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Internet and Cyberspace as a Means of Feminist Empowerment: A Cyberfeminist Study of *Girls of Riyadh* by Rajaa Alsanea

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of the internet and cyberspace, particularly through the use of emails, as a tool for feminist empowerment within Saudi Arabian society, as depicted in Rajaa Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh*. The research aims to examine how female characters use virtual spaces to challenge and undermine patriarchal norms and expectations. By utilizing the internet's anonymity and connectivity, these women carve out a platform for self-expression, solidarity, and resistance against the oppressive structures of their society. The study finds that cyberfeminism offers a powerful means for women in conservative environments to voice their thoughts and advocate for change. Furthermore, the internet serves as a catalyst for new forms of feminist discourse and activism. The study concludes that cyberspace not only facilitates the creation of a

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collective feminist identity but also empowers women to redefine their roles and resist traditional societal constraints.

Keywords: Cyberfeminism, Cyberspace, solidarity, Emails, Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*

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الانترنت و الواقع الافتراضي كوسيلة لتمكين المرأة: دراسة نسوية سيبرانية في رواية بنات
رياض لرجاء الصانع

فيدان جودت عبدالله

كلية التربية للبنات/ جامعة تكريت

و

أ.د لمياء أحمد رشيد

كلية التربية للبنات/ جامعة تكريت

المستخلص

تستكشف هذه الدراسة دور الإنترنت والفضاء الإلكتروني، وخاصة من خلال استخدام الرسائل الإلكترونية، كأداة للتمكين النسوي داخل المجتمع السعودي، كما هو موضح في رواية "بنات الرياض" لرجاء الصانع. تهدف الدراسة إلى فحص كيفية استخدام الشخصيات النسائية للمساحات الافتراضية لتحدي وتفكيك المعايير والتوقعات الأبوية. من خلال الاستفادة من الطابع المجهول والاتصال الذي يوفره الإنترنت، تقوم هؤلاء النساء بإنشاء منصة للتعبير عن الذات والتضامن والمقاومة ضد الهياكل القمعية في مجتمعهن. وتجد الدراسة أن السايبر فيمينيزم (النسوية الإلكترونية) يقدم وسيلة قوية للنساء في البيئات المحافظة للتعبير عن أفكارهن والدفاع عن التغيير. علاوة على ذلك، يعمل الإنترنت كعامل محفز لأشكال جديدة من الخطاب والحراك النسوي. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن الفضاء الإلكتروني لا يسهل فقط إنشاء هوية نسوية جماعية، بل يُمكن النساء أيضًا من إعادة تعريف أدوارهن ومقاومة القيود الاجتماعية التقليدية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: النسوية السيبرانية، الفضاء السيبراني، التضامن، الرسائل الإلكترونية، رواية

رجاء الصانع بنات الرياض

1. INTRODUCTION: DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND CYBERFEMINISM

At the start of the millennium, with the emergence of the early forms of social media and the gradual integration of the virtual world into people's daily lives, it became easy to communicate with the outside world and learn about news and events around the globe with the click of a button. MySpace was one of the first websites that virtually brought people together in one place. Moreover, the impressive emergence of YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram led many teenagers and internet users to engage with these platforms. However, the turning point was in 2007 when smartphones with touch screens were released for the first time, allowing individuals to become closer to their phones and the virtual world. Social media has become a parallel world for users, enabling them to express themselves, collaborate, and connect with others more quickly and easily. Virtual reality and social communication have put everything within reach, opening the door to many possibilities. Some took it as a refuge to escape the real world, while others used it for other positive purposes.

One can say that with the development of technology and the world's need to use the Internet, the feminist movement branched out or instead evolved into what is known as the fourth wave of Feminism after the escalating events in 2010 and the spread of the #RiotGrrrl hashtag across the Internet. Feminism became more inclusive in defending women's rights to express their anger, frustration, and rage and advocating for minority rights through social media. Virtual reality, in general, became a newly developed reality parallel to the real world, offering a safe space for these minorities and suffering women. One of the core pillars of the new cyberfeminism is the use of digital platforms for activism, which empowers women to amplify their voices and advocate for change (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Social media, blogs, and online campaigns have become critical platforms for addressing gender inequality, debunking misconceptions, and motivating collective action. Hashtag movements such as #MeToo and #TimesUp have shown how digital platforms may stimulate worldwide discourse on topics ranging from sexual harassment to employment discrimination (Tufekci, 2017). The new cyberfeminism acknowledges internet activism's revolutionary capacity to raise women's voices and eliminate repressive structures.

