek and Hoda Al- Rasheed. New fictional settings also appear in works like Turki AL-Hamad's trilogy, *Shadows of Deserted Allies*, Abdo Khal's *Cities Eat Bread*, Khalb Hamza's *Red Devils*, *Strangers without Homeland* and *Beirut Burnt*. According to Hifz-Alrahman Al-Eslahy, these settings allowed Saudi writers to tackle radical narrative themes. He writes:

This third stage of Saudi novel records the transformations in Saudi society; its tradition, customs and agonies as a result of economic development. It treats themes like immigration from country to town, women's education, family violence, divorce and collapse of moral and behavioral values (2011: 94).

To free his characters from the cultural taboos of their native setting, Al-Gosaibi makes Cairo, the capital of Egypt, the setting of *Freedom Apartment* in the years between 1956 and 1961. This era is important and critical in modern Arabic history, as it witnesses radical transformations in the Arab countries and in many places. The work presents a live image of the social, intellectual and political situation in the region and discusses great political events like the Suez Canal war against Egypt, Iraq revolution against Nouri Al- Saied and the rise of The United Arab Nation. It also tackles more universal ideological and philosophical aspects as communism, Marxism, socialism, existentialism and capitalism. Through the vision of a liberal author, fictionally presented through four enthusiastic young Arab students, the novel gives a wonderful image of the events and conflicts of the sixties.

Freedom Apartment is a complex work. It marks a new stage in Al-Gosaibi's narratology and in Saudi novel, and takes the author and the genre to the universal limits of modern fiction in terms of thought and technique. The story is told through the perception and consciousness of four narrators. Al-Gosaibi uses the technique of multiple narration used by some modern novelists like William Faulkner in *Absalom, Absalom* and *As I Die Laying* and Virginia Woolf in *The Waves* and leading contemporary novelists like Julian Barnes in *Talking It Over*, Graham Swift in *Last Orders* and Andrea Levy in *Small Island*. According to this technique, the story is narrated by multiple narrators. Each one of them relates part of the events and heads a block of the story to help in completing the final narrative structure of the text. Although the use of this narrative point of view sometimes disturbs the proper chronological sequence of events, it creates a kind of grand design for the novel. The use of such modern narrative patterns of narration by Al-Gosaibi and some other Saudi novelists is appreciated by critics. Hifz Alrahman Al-Eslahi, in this sense, praises the production of the third generation of Saudi novelists, saying:

The novels of this era witness an obvious technical development. Novelists turned to innovation and experimentation. They gave concern to the new techniques of multiple narrations and stream of consciousness ... The narrative production of this era is rich in quality, themes, attitudes and techniques and tackles radical political, cultural, social and historical concerns. It is not exaggerated then, to say that the Saudi novel flourishes and moves from locality to universality and realizes identity and value (2011: 95 - 96).

The main characters in *Freedom Apartment* are four young Bahrainis who are sent to Cairo to join university; Fouad, Abdulkarim, Yaqoub and Kassem. They have different social and cultural backgrounds; Abdulkarim comes from an honorable Shei family, Yaqoub from a modest family, Kassem from a rich family and Fouad from a middle-class one. They live in Alagoza district in an apartment they call freedom apartment, as it secures them intellectual, political and sexual freedom they have never experienced in their strict gulf societies. This exciting open life of Cairo with its national, regional revolutionary and international prospects takes them into universal dimensions of intellect and thought.

Through narrative sketches that follow the life of each of the four characters, Al-Gosaibi makes Cairo a setting that represents a multiplicity of universal intellectual, political and ideological issues. Yaqoub, thus, is influenced at the beginning of his life in Cairo by the ideas of the Russian writer Tolostoy, and during the 1956 attack on Egypt he acts as an Arabic revolutionist. Then, he is affected by one of his university professors and joins the leftist communist movement and becomes a member of the international fighters against oppression and exploitation. He is arrested, imprisoned and then fired from Egypt before completing his study. He goes to Beirut and stays there for a short time. Through the interference of the socialist politician Kamal Gonblat, he returns to Cairo to complete his study. At the end he loses faith in all ideologies and indulges in his study. Yet, he keeps aspiring to new ideas and calls for social change.

