

Tribhuvan University

Female Agency in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*

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**Letter of Recommendation**

This is to certify that Ms. Indu Pariyar has completed her thesis entitled “Female Agency in Rajaa Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh*” under my supervision. I hereby recommend her thesis to be submitted for viva voice.

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### **Letter of Approval**

This thesis entitled “Female Agency in Rajaa Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh*” submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University by Indu Pariyar has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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## Abstract

This research thesis explores the theme of female agency in Rajaa Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh* through the lens of Islamic feminism. The analysis draws on the theoretical frameworks and insights of prominent Islamic feminists, including Haidech Moggissi, Margot Badran, Fatima Mernissi and Nazira Zayn al-Din, among others. The novel, set in contemporary Saudi Arabia, offers a compelling narrative that highlights the lives, struggles, and aspirations of young Saudi women. This study investigates how these characters negotiate their identities, assert their agency, and challenge traditional gender norms within a patriarchal society. Haidech Moggissi's critique of Islamic fundamentalism, in *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, provides a critical framework for understanding the restrictive socio-religious contexts within which the characters operate. Nazira Zayn al-Din's work *Unveiling and Veiling* offers historical and theological perspectives on the practice of veiling, which is a recurring motif in *Girls of Riyadh*. Margot Badran's analysis in *Feminism in Islam* emphasizes the diverse and evolving nature of feminist discourses within Islamic contexts, highlighting the interplay between tradition and modernity. Fatima Mernissi's contributions to Islamic feminist thought underscore the potential for reinterpretation of Islamic texts to advocate for women's rights and empowerment. By synthesizing these theoretical perspectives, this thesis aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of how *Girls of Riyadh* articulates a vision of female empowerment that is rooted in, yet challenges, traditional Islamic values. This study also explores how the novel contributes to the broader discourse on Islamic feminism by showcasing the agency of Saudi women in navigating and transforming their socio-cultural realities.

Keywords: patriarchy, status quo, agency, Islamic feminism, gender stereotypes

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## I. Victimization of women characters in *Girls of Riyadh*

This research focuses on Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2007), a story of a conservative Islamic community of Saudi Arabia. It explores the complex social structure and relationship from the perspective of the main characters Sadeem, Gamrah, Lamees and Michelle. Framed as a series of e-mails sent to the subscribers, the story follows an unnamed narrator who recounts the misadventures of four young Saudi girls, Sadeem, Gamrah, Lamees and Michelle.

The novel tells the story of four college-age high class friends in Saudi Arabia. It describes four girls looking for love but stymied by a system that allows them only limited freedoms and has very specific expectations and demands. There is little contact between men and women especially single teens and adults but modern technology has changed that a bit. The internet is also a new medium that can't contain women and their thoughts like the old system could, and the anonymous narrator of the novel takes advantage of that and she presents her stories in the form of e-mails. The narrator's motivation is to avenge the tyranny of life and society against her friends. Each chapter in the novel starts with a piece of poetry, a verse from the Quran, or lyrics from famous song that captures the idea of the chapter.

Every character in this novel is well-educated, wealthy, and familiar with the modern technologies and looking for the true love and suitable man for the bright future but their world is dominated by prayer, family loyalty and physical modesty. Gamrah, one of the characters, is divorced after she discovers his affair with another American-Japanese woman. Sadeem's fiancé, Waleed, dumps her after having sexual relationship with her. Michelle and Faisal adore each other but Faisal gives her up when her mother says so. Lamees is the only character who achieves the happy ending that the other friends strive for. She combines the modernity of Michelle with

the devotion of Gamrah, successfully choosing her own mate and own job without abandoning the culture and ideals completely.

In the novel, each character has hopes, dreams, plans and determinations and they fall deeply in and out of love just like women anywhere else. Although it is a very conservative Islamic society, they enjoy shopping, dating, chatting, watching American TV and having fun. But they are compelled to live in the squeezed condition between the homegrown tradition and global modernity. They have no choice in doing things. They cannot be totally a good little Muslim girl and a twenty-first century girl. Every one of them lives huddled in the shadow of a man, or a wall, or a man who is wall but Alsanea says that the shadow of a wall is better than the shadow of a man. So they are in identity crisis and suffer from the lost identity. They wander here and there for their real identity.

The Muslim society denies equal position of women comparison to men. From the childhood society teaches the rights about male and female. This society teaches that women are mentally and physically weak and they are not fit for emancipation. The male centered social structure humiliates women. The humiliation leads to the suppression of the voice and self-confidence of women get crushed, but by means of courage and determination, Alsanea is able to revolt against the male domination and construction of the stable identity through the struggling characters. The feminist resistance against the male victimization and conservative Islamic social structure can be a way for equality, justice and co-existence of humanity. It pinpoints and encourages females to raise voice for their real identity and it also demonstrates the importance of understanding between male and female in their social relationships.

The search for one's own self is a major concern in *Girls of Riyadh*. The protagonists try to find identity through their relationship with others, namely through

relationship with different people in their life. Their relationship with different people forces them to form their new identity and with each of them, they adopt another identity. In the novel, Gamrah was a good girl but after her marriage she is known as divorced woman. Sadeem's fiancé, Waleed, dumps her after having sexual relationship with her. She suffers a lot in choosing the perfect partner for her respectful identity. Michelle and Faisal love each other but Faisal gives up the relationship because his mother says so. But in one or the other way, they are in the need of the male character in their side to provide shadow for them. They have not their own standpoint and need others protection. Although they seem living freely like the women from other community, they cannot do this fully. Either they can be typical Muslim women or they can give up their ideals and culture completely. But they are living in the hanging condition between their identity and culture, and little by little some of these women are beginning to carve out their own way-not the Western way, but one that keeps what is good about the values of their religion and culture. So this research tries to explore why these characters struggle for their own identity and one's own self.