Cyberfeminism is a theoretical and activist framework that critically examines the intersection of feminism and technology, focusing on the impact of digital spaces and technological advancements on gender relations, power structures, and identity construction (Haraway, 1985; Hawthorne, 1985; VNS Matrix, 1991; Plant, 1997). This interdisciplinary field within feminist studies aims to challenge and transform gender inequalities in the digital realm by advocating for the empowerment of women and marginalized groups through digital platforms, activism, and a critical examination of technology's impact on gender norms and stereotypes. Cyberfeminism aims to establish inclusive and open digital environments, eliminate discriminatory practices, and reclaim technology to promote social justice and gender equality.

Cyberfeminism is a dynamic and growing framework in feminist studies because of its ability to adapt to technology breakthroughs and respond to changing sociocultural context. Its exploration of intersectionality, global viewpoints, intellectual evolution, activism, and engagement with emerging technology all demonstrate its dynamic nature.

Its ongoing adaption to technological improvements serves as an example of this dynamic. It critically examines the ways that gender relations shape and are shaped by technologies (Wajcman & Young, 2023).

Cyberfeminism emerged in the 1990s as a response to the increasing digitization of society and the gender dynamics within these new technological spaces. The movement was initially rooted in a radical, utopian vision of the internet as a space where traditional gender binaries could be dissolved, and new forms of identity could emerge. Over time, however, cyberfeminism evolved, responding to the changing technological landscape and the increasing commercialization and corporatization of the internet. This study compares the early phase of cyberfeminism, often referred to as "old cyberfeminism," with contemporary cyberfeminism.

Old cyberfeminism was characterized by its optimistic view of technology's potential to disrupt traditional gender roles and hierarchies. The movement drew inspiration from cyberpunk literature and postmodern feminist theory, emphasizing the idea that the internet could be a space of liberation for women and other marginalized groups. Key figures in early cyberfeminism, such as Donna Haraway and Sadie Plant, argued that the digital world allowed for the creation of fluid, non-binary identities that could challenge patriarchal structures (Haraway, 1991). This period saw the emergence of collectives like VNS Matrix, who famously declared that they were the "virus of the new world disorder," highlighting their belief in the subversive potential of digital technologies (VNS Matrix, 1991).

Contemporary cyberfeminism, on the other hand, is more critical and pragmatic. While it still recognizes the potential of digital technologies to empower women, it is also acutely aware of the ways in which these technologies can reinforce existing inequalities. The optimism of the 1990s has been tempered by the awareness of issues such as online harassment, the digital divide, and the commercialization of the internet. Scholars like Jessie Daniels (2009) and Angela McRobbie (2009) have critiqued the early cyberfeminist emphasis on the internet as a utopian space, pointing out that digital technologies are embedded within existing power structures and can perpetuate gendered inequalities. Contemporary cyberfeminism is also more intersectional, taking into account the ways in which race, class, and sexuality intersect with gender in the digital sphere (Daniels, 2015).

While old cyberfeminism was marked by an optimistic belief in the transformative potential of digital technologies, contemporary cyberfeminism is more critical, recognizing both the opportunities and the challenges posed by these technologies. This evolution reflects broader shifts in feminist thought and the changing nature of the internet itself.

This research holds significant importance in contemporary feminist discourse, particularly in the context of conservative societies like Saudi Arabia. This research seeks to illuminate how virtual spaces, such as the internet and cyberspace, serve as powerful tools for women to challenge and resist patriarchal structures. By analyzing the experiences of female characters in *Girls of Riyadh*, this study aims to explore how these women leverage the anonymity and connectivity of the internet to express themselves,

form communities, and advocate for change. The research addresses crucial questions, such as: How does the internet empower women in restrictive environments? In what ways do virtual spaces contribute to the formation of a collective feminist identity? And how can cyberfeminism be utilized as a framework for understanding the evolving role of women in such societies? By answering these questions, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between technology and feminism, highlighting the potential of cyberspace to facilitate feminist empowerment and reshape traditional gender roles.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on cyberfeminism and digital activism has significantly expanded over the past two decades, reflecting the growing impact of the Internet on feminist movements and the broader landscape of social justice. This study contributes to this evolving field by examining the intersection of literature, cyberspace, and feminist empowerment. Previous studies have extensively explored how digital platforms are shown as harmful tools that affect individuals economically, mentally, and socially; however, there remains a gap in understanding how the Internet and virtual platforms represent and critique positively within contemporary novels. This study fills that gap by analyzing a selected work of fiction that engages with themes of cyberfeminism, offering a nuanced exploration of how the author depicts the Internet as a site of empowerment and resistance for women and marginalized groups.

