



Contribution Of Raja'a 'Alem In Arabic Novel

[مساهمة رجاء عالم في الرواية العربية]

Sk Nurullah, Ph.D Research Fellow

Department of Arabic

University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

Abstract: The modern era is very important for Arabic language and literature. It is full of the art, the novel, the story and the play. Many sciences and knowledge have developed in it. Novelists from different countries have fought in a variety of ways in the creativity of the novel, its techniques and the types of plots. The Arabic novel passed through many stages until it reached maturity, perfection and developed the last forms of narrative.

Raja'a Muhammad 'Alem (Arabic: رجاء عالم) is one of the foremost modern Arabic novelists from Saudi Arabia. Through her personal experiences, 'Alem provides a glimpse into the private lives of local women who experience pressures very different from those faced by typical female visitors to Mecca. Her novels delve into the social restraints of society, which often forbid the voicing of issues and concerns such as women's rights, forced marriages, and emotional issues like love and relationships between the sexes, as these topics are deemed objectionable.

'Alem addresses the problem of women seeking to identify their identity by illustrating the reality of being continually veiled and unable to express themselves through visible methods. She is an active writer of prose, and her unique style, blending modern elements with traditional themes, sets her apart among Saudi authors. This article attempts to depict the position of Raja'a 'Alem and her contributions to Arabic novels.

Keywords: modern era, personal experiences, glimpse into the private lives, social restraints, forced marriages.

Introduction

The novel is an independent art that has its own advantages and presence in Arab and western culture. It is now written in all languages, discusses all issues and aims to nourish all human culture.¹ Until comparatively recently there was no real concept of the novel as such in Saudi Arabia; it was a literary genre unknown even to the educated². Novel writing by Saudi women did not start until the late 20th century. Raja'a 'Alem witnessed Saudi culture during her childhood while living in her grandfather's house. 'Alem convinces her readers that the historical and cultural context of this community is biased against women, using various techniques to portray cultural patterns that belittle women in society—primarily the inequality between men and women. 'Alem also portrays troubled family relationships to highlight the negativity of cultural trends. In her novel, 'Alem uses letters written by the protagonist Aisha to depict a civilized woman who makes a desperate attempt to...effort to change men's perspectives regarding women rather than confining herself to an ancient cultural pattern.

About Her life

Raja Alem, (1963-), a Saudi Arabian novelist, is from Mecca³. She was raised in her grandfather's house near the Holy Mosque. Her grandfather was the Sheik of the Zamzam Water Carriers⁴. Zamzam is the well in Mecca's sacred mosque, and also the name of the healing waters that flow from it. The city of Mecca went through a continuous process of development that varied across periods, including the dynasties of Abbasid, Fatimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk (750-1517). Mecca experienced stagnation and political unrest during the Ottoman and Ashraf (1517-1923) eras, but also enjoyed great prosperity in all of life's aspects (Merza, 2009). Mecca experienced its most significant growth after the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established by King Abdul Aziz in 1932, when the city started a new era of achievements⁵. The most recent book, *My Thousand and One Nights*, is a pilgrimage to a Mecca that no longer exists⁶.

Raja'a 'Alem is a Saudi Arabian author who was born in Mecca and currently resides in Paris⁷. She is the author of eleven novels as well as numerous plays, short stories and essays⁸. She frequently makes appearances on the global literary and cultural scene particularly to speak on and conduct workshops on spirituality, children's creativity and the connection between the east and west⁹.

After completing her schooling, she joined King Abdul Aziz University and graduated with a bachelor's degree in English literature. Before receiving her degree, she published her first novel, *Four Zero*, in 1982, for the Literary and Cultural Club in Jeddah. After her graduation, she worked in the education sector while focusing on her novel projects and constantly writing for the cultural supplement in *Al-Riyadh* newspaper. She and her sister Shadia 'Alem founded a cultural centre in Mecca to activate the role of women in obscure neighbourhood and raise their level of knowledge and awareness.

Influenced and impacted by the Books

Her role models came from a great map of the world, from art and literature. She was heavily influenced by old Arabic books, for instance the works of great Sufis like Al-Nafari, Rumi and Ibn Arabi, Al Suhrawardi and Al-Hallaj, who was executed for overcoming all boundaries. Unconsciously, her style was also shaped

by books like Al-Jahiz's "Book of Animals" or the cosmography "Marvels of Creatures and the Strange Things Existing" by Al-Qazwini.