This project makes significant contributions in two areas of critical concern. First this study highlights the causes behind the quest for identity in *Girls Of Riyadh* with the scheme of critical analysis and it tries to make significant theoretical connection between the Islamic feminism and strict cultural tradition of Saudi Arabia. This study highlights the logic of Islamic feminism in which the suppression of the women character and their desires in the name of gender and religion has been focused upon. Though this study raises the issue of women's identity, it cannot be addressed merely by the Anglo-American feminist approach which only focuses on the equality of the freedom and rights. So there is the requirement of the special kind

of theoretical reading for the fact that there are Muslim women searching for good relationship, true love, prestigious life and their independent identity in the strict and conservative community without the shadow of men. A critical lens of Islamic feminism encourages revealing the ways in which women characters are depressed, dominated and marginalized. Islamic feminism attempts to work within the values of Islam, not against them, by offering social benefits in a culturally satisfactory and sustainable way to families through enhances opportunities for daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. Saudi society is a unique mix between religion and culture and the position of women in this society is complicated all the time. Therefore, the status of women in such societies needs to be enhanced by treating them with more respect and making sure their rights as human are respected. The major characters such as Sadeem, Gamrah, Michelle and Lamees engage in the acts which are unbearable and unacceptable by the Islamic community. These girls enjoy shopping, dating, chatting, watching American television and challenge the male dominating society.

The primary objective of this study is to highlight the stifled lives of women in the conservative Islamic community where they live under the male dominance. This study aims at deconstructing the prejudices against women from the Islamic feminism where they need the shadow of the male for their identity. It aims to raise the voice of voiceless and give them their own significant stand point in the society. It also questions about the self respect, tolerance and emotional maturity.

The main characters in the *Girls of Riyadh* are the victims of love, marriage and Saudi Arabia's strict cultural traditions. They are vitally important as they illustrate the contradictory representation of complex social structure where women suffer from their losing identity under the so called protection of men.

Roger Hardy, in *New Statesman* writes:

Bored young women from wealthy Saudi families chronicle their unhappy love lives: it hardly sounds like a winning formula. But *Girls of Riyadh* will tell you more about one of the world's oddest and most closed societies than a library of books and articles by supposed western experts. (...) *Girls of Riyadh* is highly readable without being great literature. Some readers will be exasperated by the self-obsession of the Saudi me-generation. But it is a wonderfully vivid social portrait of stifled lives, and one that shows there is now a brave new generation of Saudi women no longer ready to suffer in silence. (1)

Hardy states that this novel *Girls of Riyadh* tells us more about the one of the world's oddest societies than library books and articles tell. It is a vivid social portrait of stifled lives of Saudi women who are struggling for their identity and no longer ready to suffer in silence.

*Girls of Riyadh* lifts the veil of an obscured world from a mystery, a red lipstick-wearing 'blogger'. It captures the trials and tribulations of a middle class society quite unlike our own and blows the lid off all our preconceptions of Arab life.

Lucy Beresford in *The Telegraph* writes:

*Pride and Prejudice* this is not. This is topical chic-lit, even down to the requisite embossed dust-jacket, although one of glamorous black and gold rather than the British standard of baby pink. The diet of girl-longs-for-boy palls, largely because many of the chapter endings are limp, the translation from Arabic is often clunky, and few characters possess a credible interior life. And yet Rajaa Alsanea raises important questions about self-respect, tolerance and emotional maturity. For all the cultural and religious differences, these

teenagers are seen to echo educated girls the world over: they giggle, they bitch, and their dreams are often thwarted by social constraints. There may be more polished novels on this theme to come, with more emotional texture, but Alsanea has had the courage to lift the veil of an obscured world. (1)

Beresford reviews Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* and highlights that this novel raises the question of self-respect, tolerance and emotional maturity. They have dreams but often squeezed by the social constraints and compelled to hinder here and there in search for their real identity.

The proposed thesis is a library based research; it will use a close, discursive analytical style which focuses on the Islamic Feminism. *Girls of Riyadh* is analyzed through the perspective of Islamic Feminism. The focus of the research is a feminist critique which establishes Sadeem and Michelle as the rebellious characters through a feminist discourse. It focuses on the issue of sexual division, love affairs, marriages, divorces, loss of identity, as the exploitation resulted by the conservative patriarchal Islamic society where they cannot get their real identity without the support of men, culture and religion.

Feminism gradually emerged as a world-wide cultural movement to secure a complete equality for women with men in the enjoyment of all human rights: moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal, economic and so forth. This is the core of all feminist theories. In other words, feminism is an expression of the resentment at the unjust treatment to women. It voices the new women's objection to be treated as a door-mat or a piece of furniture meant for the convenience of men. The purpose of feminism is to change the humiliating attitude towards women, to challenge the existing order and to claim women's rights for a better life. Feminists hope to be able to build a society in which men and women are treated with equal value. So to address

the problem of the Muslims, there comes the concept of Islamic feminism. It focuses on the rights from within Islamic tradition rather than against it. It highlights the issues of women who are victimized by the Islamic norms and doctrines.