One of the studies written about *Girls of Riyadh* (2007) by Rajaa Alsanea is "Breaking Silence in Rajaa Al-Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* by Isam Shihada" (2013), which examined the status of women in Saudi Arabia and how patriarchy, double moral standards, tribal mentality, and social hypocrisy violate their fundamental human rights as represented in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*. The researcher also argued that Alsanea's novel can be seen as an awakening call for enhancing and improving women's rights in Saudi Arabia. It is visionary in its scope in light of the Arab Spring, which is raging through the Arab world. The second study about this novel is "Islamic Feminism at the Crossroads between Apologetics and Islamic Feminism at the Crossroads between Apologetics and Defending Women: Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* in Context" (2023) by Nouredine Bendouma and Salim Kerboua, which explored the Islamic Feminism's order of precedence in the predicament of defending women versus defending Islam. By employing feminist methodologies and textual analysis, this article probed whether the Islamic feminist project is solely about women's rights advocacy and considers whether defending Islam is a pre-ordained inevitability. These issues were examined concerning Rajaa Al-sanea's Islamic feminist novel *Girls of Riyadh*.

The third study is "A Study of Feminist Ideas in The *Girls of Riyadh* Novel By Rajaa Al-Sanea Based on Simon de Beauvoir Theories" (2020), by Shahriar Giti and Mahnaz Mohajeri, reflects feminist ideas in the *Girls of Riyadh* in a descriptive-analytic manner based on Feminism arising from de Beauvoir. It has been very successful in portraying these ideas. It has been able to depict the most crucial factor in the marginalization of women, the absolute sovereignty of men. Another study titled "Building Identity in Global Reality: A Postcolonial Study on Rajaa Alsanea's Novel *Banaat Ar-Riyadh*" (2021) examined the novel *Banaat ar-Riyadh (Girls of Riyadh)* from the perspective of

globalization using a postcolonial approach. It adapted postcolonial theory, with the theoretical framework of globalization as a basis for investigating the aspects identified in the theory, such as mimicry, inferiority, and hybridity, and applied the deductive qualitative method from a globalization perspective. The results of this study indicated the influence of American culture on the lives of Saudi Arabians.

In general, in the literary field, there are scarcely any studies that can explain how the Internet and cyberspace can be shown as a way to gain solidarity and empowerment through the lens of cyberfeminism.

3. THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK: CYPERFEMENISM

Cyberfeminism is a theoretical and activist framework that critically examines the intersection of feminism and technology, focusing on the impact of digital spaces and technological advancement on gender relations, power structures, and identity construction (Haraway, 1985; Hawthorne, 1985; VNS Matrix, 1991; Plant, 1997).

Feminist theory highlights the significance of questioning conventional gender roles and promoting equality between genders, meanwhile cyberfeminism is an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that emerged in the 1990s at the intersection of feminism, technology, and digital culture. Initially, it grew out of a feminist desire to challenge the male-dominated technological sphere, promoting the idea that cyberspace could be a revolutionary platform for dismantling traditional gender roles. However, over time, cyberfeminism has evolved, influenced by various social, technological, and academic developments (Saeed & Rasheed, 2024).

The term "cyberfeminism" was first coined by the Australian art collective VNS Matrix in 1991, who described themselves as the "virus of the new world disorder," emphasizing their desire to disrupt patriarchal structures through digital means (VNS Matrix, 1991). Early cyberfeminists were inspired by the potential of the internet and digital technologies to create new forms of identity, free from the

constraints of gender binaries. Donna Haraway's seminal work, *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991), is often cited as a foundational text in cyberfeminism. Haraway introduced the concept of the "cyborg" as a metaphor for hybrid identities that transcend traditional boundaries of gender, race, and class. Another important figure in the development of early cyberfeminism was Sadie Plant, whose work *Zeros + Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (1997) argued that women could harness digital technologies to create new forms of expression and community, breaking free from patriarchal control. Plant's work emphasized the idea that the digital world offered opportunities for women to redefine themselves and their roles in society.