Raja'a moved to Paris in 2006, where French culture equally confused and fascinated her. Despite this, she remained faithful to her writing framework which is heavily steeped in Middle-Eastern traditions, figures and places. She was classified as a novelist, as she has been writing novels ever since she was 15 years old. She began to weave tales in her early teens inspired by her roots and religious culture. In the latter, Raja brings her birthplace Mecca to life, using it as a backdrop for a mystery. But on top of this intrigue, she depicts a civilization undergoing transformation, where intergenerational relationships are irrevocably complexified. The novel is a mirror, in which we see current Saudi society geared towards more openness, technology and modernity, but also a society in which cultural and religious society are extremely strong.

She began publishing theatrical texts within the framework of experimental theatre, the first of which was the text "Dancing on the Point of a Fork", for which she won several awards, including the Johar Award from the Al-Salem Theatre Writing competition in Kuwait. Her texts are generally characterized by their exploration of unexplored narrative worlds, rich in Meccan history, legends, and philosophy. Mecca is one of her most prominent creative sources. Her language is also known for its closeness to Sufi texts, which require additional effort and spiritual depth to decipher their codes and understand their meanings. Through her travels, origins and experience as a novelist, 'Alem understands what losing one's cultural bearings means. In her own words: "All her life, she's tried to destroy stereotypes". Both in fiction and in real life, she strives to create bridges between individuals in order to forward cultural rapprochement and living in harmony.

Literary contribution

She participated in international cultural forums, such as:

- The International Reading Book Festival in Canada in 2002.
- The Saudi Women's Expression Conference in France in 2003.
- The Book Fair in Germany in 2004.
- And the Colors of the Kingdom Exhibition in Spain in 2005.

Achievements

- She received the "Ibn Tufail Medal" of Honor in 1986, awarded by the Arab-Spanish Institute in Madrid for her novel "Four Zero."
- She won the "Creative Achievement Award" at Al Yamamah Press Foundation, and the Literary and Cultural Club Award in Jeddah.
- In the year 2005, she won a book award in a newspaper from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

- She received an award on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of UNESCO, in recognition of her active role in the creativity of Arab women. She also won the Medal of Honor in the Ibn Tufail Novel Competition from the Western Spanish Cultural Center in Madrid.
- In 2008, she was chosen to be the winner of the Arab Creativity Award at the Lebanese Cultural Forum in Paris.
- Raja'a 'Alem achieved a groundbreaking milestone in 2011 when she won the prestigious International Prize for Arabic Fiction for her novel, *The Dove's Necklace*¹⁰.

Raja'a 'Alem's Booker Prize

Ṭawq al-h.amām [*The Doves' Necklace*], for which Raja'a Alem won the 2011 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, is a long and densely written novel that deals mainly with Alem's place of birth and upbringing, the city of Mecca¹¹. In mid-March "The Doves' Necklace" and Moroccan writer Mohammed Achaari's book "The Arch and the Butterfly" were declared joint winners of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF). The award marked several firsts for IPAF: the first time in its four-year history that the prize had been awarded jointly; the first time a woman had won it, and the first time it had gone to a Moroccan. The joint award was good news for the publisher of both winning novels, al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-Arabi of Casablanca in Beirut.

Her novel "The Pigeon Collar", making her the first Saudi and Arab woman to win the Booker, and the first time in the history of the award that a split win occurred, and Mecca is the center of the narrative circle in the novel "The Pigeon Collar". Through it, a complete system of religious and historical values and human social relations is revealed, with the blurring of the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, which qualifies the novel to be one of the experimental novels encumbered with connotations.

Literary works

Raja'a Alem published her novels over a period of 29 years.

- طريق الحرير - (The Silk Road) 1995.
- سيدي وحدانه - (My Master Wahdana) 1998.
- حُبِّي - (My Love) 2000.
- موقد الطير - (Bird Stove) 2002.
- ستر - 2005
- خاتم - 2007
- طوق الحمام - (The Pigeon's Ring) 2010.
- ثقوب في الظهر - (Holes in the Back) 2010.
- الرقص على سن الشوك - (Dancing on the Fork's Tooth) 2010.
- الموت الأخير للممثل - (The Actor's Final Death) 2010.
- ألف ليلة وليالي - (My Thousand and One Night) 2007.
- فاطمة - (Fatma) 2002.
- سراب - (Sarab) 2018.