As for Kassem, he is not much affected by the confusion of the opposite intellectual and ideological trends which excite his colleagues in freedom apartment. He shows himself as a capitalist, although he sometimes appears faithful to the ideals of communism. He hates Gamal Abdel Nasser, and rejects his leadership and Arabic national beliefs. He remains faithful to his beliefs, and Al-Gosaibi makes his narrative voice clear and loud in attacking Nasserism and socialism from the beginning to the end. He believes that the royal regime is the only way for the development of Arab countries. He considers revolutions and radical political movements as artificial and deceptive propaganda, and even a conspiracy to seize power and exercise domination and oppression.

Fouad, the third narrative voice in Al-Gosaibi's *Freedom Apartment*, appears more reasonable and mature than his friends. He is emotionally, intellectually and mentally siding with Nasser since he was in Bahrain. His support to his great hero, the leader of Arab unity, grows more during his first university year in Cairo. Yet, his belief in Nasser is shaken by the ideas of his university professor, Shaikh Abo Zahra, who teaches him that the ideology of Arab unity adopted by Nasser is not consistent with the Islamic system and does not arise from Islamic legislation "Islamic Shariaa". He, then, joins the Resurrection Party "Hizb Al-Bath" and attends its meetings. But he soon retreats when he realizes the irrationality of its ideology, and that he will sacrifice his freedom for the sake of loyalty to the party. In his last days in Cairo, Fouad feels that the public tide of Nasser faces a critical time in Egypt and outside, and that Nasser faces strong resistance from Al-Bath, leftist communism and imperialism. He thinks much and, then, comes close to the Arab Nationalists Movement, meets their leaders, attends their conference and listens to their discussions and debates. Yet, the motifs of the movement fail to satisfy his heartily wish for a compromise between Islam and Arabic Nationalism, and he reaches a conclusion that the movement lacks the spirit of democracy and its leaders adopt the ideas of Lenin and Marx instead of Islamic beliefs. He, accordingly, regrets joining the movement. He even becomes more disappointed by the separation of Egypt and Syria and Nasser's failure to stop it. Thus, after five years in Egypt, he becomes no longer ready to be Nasserite, nationalist, capitalist or communist, and decides to leave to America to do his Masters.

In *Freedom Apartment*, Al-Gosaibi takes the consciousness of his Bahraini students from the limited horizon of their gulf culture to further universal intellectual and philosophical issues. Through an exciting narrative sequence and a variety of dynamic characters and in a satirical language, he creates a documentary work on the two decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Like Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian novelist winner of Noble Prize, in *Midaq Alley* (1947), Al-Gosaibi uses the setting of Cairo to create not only the political, intellectual milieu of the Arabic world but also that of world's politics and ideologies. Thus, his characters are narratively involved in long debates which range from the local and regional concerns of Nasser and his revolution against King Farouk, unity between Egypt and Syria, Al-Bath in Iraq, Arabic National Movement, Islamic Shariaa and the poetry of Abo Nawas and Al-Mari to the universal perspectives of capitalism, communism, communist socialism and the ideas of Marx and Freud. The narrative experience, thus, depends on a consciousness, which transcends the limits of time and space of the setting of Cairo. In a style which mixes tragedy and comedy, the characters' consciousness moves from the world of Bahrain to that of Egypt, and from the events of the Arab world of the fifties and sixties to the much wider space of the world politics and ideology. The author, here, comes close to the concept of modern character expressed by Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Light House* (1927). Like Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, the heroines of both novels, Fouad, Abdulkarim, Yaqoub and Kassem represent an unmistakable fluidity of consciousness, where a flood of recollections, ideas and impressions flow, sometimes in a chaotic contradictory and disintegrated way. They are all images of the modern character envisaged by Woolf in her important essay "Modern Fiction", when she addresses the novelists, saying:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impression – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come: An incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday (Lodge, 1993: 88).

Al-Gosaibi, actually, transcends the local and regional limits to universal ones not in terms of place setting and thought. He dares to present a text, which treads the forbidden land of the trilogy of religion; politics and sex. This radicalism appears not only in *Freedom Apartment* but also in many of his non-fictional writings. He, in this sense, wrote a series of political essays focusing on the relation between the Arab world and the west. His search for multiplicity and variation is also evident in *Sab'ah* (2003), the novel which gives a satirical representation of the social and political mores of the Arab reality in the last decades of the twentieth century through seven characters or narrative voices who symbolize different ideas, beliefs and ideologies. As a sign of the echoes of Al-Gosaibi relentless search to extend the world of his fiction to a much wider fictional space than that of his region, is that two of his novels were translated into English. His novel *Seven* (2003) was translated by Basil Hakim and Gavin Watterson, in 1999 and *An Apartment Called Freedom* (Shiqqat-al- Hurriyah) by Leslie Macloughlin, in 1996.