As the internet became more mainstream and commercialized in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the optimistic vision of early cyberfeminists was met with increasing criticism. Scholars began to question the extent to which digital technologies could truly liberate women, pointing out the persistence of gendered power dynamics online. Critics such as Radhika Gajjala (2002) and Jessie Daniels (2009) argued that the internet, rather than being a utopian space free from gendered oppression, often replicated and even

exacerbated existing inequalities. Contemporary cyberfeminism has moved towards a more intersectional and critical approach. This evolution reflects broader shifts in feminist thought, particularly the recognition that gender cannot be understood in isolation from other axes of identity, such as race, class, and sexuality. Modern cyberfeminists are therefore more likely to analyze how these intersecting identities shape experiences of technology and digital spaces. For instance, Lisa Nakamura's work on race and digital culture highlights how online spaces often reproduce racial stereotypes and inequalities (Nakamura, 2002).

Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) is a cornerstone of cyberfeminist theory. She introduced the idea of the cyborg as a symbol of resistance against patriarchal and capitalist structures, advocating for the creation of hybrid identities that challenge traditional boundaries. Sadie Plant, in her work *Zeros + Ones* (1997), explored the relationship between women and technology, emphasizing the potential of digital technologies to empower women and create new forms of social organization. Radhika Gajjala's work critiques the early cyberfeminist ideal of the internet as a space of liberation, arguing that digital technologies often reinforce existing power structures rather than dismantling them (Gajjala, 2002). Jessie Daniels (2009) has contributed significantly to the understanding of how race and gender intersect in online spaces, arguing that the internet is not a neutral space but one deeply embedded with existing societal biases. Lisa Nakamura's research focuses on race and digital media, examining how online spaces can perpetuate racial inequalities while also providing new avenues for resistance (Nakamura, 2002).

Cyberfeminism today is deeply concerned with how identities are constructed and represented in digital spaces. This includes the potential for technology to create new forms of identity, as well as the risks of reinforcing stereotypes and exclusions. Moreover, cyberfeminism has evolved from a utopian vision of digital liberation in the 1990s to a more nuanced and critical framework that recognizes both the potential and the pitfalls of technology. It remains a dynamic and evolving field, continually responding to changes in technology and society. While early cyberfeminism was characterized by an optimistic belief in the liberating potential of technology, contemporary cyberfeminism is more critical, acknowledging the ways in which digital technologies can reinforce existing inequalities. The focus has shifted towards intersectionality, recognizing that gender intersects with race, class, sexuality, and other identities in shaping experiences with technology. Additionally, cyberfeminism is not just a theoretical framework but also a call to action, advocating for the use of digital technologies to resist patriarchal, racist, and capitalist structures and to create more inclusive and equitable online spaces.

Cyberfeminism has developed from its early days as a movement rooted in the radical potential of cyberspace to disrupt traditional gender roles into a more sophisticated and critical theory that addresses the complexities of identity, power, and technology. It is an evolving discipline, shaped by key contributors such as Donna Haraway, Sadie Plant, and Lisa Nakamura, who have laid the groundwork for understanding the relationship between gender and technology. Contemporary scholars continue to explore its

implications for understanding the complex interplay of gender, race, and technology in our increasingly digital world.

4. THE POTENTIALS OF EMAILS IN DEFEATING PATRIARCHAL POWERS IN RAJAA ALSANEA'S *GIRLS OF RIYADH*

"*Girls of Riyadh*" by Rajaa Alsanea presents a compelling narrative about the private lives of four young women in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, who navigate the complexities of love, friendship, and societal expectations. The story is delivered through a series of emails written by an anonymous female narrator to an online audience, revealing these women's private struggles and triumphs (Alsanea, 2007).

Rajaa Alsanea was born in 1981. Coming from a conservative background, she navigated the complexities of Saudi society from an early age. She is famous for her novel *Girls of Riyadh*, published at the age of twenty-four and cost her six years of writing. This novel was published in Arabic for the first time in 2005 AD in Lebanon.

This novel is set in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, precisely its rich and elite society between 2004 and 2005. It talks about the secrets and what happens behind the soft smiles and hidden desires. How can a tool such as the Internet cause a free space in order for the anonymous narrative of the story to expose these secrets to the conservative society of Saudi Arabia without forgetting how the citizens of the mentioned country reacted to all those emails throughout the one year of its first release (Alsanea, 2007).

The novel begins with the marriage of one of the four close friends, Gamrah Al-Qusman. Gamrah is a shy, self-conscious, and conservative girl who just finished her high school education. With some difficulties, she could attend the university. However, after her engagement proposal, she had to abandon her academic career and relocate to the United States to enable her husband to complete his higher degree. Gamrah had to undergo much misfortune, starting from her marriage to her divorce from Rashid. He never wanted to marry her, and she never knew his intention or him generally because their parents arranged their marriage (Alsanea, 2007).