Islamic feminism has been widely discussed phenomenon since the emergence of the term in 1990. This type of movement addresses the issue of Muslim women's problem. Though, before this movement there was the movement called third world feminism which was first introduced to address the issue of women from the third world countries, which also has the primary objectives to raise voice against the prevailing domination and exploitation upon women. Islamic feminism focuses on the rights from within Islamic tradition rather than against it. Islamic feminist, Haidech Moggissi in her book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism* writes:

Feminism in the 1990s has shown a new and refreshing willingness to engage in self-criticism. Attempts at all-encompassing theories and concepts and the earlier ideological commitment to universalizing the perspectives of what turned out to be a single, specific culture, class and 'race' have long lost their merit. Placing emphasis, instead, at least in theory, on including all women by accepting the multiplicity of each woman's identity and self identification, feminists are now urged to respect difference, affirming the singularity of each woman's struggle and experience, and validating self-understanding and self-analysis. Today, feminism has grown large and includes many brands, both conservative and radical, religious and atheist, heterosexual and non-heterosexual, white and non-white, issue-oriented and holistic, individualistic and community-oriented; and feminists hail from the North and the South.

(125)

In the above lines, Moggissi focuses on the emergence of Islamic feminism which focuses on the individual and collective experience of oppression and domination of women along with struggle and resistance. So, Islamic feminism is a modern ideological movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and it focuses on affirming the singularity of each woman's identity, experience and struggle and respect accordingly.

Although the study makes the significant use of the concepts developed in Islamic feminist scholar, it doesn't offer a comprehensive analysis of Islamic feminist literary theory. Rather an analysis of victims of patriarchal Muslim community has become the primary tool of analysis. Since the major objective of the study is to flash out the victims of male dominating Islamic society. Though such analysis would definitely contribute towards the complex relationship between Alsanea's authorship and the feminist discourse.

Islamic feminism tries to blur the prevailing hierarchy of gender, culture and race. It also empowers the women to construct their own identity different from the men. Viewing the cohabitation and convergence between post-colonial and Islamic feminism, Leela Gandhi argues:

Feminism and post-colonial theory alike began with an attempt to simply invert prevailing hierarchy or gender, culture, race [...] there are three area of controversy which fracture the potential unity between post-colonial and feminism: the debate surrounding the figure of the third world feminism; the problematic history of the feminist-as-imperialist' and finally, the colonialist deployment of 'feminist criteria' to bolster the aspect of the civilization mission. (82)

The above lines depict the post colonialism and feminism as disciplinary sibling.

These two variant fields could have rivalry standing as well. The parallelism between

feminist and post colonial concern also underscore the double oppression shared by post colonial women. They are the victims of both colonial ideology and patriarchal ideology. Post colonial women have suffered from patriarchal oppression not only at the hand of colonialist but within their own patriarchy as well.

Nazira Zayn al-Din, another Islamic feminist and a daughter of a Muslim authority, complains in her *Unveiling and Veiling* that Muslim perceptions for women, particularly concerning the veil, have been historically framed by men. She devotes hundreds of pages to a passionate, well documented refutation of the Islamic scholars' insistence that veiling is religiously binding. The Islamic feminist tries to deconstruct the existing norms and make it women friendly in Muslim community. By raising the issue of veil, feminist tries to avoid the religious binding for women which becomes the hindrances for women's career also.

Islamic feminism is concerned with the role of women in Islam. It aims for the full equality of all Muslims, regardless of gender in public and private life. Islamic women advocate women's right, gender equality and social justice grounded in an Islamic framework. It is the challenging domain which criticizes the dominating and denigrating ethos experienced by Muslim countries and other third world countries. It has its own history, theoretical frame of reference and point of departure. The advocates of the movement seek to highlight the deeply rooted teaching of equality in the Quran and encourage a questioning of the patriarchal interpretation of Islamic teaching through the Quran (holy book), Hadith (saying of Mohammed) and Sharia (law) towards the creation of a more equal and just society. The subordinated position of female and their issues in the Muslim country are the central theme of the *Girls of Riyadh*. The Muslim people, their doctrines, social context, domestic violence, sexual

abuse and other indefinite institutional violence done over women are thoroughly and evidently presented in the fiction. Margot Badran in *Feminism in Islam* writes:

Islamic feminism argues that the Quran affirms the principle of equality of all human beings, and that the practice of equality between women and men (and other categories of people) has been impeded or subverted by patriarchal ideas (ideology) and practices. Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), consolidated in its classical form in the ninth century, was itself heavily saturated with the patriarchal thinking and behaviors of the day. It is this patriarchally-infected jurisprudence that has informed the various contemporary formulations of the *Shari 'a*. The Hadith – the reported, but not always authentic, sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad – have also been often used to shore up patriarchal ideas and practices. Sometimes hadiths are of questionable provenance or reliability, and sometimes they are used out of context, with negative consequence for women. (247)

Badran in the above lines, tries to focus on the Qur'an. Here, Badran says that Islamic feminism does not question the norms or the purity of it rather tries to examine the temporary interpretations of it.

Islamic feminism serves people in their individual lives, and can be a potent force in improving state and society. It insists on full equality of women and men across the public and private spectrum. It also stands for Muslims of both sexes, as well as non-Muslims living side by side with Muslims everywhere. Islamic feminism attempts to work within the values of Islam, not against them, by offering social benefits in a culturally satisfactory and sustainable way to families through enhanced opportunities for daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. Badran also writes:

The conceptual and political location of this “Islamic feminism” will be a middle space, or independent site, between secular feminism and masculinist Islamism. I suggest that “Islamic feminists” will come to acknowledge plural identities and “secular feminists will make more explicit an Islamic dimension of feminism that will link them to other Muslim women as theorists and activists of gender. “Islamic feminists” will acknowledge positioning and linkages beyond those created by religion and case to shy away from the feminist label; rather, they will acknowledge such an identity...I believe that the new radical feminism in Muslim societies- that is, “Islamic feminism”- will play a salient role in (1) the re-visioning of Islam; (2) the constitution of a new modernity in the twenty-first century; and (3) the transformation of feminism itself. (219-20)

Badran states that Islamic feminism seeks rights and justice for women and men in the totality of their existence. It focuses in the position and identity of women of Muslim societies and the constitution of a new modernity in the twenty-first century.