- خطر المحبة - (Risk of Loving) Autobiography English.
- قصص- نهر الحيوان
- -أربعة صفر (Four Zero)
- -مسري يا رقيب (My Pleasure O! Sergeant).
- 2023 - باهبل مكة
- قرية النور- حسن الأخضر

❖ The Dove's Necklace

The Dove's Necklace is a novel written by Saudi writer Raja' Alem. The novel was first released in 2010 by the Arab Cultural Centre in Casablanca. She was jointly awarded the 2011 International Prize for Arabic Fiction. The Dove's Necklace is a Hejazi novel set in Mecca. The reality of this novel is an organic mix of history, current state, fiction or fantasy; the characters of the novel are a combination of people with flesh, blood and others are fictional; and the main narrator is neither the writer nor one of the human characters in her novel, but it is the street of "Abu-Russians" in "Old Mecca", where most of her characters reside.

❖ Fatma

Fatma, an Arabian peasant girl, unwittingly embarks upon a strange journey of transformation the day her father marries her off to a snake handler. Unbeknownst to the new bride, her husband milks the venom of his snakes for use in potions he sells on the side. Bitten by one of the snakes, Fatma changes from naïve girl to sensuous woman. What's more, she now gains an arcane affinity for her husband's reptiles as well as a talent for controlling them. This trait will enable her to travel from the sands of Arabia to the shadows of the Netherworld beyond the realm of ordinary human experience. Resonating with ritual and mystery, *Fatma* is a fabulous tale of one woman's path to ecstasy—an enraptured vision of enchantment in this world and fulfilment in another. The first novel to be published in English by one of the most distinguished of modern Arabic writers, this imaginative work blends naturalistic prose, poetry, and song with all the magic of its author's abundant literary gifts.

❖ My Thousand and One Night

My Thousand & One Nights by Raja Alem and Tom McDonough, Syracuse University Press, 272 pp. in 2007. Although it is a semi-autobiographical novel focusing on the so-called “women’s world” of the home and the hearth, in a kind of pre-modern Mecca lost to time, it is anything but domestic. Ostensibly, the plot concerns the narrator’s aunt, an untameable woman named Jummo, who loves and is loved by an ancient dervish named Sidi Wahdana. What Sidi, a name McDonough loosely translates as “Sir Death,” seems to embody is fate, the inevitability of life and death. He appears to infants at their birth, showing the whites of his eyes, and at bloody wars and accidents, showing only the dark¹².

Rise of Arabic Novel

The emergence of modern Arabic fiction in general, and the novel in particular, happened over many years. But a continuous flow of novels of any literary merit, or a fair degree of technical competence, does not become apparent until nearly a hundred years later, around the 1940. Nevertheless, almost all critics consider “Zaynab” (1913) by Muhammad Husayn Haykal to be the first fairly accomplished novel that departed from the traditional form of Maqama¹, and the first novel which was inspired by regional Egyptian nationalism.¹³ In the contemporary Arabic literature, the genre of novel stands out with its outstanding characteristics. Over very short period of time, this modern literary genre expanded the mental horizon of readers¹⁴.

The development of the Arabic novel

In 1914, the novel “Zainab” authored by Haikal was published. This novel is conceived a quantum leap in the development of the Arabic novel, for it accommodates all the artistic features and qualities. It was published in a time when there was an intellectual uprising among the Arabic writers who were keenly interested in writing novels and stories and translating them as well. In universities, the intellectuals had feisty debates over literary genres and diverse topics in search of new ideas to bring about change. In this period, there emerged many prominent writers like Lutfi As-Sayyid, Alī Abdur Razzāq, Mansūr Fahmī, Tāhā Hussein, and Taufiq Al-Hakim¹⁵. In this period, the novel became a permanent self-reliant literary genre, for it sifted out all the thematic and linguistic loopholes, drawbacks, and ambiguities, and it became diverse in all terms. Egypt had far reached impact on the development of the Arabic novel for its diverse scope of journalism and the intellectual churning. Egyptian novels were the quintessential models for writers to follow and emulate.