But Rashid the jerk did not let things go long enough to give Gamrah's mother time to think of a solution. In a virtual reenactment of Sadeem's tragedy, the divorce papers were delivered to Gamrah's father two weeks after Gamrah landed in Riyadh, effectively blocking all possible maternal machinations. It appeared as though Rashid had just been waiting for the moment in which he felt he could justifiably rid himself of the wife that had been imposed on him by his family (Alsanea, 2007, p.98).

Gamrah knew that if Rashid ever divorced her, her reputation would be forever tainted, and society would never let her live in peace and would always talk behind her back because Eastern society is and will always be judgmental and harsh towards divorced women. Gamrah's character also serves as a lens through which broader themes of gender inequality and societal pressure are explored. Her story exposes the harsh realities of divorce and the challenges faced by single mothers in a society where marriage and family honour hold significant cultural currency. Additionally, Gamrah's

experiences shed light on the intersections of class, gender, and cultural expectations, illustrating the complex web of factors that shape women's lives in Saudi Arabia.

Sadeem Al-Haraimel, the second girl in the group, suffered the most emotionally by losing her mother at a very young age and then her father to death and later on her fiancé and the man she loves. Sadeem's character reflects broader societal norms and expectations surrounding love, marriage, and relationships in Saudi Arabia. Her struggles and triumphs resonate with many readers who identify with the complexities of modern romance within a conservative cultural context. Through Sadeem's story, Alsanea offers a nuanced commentary on the intersections of tradition and modernity, personal agency, and the pursuit of happiness (Alsanea, 2007).

Mashaal Al-Abdulrahman, also known as Michelle, is a strong character who embodies the complexities of identity and cultural clash. Throughout the novel, the anonymous narrator describes her as the odd one in the group who cannot live with the new culture and traditions of Saudi Arabia.

Her father had gone to college there, at Stanford University, where he met their mother. After college he stayed in America for a few years to work and start his family. Only a year after Michelle came back to her home country to live, she transferred to a school where all the classes were taught in English (Alsanea, 2007, p.10).

Because of her mixed family background (from an American mother and a Saudi father) and living half of her life in America, she wasn't able to adapt to the conservative life in her new home in Saudi Arabia. Michelle appears to be a feminist power and the sound of reason inside the group. She meets a guy during Gamrah's bachelorette party. Fortunately for her she finds a man—Faisal, who understands and loves her, but unfortunately he leaves her as soon as his mother rejects his pleas to marry her. Michelle's character serves as a vehicle for exploring the cultural tensions and prejudices that exist within Saudi society. Her experiences highlight the complexities of identity and belonging in a multicultural world, shedding light on the challenges faced by individuals who straddle multiple cultural spheres. Michelle's character deepens the novel's exploration of cultural diversity and the impact of globalization on traditional societies.

Meanwhile, Lamees Jeddawi was the opposite of Gamrah. She was the embodiment of determination and self-confidence. Her priorities were to be a faithful friend and to finish her medical studies to be an excellent doctor. Lamees was aware of the traditional expectations placed upon her as a woman in Saudi society,

Lamees was in her third year of university, and soon she would become a doctor and have the world at her feet! No problem if she was a little late in getting married, since marriage later in life was common in medical circles (Alsanea, 2007, p.173).

Lamees refuses to conform to conventional gender roles and instead strives to achieve her professional aspirations. Lamees didn't want to end up like her friend Gamrah, whose marriage ended with divorce; in fact, she wanted to know who would end up with her.

Throughout the novel, Lamees faces various obstacles that challenge her determination, including her professional life and personal relationships.

During her training period in the hospital, she was able to start a friendship with a trainee named Nizar. Nizar was an outgoing and funny person who charmed Lamees, but she was determined not to give him the satisfaction of knowing how much she was attracted to him; that's why she set up some rules for herself about how to act around him and how to make herself more attractive in his eyes. Eventually, her efforts were successful, and he asked for her hand by the end of three months of their friendship/relationship.

MICHELLE: But isn't that the way it should be? Or did you think he was not going to let her finish her studies, or that he would force her to finish in Jeddah because he's there? This is her life, and she's free to run it as she wants, just as he's free to run his as he wants. Our problem here is that we let men be bigger deals than they really are. We need to realize—assume, even—right from the start that things like letting us graduate are not even optional, it's just what makes sense, and our eyes should not fly out of our heads if one of these men actually does something right! (Alsanea, 2007, p.235).