*Girls of Riyadh* by Alsanea deals with a profoundly different world. It focuses the position of women in Islamic society where their positions are in between homegrown tradition and global modernity. Laws pertaining to marriage and divorce speak clearly of women’s disabilities in enjoying full legal status. This novel is a story of four young Saudi women looking for love and how their culture acts against it. Women face problems in finding the real identity because neither they can totally accept the twenty-first century’s modernity nor they can go against it. So Islamic feminism tries to study the position of women in conservative patriarchal Muslim society and tries to pave the better way for women.

## II. Suppression, Victimization and Quest for identity in *Girls of Riyadh*

*Girls of Riyadh* is about the story of the personal struggles of four young upper-class Saudi women Sadeem, Gamrah, Lamees and Michelle (Mashaal) who are the main characters of this novel. This novel questions about the self-respect, tolerance and emotional maturity and lifts the veil of an obscured society. It is a quest for identity of women in between the oppressive traditions of Muslim society. It explores the complex social structure from the perspective of the main characters Sadeem, Gamrah, Lamees and Michelle who go through several transformations during their journey of life from their native land Riyadh to Chicago, San Francisco and London. Four close girlfriends from upper-class Saudi families attend university and medical school in Riyadh and Chicago and San Francisco. They talk in chat rooms to their boyfriends and each other. But even with all the hip technology, they cannot escape from the deep rooted oppressive traditions after they return to Riyadh. Their journey from Riyadh to another countries itself is a search for their own identity in between their home grown tradition and global modernity.

Framed as a series of e-mails sent to the subscribers of an Internet group, the story follows an unnamed narrator who recounts the misadventures of her best friends Gamrah, Sadeem, Lamees and Michelle who are all young, fashionable, educated and wealthy looking for true love and own standard identity. Their world is dominated by prayer, family loyalty and physical modesty. Through a series of e-mails on a yahoo subscription list, an unnamed narrator relates the adventures of her four young friends as they confront the challenges of adult life in the privileged society of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Each of the girls has her own individual story: Gamrah has moved to the Unites States with her new husband in a union their families have arranged. Lonely and confined to a Chicago apartment, she wonders if she made the right choice. Her

best friend and the romantic business student Sadeem is fixed up with Waleed, a handsome civil servant from a prominent lineage, and they are soon caught up in a romantic whirlwind that might be a bit too intoxicating for their own good. Michelle, the half- American member of the group, meets her own seemingly perfect man who can truly understand her Western values but unfortunately comes from a less tolerant family. The rebellious character and medical student Lamees finds herself attracted to the brother of her classmate, even though the relationship may jeopardize her friendships and her freedom. She is the only character who finds success in her professional and love life when she marries a man of her choice and moves to Canada to get her board in medicines.

As Alsanea writes, Sadeem, one of the characters of this novel, gets emotional tragedy when her fiancé Waleed dumps her after having sexual relationship with her before wedding. In Muslim society that is considered as a big mistake and society usually get the impression that the girl is too easy. After that night Waleed disappears and sends her divorced paper which clarifies that how women are treated by society. At this point, Sadeem wondered about what is happening with her and questions herself:

Had she been wrong to give himself to Waleed before the wedding celebration? Wasn't he her legal husband ever since they signed the contract? Or did getting married mean the ballroom, the guests, the live singer and the dinner?...Hadn't he been the one who initiated it? Why had he encouraged her to do the wrong thing and then afterwards abandoned her...He must have thought she was one of those girls who were easy? Hadn't there been acceptance, consent and commitment, witnesses and an announcement to the world...So where was the error? Where was the sin? (35-36)

In the above lines, Alsanea questions about the fine line drawn between the men and women of the society. Through the character Sadeem, Alsanea questions about the meaning of marriage in Muslim society and if anything bad happens why women only considered as the responsible character.

Islamic feminist, Haidech Moggissi tries to show the patriarchal interpretation and judgment of female body in the Muslim society. In her book *Feminism and Islamic fundamentalism*, Moggissi writes the male's view regarding the female body. Moggissi writes:

In Islamic societies, the women's body generates fascination and pleasure. It is exploited for procreation, and as a symbol of communal dignity. It is manipulated and its activities are codified. It is covered and confined. It is disciplined for defiance and is mutilated in anticipation of trespassing—all this often sanctioned legally and, particularly, culturally. The female body is the site of struggle between the proponents and opponents of modernity and is used as playing card between imperial and anti-imperial political forces. In Islamic societies, sexuality, the site of love, desire, sexual fulfillment and physical procreation, is at the same time, for women the site of shame, confinement, anxiety, compulsion. (20)

The above lines show that female body is like a playing card everyone can use in whatever way they like. Islamic societies define sexuality as the site of love and procreation but at the same time it becomes shame, confinement, anxiety and compulsion for women as like Sadeem in this novel. So the Islamic feminist tries to question such trend and culture and give respect to everyone.