The Arabic novel explored new scopes and was characterized by the outshining features when Naguib Mahfouz emerged as an extraordinary writer. The contribution of Naguib Mahfouz to the development of the modern Arabic novel is unprecedented. After his early efforts to write down the novel on the history of Egypt he came to realize the flaws and pathetic conditions of social life, and he shifted his attention from historical novels to the depiction of social issues and problems in his works. He brought about the drastic changes in literary productions. He diversely extended the horizons of novel and portrayed the real social problems in highly elegant language, mesmerizing writing style, eloquent expressions, and lucid and uncomplicated dictions. His writings are mirrors to reflect the subtle details and nuances of society and the world around him. He vividly portrayed the pains and sorrows of people in his realistic novels. In a nutshell, he laid down the real foundation stones of the Arabic novel¹⁶.

¹ 1 Maqama is a sort of narrative form, which was popular in Arabic literature until the beginning of the 20th century. Hadith Isa Ibn Hisham by al-Muwaylihi (1907) is considered by many critics to be the closest to European narrative tradition of the novel

Her contribution in Arabic Novels

Raja'a 'Alem is one of the most important women in Saudi Society at present. She is distinguished by her bold and deep narrative style. She is a novelist who obviously looks to give her fiction a general weight and to make a certified amount of expression that raises the victory of humanistic soul over social troubles.

She is a distinguished Saudi novelist born in 1970 in Makkah, has made significant contributions to Arabic literature, particularly in capturing the essence of the Meccan/Hejazi environment in her works. Her novels, characterized by deep symbolic, mystical, and Gnostic narratives, offer universal perspectives. She is called "Rā'idat al-'adab al-tajribī"¹⁷. 'Alem's desire to preserve Mecca's cultural heritage can be seen as a part of the current efforts in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to record and reenact various aspects of their national heritage that have yielded to modernization and are now almost unknown to the region's younger generations. A number of works have been written on the rapid socioeconomic changes that have taken place in the Arab Gulf during the last three or four decades as a result of oil wealth and globalization¹⁸.

Raja'a 'Alem's work stands out for its profound exploration of the human experience, weaving together themes of love, identity, and the complexities of societal and cultural norms. Her writing style, often described as experimental and innovative, challenges traditional narrative forms, offering readers a unique and enriching experience.

As a prominent figure in the Saudi Arabian literary scene, 'Alem's novels are not only celebrated in the Arab world but have also gained international recognition, with translations into English and Spanish. Her ability to portray the mystical and spiritual aspects of her culture through compelling storytelling has established her as a significant voice in contemporary Arabic literature. Alem dedicates *Tawq al-hamām* to her late grandfather, 'Abdul latīf, whose house in Mecca, where she grew up, was marked with the red "X" of extinction with the intention of turning the site into areas for housing "the strange four-wheeled creatures which will apparently inherit Mecca, as indicated by the H.adīth, about the signs of Judgment Day. One such sign, the narrative adds, is seeing gold thrown into the streets, the gold being the high-priced cars whose numbers exceed those of human beings in the city"¹⁹. Notably she assigns to various arts (including photography, painting, and writing) a primary function, of preserving identity and culture, and building bridges between different generations and lifestyles. She is particularly interested in the figure of Scheherazade, the prototypical narrator, and her ability to create varied worlds and preserve life²⁰.

Conclusion

'Alem is one of the greatest living legendary Arabic Novelist proven by her works and contributions. Her efforts to combat heritage erosions are also obvious in her handling of the issue of aniconism in her culture. Although depicting modern Mecca as a place where both heritage and spirituality have been eroded, 'Alem is not against progress and modernity. She denounces the type of education available to women of her generation, but she assigns to true education which does not need to be formally acquired the primary role of enriching and broadening people's perspectives.

‘Alem’s work is especially important in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world, where many social and cultural rules limit what people—especially women—can talk about. Her stories give a voice to women and others who are often ignored or silenced. She challenges traditional views and shows women as strong, thoughtful, and independent figures in society.

But ‘Alem’s contribution is not only about what she writes—it's also about how she writes. She experiments with language, uses deep symbols, and connects her stories to other texts and traditions. Her writing is inspired by the spiritual and cultural life of Mecca, but it also speaks to people around the world. She builds a bridge between the East and the West, between old and new, and between what is seen and what is hidden. By creating new spaces for expression and storytelling, Raja’a ‘Alem has helped shape the modern Arabic novel. Her work is respected not only in the Arab world but also internationally. With her bold voice and artistic talent, she continues to inspire readers and writers and has become a major figure in Arabic literature.

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