Lamees was the presentation of balance between the four girlfriends group and could achieve all the dreams that her friends were wishing for. She was able to have the stable marital life that Gamrah was aiming for, she was able to have the caring husband that Sadeem wished for, and she was able to succeed in her career in the future and have the freedom just like how Mashael (Mechelle) wanted. Lamees was the only one who could achieve her happy ending and could stabilize a life mixed between the conservative East and the " liberal " West culture. As a character, Lamees represents a symbol of hope and empowerment for young Saudi women aspiring to break free from traditional gender roles and pursue their dreams. Her story resonates with readers who identify with her struggles and triumphs, making her a relatable and inspiring figure in the narrative (Alsanea, 2007).

Girls of Riyadh is a novel rich with themes that offer a critical look at Saudi society, especially from the perspective of its young women. One of the most prominent themes shown during the presented emails was gender inequality. Throughout the free space that the Internet provided to the anonymous sender, she could vividly present how men in Saudi Arabia are superior and have more rights than women (Le Renard, 2008). The characters' experiences highlight the limited freedoms and choices available to women in a patriarchal society.

Waleed had criticized her every time she put a stop to anything, saying that she was his wife according to the religion of God and His prophet. Who was there to explain to her the psychological makeup of the young Saudi man so that she could understand what went on in his mind? Had Waleed now come to believe that she was a young woman of “experience”? (Alsanea, 2007, p.34).

The novel vividly depicts the gender inequalities Saudi women face, such as societal expectations surrounding purity and honour. For example, Sadeem's heartbreak over her

failed engagement underscores the harsh scrutiny and double standards imposed on women. Through the narrative emails, Sadeem can share her intimate thoughts and receive empathy and support from her friends, a form of solidarity that cyberfeminism highlights as essential in combating patriarchal oppression (Haraway, 1991). The digital space created by the email format allows for an anonymous, open discourse on issues often silenced in the public sphere. Cyberfeminism advocates for the use of technology as a means for women to articulate and disseminate their experiences, thus subverting traditional patriarchal control (Plant, 1997).

Additionally, the word 'Chat' refers to a form of digital language unique to online communities, used by participants to share their opinions and perspectives. In the context of cyberfeminism, this type of communication empowers women and marginalized groups, enabling them to challenge dominant narratives and foster inclusive dialogue in cyberspace (Khalifa, 2019). For example, the Internet and its free platform allowed Gamrah to vent her pent-up energy and frustration after her divorce and giving birth. Her parents were afraid of what people would say if they saw her outside without her husband, so her parents forced her to stay inside the walls of her house.

With the help of Lamees, Gamrah got to know the world of chatting. In the beginning, Lamees would ask her if she wanted to accompany her into the chat room. That way, Lamees said, she could introduce Gamrah to her friends online (Alsanea, 2007, pp. 152-153).

With the help of Lamees, Gammarah managed to use the computer as a platform to speak up for herself by logging into the chat rooms to meet and converse with many strangers online. The world of the Internet was her only outlet, probably due to the severe depression that she suffered after postpartum. Not only that, but Lamees' ability to access the Internet and help Gamrah is essential to illustrate how women with free access to knowledge can empower and help each other in need (Herring, 2003).

As a means of resistance to gender inequality, the anonymous sender used the emails to show how this phenomenon is a prominent feature inside Saudi Arabia's society and is rooted deep within its culture. These emails in this novel are used as a narrative tool. This format allows the characters to discuss intimate and socially taboo topics according to the timeline and setting of Saudi Arabia's culture in which the novel was written.

As for the issue of gender inequality, those emails presented the difficulties that young Eastern women, primarily Arab women, go through in their everyday lives, such as the term "a divorced woman" was plastered upon Um Nuwayyir (the girl's adult friend whom they spend time with at her house) and Gamrah till the end of the novel even though both of her and Rashid divorced each other. Unlike her with his girlfriend, he gets to live his life freely, and she gets to suffer the consequences of his actions. Even when there was a suitor, he was in his mid-forties and didn't allow her to raise her son with him. That's why she bluntly refused him, depicting how divorced women had few opportunities in life regarding marriage and other aspects (Doumato, 2000).

The gender inequality and its depiction did not stop with Gamrah; in fact, this theme extended to the other characters in the novel, such as Sadeem. "Sadeem kept her secret

from everyone. She licked her wounds in silence until the second shock arrived: in her first year at the university, she had failed more than half of her courses" (Alsanea, 2007, p.35). Because her being raised without a motherly figure, nobody warned Sadeem about giving herself to her fiancé Faisal before the wedding ceremony, which caused her so much emotional damage. Unfortunately, the very next week, Faisal decides to break their engagement, thinking that she never was a virgin and she could be sleeping with others just like how she did with him. Because of her emotional turmoil, she failed half of her courses. Faisal's actions highlight the leniency towards male sexual indiscretions. In contrast, women in the novel are harshly judged and penalized for any perceived sexual impropriety, which is why Sadeem will keep their affair secret.