In this novel, each character has hopes, dreams, plans, determinations and they fall deeply in and out of love just like women anywhere else. They enjoy shopping,

dating, chatting, watching American TV and having fun but they are compelled to live in the squeezed condition between homegrown tradition and global modernity. They have no choice in doing things under the conservative Islamic society. In this novel, what the author opines that living in restrictive Riyadh but travelling all over the globe, those modern Saudi women literally and figuratively shed the traditional garb as they search for love, fulfillment and their place somewhere in between Western society and their Islamic home. She opens up the hidden world of Saudi women, their private lives and their conflicts with the traditions of their culture. Alsanea's tale of the personal struggles of four young upper-class Saudi women offers Westerners an unprecedented glimpse into a society often veiled from view. Four characters of this novel wander here and there in search of their own identity. Neither can they be totally a good little Muslim girl nor a twenty-first century girl. So they are in the condition of identity crisis, suffer from the lost identity and quest for identity. What is happening in the lives of these four girls is the same view of the Saudi society as the female. The story of the friendship of these four twenty-year-old girls reveals the hidden and unknown aspect of Saudi society from father-son relationships to the power of men and the abuses that men make of this power. This thesis shows the sufferings of these characters for their real identity and freedom under the Islamic patriarchal society.

The Muslim society is very much biased to the women. It denies equal position of women in comparison to men. The male centered social structure humiliates women. The humiliation leads to the suppression of the voice. In the novel, Gamrah's mother forbade her to go out as she used to go before marriage and divorce. Fatima Mernissi, an Islamic feminist who deals with the issues of Muslim people,

finds the problem in the cultural and religious attitude of male. In *Beyond the Veil*, she writes:

At stake in Muslim society is not the emancipation of women (if that means only equality with men), but the fate of the heterosexual unit. Men and women were and still are socialized to perceive each other as enemies. The desegregation of social life makes them realize that besides sex, they can also give each other friendship and love. Muslim ideology, which views men and women as enemies, tries to separate the two, and empowers men with institutionalized means to oppress women. (1)

Mernissi, in the above lines, states that the ideology of suppression in Muslim society is the outcome of socialization from more generations and it is transferring from generation to generation.

But by means of courage and determination, Alsanea revolts against the male dominated society and able to construct the stable identity through the struggling characters. The feminist resistance against the male victimization and conservative Islamic social structure can be a way for equality, justice and co-existence of humanity. It pinpoints and encourages females to raise voice for their real identity and it also demonstrates the importance of understanding between male and female in their social relationships.

In this novel, Alsanea exposes the private world of Saudi Arabia's most cloistered citizens to uncover young women who ultimately share the same hopes and dreams as their Western counterparts. By using internet as a vehicle, Alsanea portrays the impact of modern communication tools on the Saudi society. In the conservative Saudi society, the internet, cell phones and bluetooth can be as important or crucial as face-to-face communication. The unknown narrator in *Girls of Riyadh* is a well

enlightened twenty-first century young woman who lives in Saudi Arabia. She is smart, motivated, and knows exactly what she and her friends are missing but yet not strong enough to face the whole society by exposing her true identity.

Though the characters of this novel wander here and there to other countries for their higher studies or for other purpose, they cannot leave culture back and form their own identity. In Saudi there are numerous laws both religious and social. Behind the shelter of the strict, religiously-dominated society of Saudi Arabia, it is difficult to imagine the daily lives of young women on the cusp of maturity, imagining the ecstasy of first love and the handsome men who will become their husbands. It is surprising how idealism cannot just restrict us from moving forward, but pull us backwards too. This study dramatizes the logic of Islamic feminism in which the suppression of the women characters in the name of gender and religion has been focused upon. It highlights the stifled lives of women in the conservative Islamic community where they live under the male dominance and need the shadow of male for their identity. It aims to raise the voice of voiceless and give them their own significant stand point in the society. It also questions about the self-respect, tolerance and emotional maturity. So, the search for one's self or one's own stable and prestigious identity is a major concern in *Girls of Riyadh*.

The protagonists in this novel try to find identity through their relationship with others, namely through relationship with different people in their life. Their relationship with different people forces them to form their new identity and with each of them, they adopt another identity. In the novel, Gamrah was a good girl but after her marriage she is known as a divorced woman. She cannot do whatever she wants. Only because she is a divorced woman there is a boundary and demarcation in each and every thing belongs to her. Sadeem's fiancé Waleed dumps her after having

sexual relationship with her. She suffers a lot in choosing the perfect partner for her respectful identity. Another character Michelle and her boyfriend Faisal adore each other but Faisal gives her up when his mother refuses to allow him to marry a girl not of the family's choosing and on top of that born to an American mother. After that she loses her faith in men. After such a disappointment, she travels to San Francisco to study in the company of her American cousin and develop a mutual admiration but things never progress to love. Faced with this confusing relationship, she travels back to her father who decides to move the whole family to Dubai to avoid gossip and ill-reputation that haunts her father. When she moves to Dubai, she works at one of the satellite TV channels owned by the father of her Emirati girlfriend, Jumanah. She succeeds in her work and asks her father if he will allow her to appear on TV as TV hostess, but he refuses and convinces her that her appearance on TV would lead to reverberations that might reach Saudi and his family. The four characters are bound by a strong friendship despite their differences. Each one of them explores her own failures except Lamees who finds success in both her professional career and her love life. She marries a man of her choosing and moves to Canada with her husband to get her boards in Medicine.