In his book *Aesthetic of the Setting in Saudi Fiction* (2006), Hamad Al-Belid states that "Saudi novel remains within the limits of conventional realism and its writers could not reach the horizon of magic realism" (2006, 176). This is to a great extent true. Actually magic realism, a Latin-American literary phenomenon characterized by the incorporation of fantastic or mythical elements into realistic fiction, is not much introduced in Saudi or Arabic fiction except in certain shadows in Naguib Mahfouz's *Trilogy*, Abdulrahman Munif's *Salt Cities* and Ibrahim Al- Kouni's *Magicians*. This term, which first applied to literature in the 1940s by the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier (1904–1980), and practiced by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Amado, Jorge Luis Borges, Miguel Angel Asturias, Julio Cortazar, and Isabel Allende, does not even appear much in the literary and critical debates about Saudi and Arab fiction. Yet, some Saudi novelists have tried to go beyond the conventional restricted concept of the setting, and to present narrative images that transcend the mere direct reporting about reality and enrich their settings intricate complex symbolic implications. It is true that their production still does not come under the umbrella of "magic realism". Yet, they manage to evoke visions above and beyond the plane of ordinary life. Al-Gosaibi is one of these novelists and in *Freedom Apartment*, he makes Cairo a mighty narrative setting, which opens to his characters windows of free universal thought and consciousness.

3. Aspiring to Universality in Alem's Narration

Rajaa Alem is another Saudi novelist whose art reveals a striking eagerness for doing the things that many other Saudi novelists do not do, and a striking freedom from the restrictive cultural taboos of her society. She is a novelist who clearly seeks to give her fiction a universal weight, and to create a genuine narrative utterance that elevates the triumph of humanistic spirit over cultural difficulties. Alem who belongs, like Al-Gosaibi and the other third generation of Saudi female novelists similar to Samira Kashoggi, Badriah El-Bisher, Rajaa Al-Sanea and Lila Al-Juhani, represents an exciting creative female narrative movement in a masculine society that makes most issues of gender, politics and religion untrodden lands of cultural taboos. The works of Alem and these female novelists enrich the Saudi intellectual life by making readers realize the fundamental truths of life and human nature, and satisfy the literary standards of artistry, suggestiveness and universality. It is enough to say that Alem is the first woman to win the International Prize for Arabic Fiction. In 2011, she shares the prestigious prize with the Moroccan poet and novelist Mohamed Achaar for her work *The Doves' Necklace*. Commenting on this event, Jonathan Taylor, the prize's chair of trustees says: "There are interesting times for Arabic fiction, which are reflected in today's exceptional announcement. For the first time the judges decided that the prize should be shared between two extraordinary books selected from an outstanding shortlist" (Davies, 2011: 3). In an interview with Ibtisam Azem, which takes place in Berlin while attending a literature festival in 2011, Azem asks Rajaa Alem: "How did the winning of the prize affect your life?" Alem's evident aspiration to universality is unmistakable when she answers:

In the past, I won a number of prizes, but what distinguishes the Poker, is the financing of the translation of the winning book ... and this is important to the Arabic book in general and one of the most important advantages of the Poker is to throw universal light on the Arabic book (2012: 1).

In his book, *Representation of Consciousness* (2003), Joe Bray states that "the novel's concern with consciousness has been emphasized by most of its historians" (2003, 3). Rajaa Alem is a novelist who seeks to use fiction to create consciousness since she began publishing her work in the cultural supplement of *The Riyadh Newspaper*. This is what she struggles to effect in *The Doves' Necklace*. In this narrative work, Alem sets her action in the holy city of Mecca. She is fascinated by the places and atmosphere of the holly city which she sees as the center of the universe. Yet, she moves beyond the religious and spiritual aspects of the setting and explores the world of crime, extremism and exploitation of foreign workers by building contractors, who, as she believes, destroy the historic areas of the city. The story which lies in 568 page starts by the discovery of a naked body of a dead woman in Abu Al-Roos (the Many-Headed), one of Mecca's many alleys. No one claims the body, as people are ashamed of it nakedness. Under the shadows of the story of the dead woman, Alem weaves her main plot of the life of her heroine Aisha. It is a story of a girl who loses all the members of her family in a car accident. Her leg is broken in that accident and is sent to Germany for treatment. There she falls in love with her German doctor. Through the investigations of the case of the naked body, by the detective Nasser and the life of Aisha, Alem reveals much about the setting, its civilization, customs and the challenge of change. Commenting on the bulky presence of the setting of Mecca in *The Doves's Necklace* as well as in Saudi fiction, Abdulhamid Al-Muhiden says:

Mecca represents a very attractive place to novelists because of its spiritual richness and long history. That setting inspires novelists with unlimited narrative elements. The spiritual heritage of Mecca changes places into symbols which have extended and far reached connotations (2001: 150).

Like what Thomas Hardy does in *Tess of the Durbervilles* and the *Return of the Native*, and what Naguib Mahfouz does in *Midaqq Alley*, Alem makes the setting the real hero of the novel. She creates a bulky gigantic setting that colors the vision of the narrator, the characters and the whole experience presented. Alem was born in Mecca, and the city represents for her a magnificent space across which most of her narrative imagination hovers. It is a very rich world extending from the past and the present to the future. Hussein Al-Menasra, professor of modern literary criticism at King Saud University, believes that the setting of Mecca with its richness contributes to the development of Saudi fiction and adds that "there is a kind of unification between the narrative memory of Alem and the world of Mecca, which empowers her writing and takes it towards the world of magic realism" (2010: 20). The setting appears a place of sincerity, power and wealth. Abu Al Roos, the neighborhood where Alem's characters dwell appears as a space of an organic mixture of history, present reality and fantasy. It, however, remains a setting which keeps the secrets of its dwellers and refrains to reveal much of their hidden reality. When the detective Nassir fails to find the killer of the woman, Alem asks: "Does Abu Al-Roos know?" Actually, if it does it will not give the secret away. The centrality of the setting of Mecca in *The Doves Necklace* and in the fiction of Alem is evident when she tells Armguard Burner in an interview that took place in 2011: "I was brought up in Mecca. I love this place, I love the myth named Mecca", and adds:

In my life and my fiction I turn around Mecca, like what people do around Al-Kabba. The place has magic and power aggravated by the image of the crowds of pilgrimages... Everything appears incredible, and one feels an overwhelming presence. Around its heart revolves a spiritual power ... The city takes me from any other. Wherever I go, I remain turning around this place. I hold the city and its cityscape in my books (2011: 2).

Alem, however is not imprisoned in a geographical setting, but takes it into a further universal space. She tells Burner who asks her about the theme *The Doves' Necklace*: "I shed light on sides of our values and unique way of life which are human and universal in essence" and adds: "Mecca is a religious divine city, yet it is the city of human beings with their daily suffering and struggle for life. This is what I seek to say in my books" (2011: 2). In her portrayal of the character of Aisha, Alem represents the conflict between two identities, one of Aisha as a Saudi girl brought up in a highly, religious conservative society, and the other of the girl who travels to Germany, loves her doctor and exchanges electronic messages with him. She implies that the conflict between the two identities cannot be avoided, and it is the fate of Aisha who travels for a medical cause to face and live such conflict. When she is asked by Burner about the electronic messages sent by Aisha and the cultural violations the whole experience of the heroine imply, Alem comments:

This does not disturb me, as it is used daily in millions of messages. All the events take place in the present, and characters are contemporary and dwell in a society overwhelmed by ideas of the fifties and sixties of the previous century. But this society faces the development of the twentieth first century and its means of communication and media (2011: 3).

In *The Doves' Necklace*, Alem creates a juxtaposition between two worlds. This juxtaposition appears in both the main plot of the story of Aisha and the sub-plot of the discovery of the dead naked body and the investigations of the detective Nasser. Through the policeman's search for the reality of the dead woman and the identity of the murderer, the narrator reveals the hidden faces of her setting. Some of the scenes given are shocking images of a world of drugs, smuggling weapon, crime, corruption and the exploitation of workers. When Alem is asked about these images, she confidently and courageously answers: "I speak about the exploitation of workers by big investment companies, which happens everywhere. Mecca is not an exception. The whole world is owned by giant companies that continuously seek to increase their profit" (Burner, 2011: 3). The juxtaposition is also created by the life of Aisha in Saudi Arabia before the accident and her life in Germany and its emotional consequences. It is a juxtaposition between two cultural extremes which causes a split in Aisha's character, and she fails to belong to both worlds. It is the same sense of split identity out of which Alem herself suffered. This is clear when she admits to Ibtisam Azem in *Jadaliyya* :

My dream is not to be an extension of any other. I suffered from being born in a world and living in another, your body in a place and your mind in another. And you do not belong to either, to the world you read about or the world you live in. You have to create yourself. Everything changes around you and you have to rethink matters (2012: 5).