While the anonymous email sender was enjoying the negative responses of the readers because it showed clearly how the Saudi street didn't accept its flows and decided to attack her and her emails, she didn't stop sending or telling her friends' stories because she was certain that if she physically informed anybody about her friends' circumstances, nobody will believe her or she would be restrained and ordered to stop immediately. That's why she had to resort to the virtual reality of the Internet and emails to convey her thoughts and what she thinks is the right thing to write because nobody would judge her or her friends if nobody knew who they were.

In "*Girls of Riyadh*," the contrasting expectations placed on men and women in terms of sexuality are evident. Men enjoy greater sexual freedom, while women face strict controls and severe repercussions for similar behaviors, just like how Sadeem had to keep her sexual encounter with Faisal secret. Cyberfeminism, which combines feminism with digital technology, provides a lens to understand how Saudi women increasingly use the cyberspace to challenge these double standards. "It's for you; it's to you that I write my emails. May they be the matches that set your thoughts on fire, the lighter that fuels a blaze of change" (Alsanea, 2007, p.2). The novel itself can be seen as a cyberfeminist act, as it uses the format of email newsletters to bypass traditional censorship and reach a wider audience. Saudi women leverage social media and other online platforms to voice their experiences and critique societal norms. This digital activism is a form of resistance against the restrictive sexual norms imposed on them.

Cultural conflict and identity are other vital themes tackled through the emails. The characters in "*Girls of Riyadh*" frequently confront the tension between adhering to traditional cultural norms and embracing modern, often Westernized, lifestyles. This conflict is particularly evident in their romantic relationships and career aspirations. Cyberfeminism posits that digital spaces can empower marginalized voices, providing platforms for expression and community-building. The anonymous narrator's emails in "*Girls of Riyadh*" serve as a virtual space where the protagonists navigate their identities and relationships, circumventing societal norms and restrictions (Haraway, 1985). Michelle, who has a Saudi father and an American mother, embodies the cultural and identity conflicts experienced by those who straddle different worlds.

Once the girls were reunited, Michelle could talk of nothing but the corruption of Saudi society, its backwardness, its benighted rigidity and overall reactionary nature. She was bursting with enthusiasm about traveling in two days' time to begin a new

life in a healthy place—somewhere other than “this rotten- to- the- core, toxic environment that would make anyone sick,” as she put it (Alsanea, 2007, p.123).

Her struggle to reconcile with her dual identity brought severe tension between her cultural heritage and the global influence she was under most of her time living in America. She always wanted more from how her friends were all right with some Eastern traditions and customs. She was always the voice of reason in her friends' group and the first one who immediately defended her thoughts and opinions regarding any subject that her friends might discuss. Her American upbringing, which emphasizes individualism and freedom, often clashes with Saudi society's conservative and collectivist norms. This conflict is particularly evident in her romantic relationships and social interactions.

The liberal virtual space that the Internet provided for the anonymous email sender was the utmost expression of transparency and logic. Because of the emails provided by the anonymous sender, every reader acknowledges the difficulties and unfairness that females, especially young and single women, go through. It seems that these emails gave a vivid, accurate image of a society that lives freely while their men, parents, and colleagues are oppressing their women, and sometimes even other elderly women. The emails also showed how Michelle was rejected by Saudi society, especially by the parents of her lover, Faisal, due to her American background. This action highlights the cultural barriers she faces. This rejection underscores the societal challenges that individuals with mixed heritage encounter in trying to find acceptance.

From the start, Lamees was up front with Gamrah about the realities and hidden pitfalls of chatting. She made sure Gamrah was wise to the wiles and glaringly obvious pranks of savvy young men, which might trap a newcomer to the Net. Lamees even read out to her friend a few conversation histories with various Web buddies that had been automatically saved on the computer (Alsanea, 2007, pp. 152-153).

Through her knowledge of how to use the internet and chat rooms, Lamees helps Gamrah to chat and text other people outside of her family, encouraging her to open up more to the outer world and break the invisible restrictions that her family pushed them towards her after her divorce with Rashed. This shows the solidarity between women through the cyberfeminist perspective. Cyberfeminism emphasizes the role of digital spaces in fostering solidarity among marginalized groups, including women. The Internet allows for the creation of virtual communities where women and marginalized groups can share experiences, resources, and support, transcending geographical barriers (Daniels, 2009). Online forums, social media, and other digital tools provide a venue for collective action and consciousness-raising, essential to feminist activism. (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018).