According to the novel, Saudi Arabia's society is oppressive to women. It does not allow them to express their opinion. Women are always controlled by the male person inside the house as well as in the public place. In one or the other way, they are in the need of the male character in their side to provide shadow for them. They have not their own standpoint and need others protection. Although they seem living freely like women from other community, they cannot do this fully and freely. They need the support of male character for their prestigious identity in the society. Through the unnamed narrator, Rajaa Alsanea in her novel writes:

Tonight's the night. The heroes of my story are people among you, from you and within you, for from the desert we all come and to the desert we shall all return. Just as it is with our desert plants, you'll find the sweet and the thorny here, the virtuous and the wicked. Some of my heroes are sweet and others are thorny, while a few are bit of both at the same time. So keep the secrets you will be told or, as we say, 'Shield what you may encounter!' And since I have quite boldly started writing this e-mail without consulting my girlfriends, and because every one of them lives huddled in the shadow of a man, or a wall, or a man who is wall, or simply stays put in the darkness, I've decided to change all the names of the people I will write about and make a few alterations to the facts, but in a way that will not compromise the honesty of the tale nor take the sting out of the truth. (2)

Alsanea in the above given narration tries to show the position of women in the Islamic society. In Muslim culture women are supposed to give more protection and care. They are supposed to be submissive, weak and docile and if they are not given proper care the family's prestige will be shacked up in the society. So they want to control and command upon women. But in case of man they are given maximum freedom. They are free to go anywhere with anybody else according to their will and interest. So there exists discrimination between man and woman in the patriarchal Islamic society. Women need the shadow of man for their protection and name too. Women are compelled to bury their names in the graveyard of culture and traditions.

In the like manner, an unnamed narrator talks about the stories of her girlfriends who are imprisoned behind black walls and whose lives and potentials are wasted in the name of rigid conservative traditions and customs. The narrator does not

only give voice to her girlfriends but also to thousands of women whose stories are marginalized, buried and never heard about. The narrator says:

I shall write of my girlfriends, for in each one's tale I see my story and self prevail, a tragedy my own life speaks. I shall write of my girlfriends, of inmates' lives sucked dry by jail, and magazine pages that consume women's time, and of the doors that fail to open. Of desires slain in their cradles I'll write, of the vast great cell, black walls of travail, of thousands, thousands of martyrs, all female, buried stripped of their names in the graveyard of traditions. (3)

In the above lines, the narrator highlights the condition of her friends in Muslim society, who are in between their desires and traditions of society they live in. The narrator also emphasizes how desires, dreams and hopes of women buries down in the graveyard of traditions.

Haidech Moggissi in her book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism* tries to focus on the norms and thinking pattern of the Islamic people regarding sex and sexuality. It is the cultural construct that males are superior bread winner, decision maker and head of the family whereas female has no any significant role. They are treated as other in their own family. Male can do whatever they want to do but when female does same thing it becomes the matter of shame to the family. Whatever the interests women show are directly rejected by the male person. Women's hopes and dreams disappear in the name of tradition and culture. Moggissi writes:

In Islamic societies, sexuality, the site of love, desire, sexual fulfillment and physical procreation, is, at the same time, for women, the site of shame, confinement, anxiety, and compulsion. 'With the first drop of her menstrual blood, every Muslim girl becomes a temple of her family's honor' (Minai,

1981). Women's expression of her desires and the pursuit of her interests contradict the interests of man and challenges man's god-given rights over woman. Underpinning the sexual and moral beliefs and practices in Islamic societies is the conception of woman as weak in moral judgment and deficient in cognitive capacity, yet sexually forceful and irresistibly seductive. The susceptibility of women to corruption, in this view, explains the obsession with sexual purity in Islamic cultures and justifies surveillance of women by family, community and the state. Laws pertaining to marriage and divorce speak clearly of women's disabilities in enjoying full legal status. (20-21)

Moggissi, in the above lines, tries to picture out the images of the Muslim women. They are not given any value in the family as well as in the society. The interests and will of the women are always in the shadow. They always marginalize. The society treats them as the other in their own homeland. Society takes women as weak and deficient. It means society takes them in the minority group. Women can't get any respect instead they have to stand and live their life in the way the society expects to do. When there is divorce between couples, blame directly goes to female that she cannot enjoy her marriage according to the law. That is very bitter but the reality of the society.

Saudi society is a unique mix between religion and culture where women cannot do whatever they want to do. They have to think more than two times before doing anything if it would be good or not to the values of our culture and religion. In this novel, Alsanea describes the Muslim wedding of Gamrah with Rashid where weddings in Saudi Arabia usually provide a space for older women who might be possible prospective brides for their sons. In return young women do their best to

show their beauty and great manners at weddings in a way to attract the attention of prospective mother-in-laws. Within this context, Alsanea writes:

At weddings, receptions and social gatherings where ladies meet, especially the old ladies looking to make match, you must follow this strategy to the letter: ‘You barely walk, you barely talk, you barely smile, you barely dance, be mature and wise, you always think before you act, you measure your words carefully before you speak and you do not behave like a child.’(6-7)

In the above lines, Alsanea shows the condition of women in Muslim society where women even cannot walk as they want. They have to follow the rules and regulations that so called society draws. Women have to act according to the wish of society not their own. Women are treated as goods kept in the showcase and their parents invite to men that come, see and choose as your wish. It is the foolproof path to a quick marriage proposal in this conservative society.

In the like manner, Simon De Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* tries to visualize the condition of women in the patriarchal Islamic society regarding sex and marriage. To show the condition of marriages in Muslim society she writes: “For girls marriage is the only means of integration in the community, and if they remain unwanted, they are socially viewed so much wastage. This is why mothers have always eagerly sought to arrange marriages for them” (12). Beauvoir in the above lines tries to clarify that people in the Islamic society are very much concerned with the marriage especially of daughters. As their daughters are grown up, parents start to choose right person for their daughters. If girls remain unwanted and unmarried, they are socially viewed as so much wastage and society creates bad image for them. So parents, especially mothers are worried to arrange marriages for them.