In this juxtaposition, Alem clearly values the role of the reader in the construction of meaning. In this regard she relies on the reader to find out and establish relations among the things she juxtaposes. Mona Al-Medihish, in this sense, writes in her book *The Language of Saudi Fiction* (2009) that Alem "mixes mystery with absurd and myth" (2009: 266). In the treatment of the events of the naked body found in Abo- Alroos and the events of Aisha's love affair, the past imprints the present. Unspoken cultural restraints make Alem shift the narrative focus from the author to the reader, who may fill the gaps that are intentionally left for him/her, find the lost meanings and construct reality. She echoes the French critic Roland Barthes's reader response theory of the "writerly text", a text which forces readers to be creative and rewrite the text and produce its meanings or as Barthes describes it saying: "The writerly text is the novelistic without the novel, poetry without the poem, the essay without the dissertation, writing without style, production without product, structuration without structure" (1974: 5). In his essay "Reading Other and the Dialogics (sic) of Critical Response, Christian Moraru states that: "We (readers) often come across textual absences that are so stressed, so ornate, so planned that they call the attention to themselves" (1993: 214). In *The Doves' Necklace*, Alem calls the reader to use his inner ear, read between the lines, spell the unsaid words and interpret action to create the final meaning. She even includes the place itself in the search for truth, where Abo Alroos appears as one of the narrative voices and speaks to the reader, like when it says: "Who dares to write an alley like Abo Alroos but me. Abo Alroos itself with its many heads, I am the small alley" (2010: 7). This pattern of narration reconciles with Mikhail Bakhtin's view of the novel's collective dialogical concern with truth:

At the basis of the genre (of the novel) lies the Socratic notion of the dialogic nature of truth, and the dialogic nature of human thinking about truth... Truth is not born nor found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction (Patterson, 1985: 110).

The world of Aisha in *The Doves' Necklace* is similar to that of Clarissa Dalloway in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). The fluid world which Alem portrays in the novel is the universal image of the chaotic modern world created in the fiction of great modern novelists like D. H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. The split from which both the author and her heroine suffer in *The Doves' Necklace* is what the hero of Arthur Miller suffers in *Death of A Salesman* (1949). It is also the image of the modern man as a heap of broken images presented by T. S. Eliot in his famous poem "*The Waste Land*". Alem's world is this modern world which Virginia Woolf articulates in her novels and describes in her important essay "*Modern Fiction*" when she addresses the novelists, saying: "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged", but "a luminous halo; a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from

the beginning of consciousness to the end” (Lodge, 1986: 88). Actually, the life of Aisha is similar to that of Mrs. Dalloway; she is the victim of the author’s image of modern reality. Aisha, throughout the text experiences what Karen De Meester finds in Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway, “the psychological injuries suffered by victims of severe trauma” (1998: 649). In many sites of the text, Alem evidently adopts the stream of consciousness narrative technique used by some modernist novelists, where Aisha appears as no more than a flood of impressions, senses, recollections and ideas that flow in a chaotic and contradictory way to shape the narrative experience. Her mind, thus, becomes an incarnation of that of the modern Man, about which Woolf says:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday (Lodge, 1986: 88).

Alem makes the consciousness of Aisha a fluid one which moves between two contradictory worlds. This stigma of modern consciousness infects her with a sense of psychological, social and cultural disintegration. She suffers what Solomon Fishman calls, in his book *The Disinherited of Art* (1953), “cultural decadence and widening chasm between the individual and his moral and material environment” (Bradbury, 1972: 123). Alem, clearly endows the heroine with a memory wider than that of her particular culture and makes her a kind of consciousness in movement. This is openly expressed when Ibtisam Azem asks Alem : “What does memory mean to you?”, and she answers: “The human being is a memory, and when yourself narrows, take from this human stock. I aspire to be once this universal memory” and adds: “The writer does not start from zero point, but builds on the memory of others. I am sure that I have this human memory inside, and at certain moments I break the unconscious and contact this memory” (2012: 4-5).