The anonymous sender's "second self" was able to familiarize herself with the "taboo" subjects that she insisted on tackling during the ongoing events of the story, making the Saudi people wait for her emails every Friday for over a whole year. She could attract them and make them understand and sympathize with her friend and their experiences and difficulties (Alsanea, 2007; Turkle, 1984).

One of the many conclusions of the sent emails is the conflict between conservative traditions and the globalization of modernity. This theme is highly depicted within the four characters. Gamrah didn't waste any time, scolding Lamees for the bronzed skin she had acquired in the chalets of Jeddah. "I swear by God, you are insane! These days, when everyone is going with whitening lotions, you have to go and burn yourself under the sun?" (Alsanea, 2007, p.178). For instance, Gamrah represents the conservative, shy young woman who accepts her parents' orders without any objections and always tends to please them and her husband when she was still married. She also sticks to her society's traditions and demands; afterwards, she becomes more liberated due to her friends' encouragement. While Michelle was the opposite of her, she comes from a mixed background, half Saudi and half American.

Cyberfeminism's essential point is solidarity inside the virtual world of the Internet (Haraway, 1985). So, by publishing these emails by the anonymous sender online, she achieved solidarity among the women of Saudi Arabia and made all of them understand or at least know what a Saudi woman can go through in a patriarchal society.

I see nothing wrong in setting down my friends' problems in my emails so that others will benefit—others who have not had the opportunity to learn in the school of life, the school that my friends entered from the widest of gates—the gate of Love (Alsanea, 2007, p.57).

This solidarity created a state of positive and negative arguments and controversial opinions due to the controversial content of the emails. By centring the experiences of marginalized communities, cyberfeminism promotes solidarity across intersecting axes of oppression, including race, gender, sexuality, and class (hooks, 2000). The anonymous sender used the provided online platform to raise awareness about social injustices, challenge dominant narratives, and advocate for policy reforms (Senft, 2008).

The novel is a domestic fiction written in an email narrative structure (epistolary), which lends authenticity to the narrative by creating a sense of immediacy and intimacy. The epistolary technique is a narrative device in which a story is conveyed through documents, most commonly letters, diary entries, newspaper clippings, or emails. This form of storytelling allows authors to present multiple perspectives and voices, providing an intimate and personal insight into the character's thoughts and emotions. According to Altman (1982), the epistolary form "offers a unique immediacy and intimacy, as the reader becomes privy to the characters' private communications and innermost thoughts" (p.5). This technique often creates a sense of realism and authenticity, as it mimics real-life modes of communication. It also allows for a multi-faceted narrative structure, where different viewpoints and narrative threads can be explored simultaneously. Alongside that, the author also uses the technique of multiple perspectives, which acts as a unifying voice, offering insights and commentary connecting individual narratives to the broader social context. This multiplicity of perspectives allows the novel to present a rich, diverse portrayal of contemporary Saudi women, addressing themes of love, marriage, identity, and the pursuit of personal freedom. Through these characters, *Girls of Riyadh* candidly examines how young women navigate and resist societal constraints, highlighting both their individual struggles and collective resilience.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, when viewed through the lens of cyberfeminism, *Girls of Riyadh* provides exploration of the intersection between technology, gender dynamics, and cultural norms in contemporary Saudi society. The novel's use of the epistolary format, with emails serving as a central narrative device, highlights the critical role of digital communication in the lives of its characters, particularly young women navigating societal expectations and personal aspirations. Through the characters' online interactions, Alsanea adeptly depicts how technology can serve as a platform for empowerment, allowing individuals to form connections, express themselves, and challenge traditional norms in a society that often restricts their agency. Additionally, *Girls of Riyadh* invites critical reflection on the broader impact of technology on gender equality and social change. By portraying the diverse experiences and perspectives of its female protagonists, the novel sheds light on the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, highlighting how digital platforms reflect and influence evolving notions of femininity, autonomy, and cultural identity. Ultimately, it stands as a strong testament to the transformative potential of technology in reshaping narratives of gender and power, offering readers a nuanced portrayal of the struggles and triumphs of women navigating the digital landscape in a rapidly changing world. Through its exploration of themes such as connectivity, self-expression, and resistance, the novel serves as a powerful reminder of the ongoing importance of cyberfeminist discourse in challenging patriarchal structures. It also envisions more inclusive futures for all individuals, both online and offline.

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