In *Girls of Riyadh*, Rajaa Alsanea exposes the plight of easiness and frequency of divorce of women in Saudi Arabia who no longer appear beautiful to their husbands or those who assert their own identities and individualities. Gamrah, one of the characters of this novel, is divorced with her newly married husband after she discovers his affair with another American-Japanese woman named Kari. After finding the extra marital affair of her husband, Gamrah decides to meet Kari, intent on fighting to defend her marriage and struggle for the sake of its survival but Rashid becomes angry with her. In return, Gamrah takes revenge by not taking her contraceptive pills and becomes pregnant thinking that pregnancy can change the behavior of her husband. But when he finds her pregnant he slaps her. After that Rashid uses the verbal abuses to her like that: “What? Pregnant? You are pregnant! How did that happen? Who gave you permission to get pregnant? You mean you’re not taking pills? Didn’t we agree there would be no pregnancy until I finish my PhD and we go back to Saudi? You reckoned you could twist my arm with these filthy tricks!” (92). These lines show that there is no right of women in their bodies too. Women in the patriarchal society have false identity. They cannot do the things according to their will. Here, too, Rashid use Gamrah as a servant and playing things at home and have extra affair with another woman. She cannot make decision even in bearing a child.

In the same manner, Alsanea poses serious questions to readers and wonders why divorced women are slapped with rejection and stigma. Alsanea argues that we should defend Gamrah and other divorcees and women like them don’t deserve to be looked down by society. In a conservative society like Saudi Arabia, a divorced woman suffers from social stigma and is usually seen as a disgrace. She should be monitored all the time fearing that she will bring shame to the family. In this novel,

Gamrah finds her life in Riyadh as a dominated woman who lives her life as a dominated daughter. And again in Chicago; she is humiliated, frustrated wife and betrayed woman by all the people everywhere. Nawal El Saadawi's view in *The Nawal El Saadawi Reader* about the concept of divorce in Muslim community is: "...the great majority of Arab women ... are still, \_terrorized by the mere word, divorce which means hunger, no home and the unrelenting remarks of those around them" (34).

Nawal EI Saadawi tries to picture the view of Muslim society towards the divorced women in Arab world. In Islamic societies, there is misconception that divorced woman may bring her ill reputation and always seen as a disgrace. People think that they can say anything as if they have no home, no name etc. Divorced women suffer from the relentless tantrums of the people around them.

Haidech Moghissi, in her book *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism*, tries to picture the manners of the male person in the patriarchal Islamic society regarding sex and marriage.

Yet, the Muslim man, it is presumed, has sexual drives that cannot be satisfied with only one woman at time. Therefore he is allowed to marry four women and hire as many temporary 'wives' as he can afford, through the institution of mutt's (temporary marriage)-as is still the case in Sh'I tradition. This special allowance made to men in effect nullifies women's right to sexual pleasure as recognized in Islam. (23)

In the like manner, Alsanea, through the narrator, narrates her story where she presents the panic condition of Gamrah. She suffers a lot from loneliness even if she is with her so called husband. After returning to Riyadh, society knows her as a divorcee and suffers from social stigma. Her family arranges her marriage but she

resists being victimized twice at the altar of patriarchal traditions and customs.

Gamrah has resisted by ranting at her mother's face:

Why? Why do I need a man to shield and protect me? Does your brother think I'm a disgrace, or I cannot protect my own self? You people don't realize that I'm a grown woman now and I have a son! My word should count and I should be listened to! But no! You think absolutely the opposite from how any responsible family would think. That's even worse than what you did to me in my engagement to Rashid! (207)

In the above lines, Gamrah asks legitimate questions to her mother which deconstruct the oppressive, patriarchal mentality which looks down upon women as just passive sexual objects only. Patriarchy denies the possibility of an independent life experience of women outside the family confines. Here, Gamrah asserts her own identity and choices in life where one can chart her own future. She refuses to be victimized and struggles for her own prestigious identity. So this novel presents a true account of women's socio-economic and unidentified position in the patriarchal woven structure of society.

Likewise, Sadeem, another character of this novel is also a divorcee with Waleed. Her first emotional tragedy is caused by her fiancé Waleed who dumps her after having sexual relationship with her. According to the oppressive traditions and tribal customs, Sadeem's action is taken as a huge mistake. Here too, women are considered as play thing. Patriarchal society can use them as the way they like.

Alsanea foregrounds the suppression of women characters and their desires in the name of culture, religion, love, marriage, etc. After that bitter tragedy, Sadeem is in relationship with Firas but he cannot accept her as life partner because his position and prestige will be ruined in the society after getting married to a divorced woman.

Here, we also find Firas so weak to face the society and so selfish to risk his elite position. Instead, he shows his utter helplessness by resigning to please the patriarchal society supported by oppressive traditions and conventions rather than resigning for his love with a woman who trusts and loves him genuinely. Sadeem finally musters her courage and ends her relationship with Firas and gets married to Tarik who adores her. Alsanea sheds light on the identity of divorced women in Saudi society who are viewed as immoral.