According to Megib Al-Edwani, Alem strives in her art to bring the time past close to the time present, and the interference of the past makes the present very complicated (2009: 98). This is what makes things difficult for Aisha in *The Doves’ Necklace*. She moves to Germany, but the setting of Mecca with its culture and taboos remains an overriding power that acts and reacts upon her mind and consciousness. She is never free from its burden, and when she starts a new experience, the past emerges in the form of flashback and memories. Hamad Al- Bilihed, in this respect, argues that Saudi novels, like novels everywhere, are not free from the semantics of the setting. But the Saudi setting has a distinctive presence due to its particular geography, customs, tradition and historical and cultural heritage (2006: 174). Aisha, however, determines to face her ordeal in her own terms. She isolates herself from others and stays most of her free time imagining and aspiring to extended horizons. Actually, through the story of Aisha’s injury and her sense of loneliness after losing her family in the accident, Alem seeks to unfold and reflect her own belief in the inherent power of woman, and her ability to overcome grief and depression. Aisha, in this sense symbolizes all women, and becomes a universal female voice. Aisha, here, comes close to the character of Sarah in John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), Maggie Tulliver in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Tess in Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) and Hamida in Naguib Mahfouz’s *Midaq Alley* (1947) historical and cultural heritage (2006: 174).

Aisha’s journey proceeds through a long path of hardships, challenges and suffering. Alem means to put her in such intolerable antagonistic patterns of patriarchal culture and frustrating social circumstances to make the rise of her consciousness and determination much more significant. Her single-minded search for freedom bears clear archetypal connotations. She becomes an expression of Alem’s wish to bridge a wide gap separating the Saudi Victorian context from the modern liberal scene. Aisha remains silent for a long time. In this silence which Virginia Woolf describes as a natural outcome of a long history of patriarchal tyranny when she mentions in her book *A Room of One’s Own* (1929): “It is fatal for a woman ... in any way to speak consciously as a woman” (1994: 108). Aisha, however, starts to break that silence when she falls in love with the German doctor who treats her. The electronic messages she writes to him become a symbol of her growing vigor and her unrestrained spirit. Aisha, here, comes close to the character of Sarah in John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969), whose engagement in a forbidden relationship with the French sailor Vergennes is an expression of a patent need to maintain the female identity and the search for self realization. Through this narrative voice, Alem says much that others cannot say. In her important study, *Female Narratives in Saudi Fiction: Rajaa Alem a Model* (2009), Fatima Al- Otaibi expounds that Alem’s narration is characterized by the use of multiple narrative voices, and that she separates the voice of the heroine from that of the author. This is evident in her criticism of social phenomena through the voice of the character not the author like other writers (2009: 106). Al- Otaibi also adds:

The narrative voice in Alem’s fiction is one which resists social authority, but it disappears behind narrative tricks... Alem’s females are authoritative voices, contrary to the archetype in female narration. When they appear weak, they utilize their weakness to impose their strength later on... Her narrative discourse seeks to resist female marginalization and viewing woman as an invisible shadow (2009: 67).

4. Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that the third generation of Saudi novelists produce radical narrative works, and endeavor to take that genre of fiction, thematically and technically, into the space of modern fiction with all its universal echoes and

dimensions. Both Gazi Al-Gosaibi and Rajaa Alem belong to this generation, and aspire to take their narratives to new consciousness, and to free themselves and their characters from the restrictive forces of their culture and its related taboos. They struggle to maintain a real and significant presence not only on the local and regional levels, but at the universal one as well. They struggle to free themselves from the traditional roles that their conservative society expects from them, and create out of the geography and history of their region a microcosm of the world. They transcend the local and regional limits to universal ones not only in terms of place and setting, but also in terms of thought as well. Both works were first banned out of the belief that they are critical of their culture, and that they give a satirical representation of the social and political mores of the Arab reality in the last decades of the twentieth century. They create fluid reality similar to the image of the chaotic modern world portrayed in the fiction of great modern novelists like Henry James, D. H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf. Both works arise out of a rebellious mood that reflects a belief that their culture needs to re-define itself in order to keep pace with what happens in the universe. Both authors move their characters into other settings that give them a wide narrative space for freedom of action, and enrich their minds with universal aspects of thought. They also follow radical narrative techniques like the stream of consciousness and multiple narration used by great modern novelists.

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