Another feminist Lila Abu Lughod analyzes the men women relationship of Islamic society. She shows the weakness of religion which underlines the women in comparison to men. In her essay *Seduction of Honour Crime* she argues:

Honor is a key moral value. On the critical analysis of Diverse representations of the honor crime The author explores how the seductive power of the honor crime, mixing sexual titillation and moral horror, and its truly polymorphous interpretive capacity have enabled it to emerge as a robust category implicated in projects that include the policing and exclusions of immigrants; nation-states' disciplinary penetration of rural and urban subaltern communities; dominate by specific national, ethnic, or class groups; manipulation of liberal values in the service of feminists. (9)

Lila Abu Lughod analyzes the cultural and religious aspect of Muslim societies. The Muslim society is guided by religious doctrine and based on moral norms and values. According to these norms and values, women are considered as the property of male, and their social status and identity depends upon the fate of male. Because of the religious belief, many Muslim women in their respective societies are in the deplorable condition. The patriarchy silences women; the silence is equated with honor. Analyzing the religious norms and values, Lughod wants to show that the

religious beliefs and ideas are not in favor of female identity. Through this article, she wants feminists to speak against the male biased religion and improve it in favor of women.

Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* is a mouthpiece in her criticism of the Saudi Arabian society with its degrading attitude towards love, suppressive traditions and conventions, lack of women's rights and misuse of religion which need urgently to be examined, revised and reformed. Another character Michelle continually advises Gamrah to become tougher and meaner in asserting herself and not to give an inch when it came to defending her own rights. In this context, Sadeem says:

'I mean, seriously,' continued Sadeem, 'I am sick of how we let everyone else to control us and lead us through this life. We can never do anything without fear of being judged holding us back. Everyone steers us along according to what they want. What kind of life is that? We don't have a say about our own lives!' (192)

In the above lines, Sadeem says that in the Muslim society women cannot live their lives as their own wish. They are being controlled by other. Here also Michelle becomes a mentor and an eye opener for her girlfriends like Gamrah and Sadeem, advising them about ways of how men think, experiences in life and how important it is to assert one's own identity and individuality in spite of all odds.

Michelle, who is born to a Saudi father and an American mother, is in the relationship with Faisal. Both adore each other but when Michelle asks Faisal to marry her, he backs off because his mother refuses him to marry a girl not of the family's choice. Here, Michelle is born to an American mother, who is viewed as negatively in Saudi Arabian society and this is manifested in Michelle's angry words. "Why does not this society respect the difference between my family and other Saudi

families? Everyone considers me a bad girl just because my mother is American! How can I live in such an unjust society? Tell me how, Faisal! (100). In the above lines, Michelle questions about the narrow mentality of society where they believed only in their inherited beliefs and their traditions from across the generations. Here, Michelle suffers from cultural identity.

After the shocking breakup with Faisal, it came as a severe shock to Michelle. With a great deal of patience and will, Michelle began the process of peeling away the pain. In spite of the wound that Faisal had inflicted, Michelle was sure that Faisal had loved her truly as she loved him but he was weak and passive and submissive to the will of a society that paralyzed its members. It was a society riddled with hypocrisy, drugged by contradictions and her only choice was to either accept those contradictions and bow to them, or leave her country to live in freedom. After such a disappointment, Michelle travels to San Francisco to study, turning her back to a country where people cannot decide and choose for themselves. She would not allow anyone to tell her what she could and could not do. It was her life, only hers, and she was going to live it the way she wanted, for herself and herself only. So, here, Michelle leaves the country for her independent and respectful identity. In this novel, Michelle serves as Alsanea's mouthpiece in her criticism of the Saudi Arabian society with its degrading attitude towards love, suppressive traditions and conventions, lack of women's rights and misuse of religion which need urgently to be examined, revised and reformed.

Likewise, as time is changeable in nature, everything in this world is also changing. No women are in a position to accept all the doctrines and paths made for them by the male dominated societies. Rather they want their own free life, without any suppression, oppression and domination. Therefore, Michelle starts to avoid the

traditional limitation and move further for the dream and liberation from male exploitation and domination. Nawal EI Saadawi is a well known Egyptian feminist writer and activist who want third world women's liberation not only in terms of national, colonial, or international exploitation, but also from legal, sexual and family oppression. She clarifies about 'what is feminist struggle' in an interview:

We women cannot liberate ourselves as one half of the population in isolation of the other half, men. This is the problem with the patriarchal system. Men have tried to liberate themselves without women...this system has ended in what we suffering. It is a battle on many fronts. It is a political battle, it is a psychological battle, and we have to fight in all these fronts. (34)

Saadawi argues that, unless women understand the link between socio-political and sexual oppression, they cannot put women's liberation of the whole country. She further argues that men have tried to liberate themselves without women. They put women in the narrow space. Because of this behavior of male, women are suffering a lot. To come out from these problems, women have to battle which is physical as well as psychological.

Margot Badran, an Islamic feminist, tries to show the changing history of the women regarding their rights and freedom in her book *Feminism in Islam* argues:

From the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the state in Egypt tried to draw women into the economic and technological transformations under way. As a consequence it began to wrest women away from the exclusive control of the family, threatening the authority and domination of men over their women....The state increasingly came to influence their public roles, leaving to religion the regulation of their private or family roles.....while promoting new social roles for women, the state could not afford unduly to alienate

patriarchal interests and has therefore made various accommodations and alliances. Whatever their competing interests, the state and the religious forces have retained patriarchal forms of control over women. (19)

Badran further emphasizes on the issues that the women in the modern world are focusing about. Women strongly stand on the same ground and discussed about the issues where they are dominated and try to root out those problems. Badran also suggests those victims of patriarchy to be alert because the religious authority may try to seize the rights of women. She writes:

It is the patriarchal dimension that feminists have identified and confronted, for which they have been variously attacked, contained, or suppressed by state authorities and Islamic alike. However in Egypt there has been sufficient space-albeit more frequently taken than granted-within state and society for women to speak out as feminists and activists. Moreover, the authorities have at times deliberately encouraged women's initiatives for their own purposes. (19)

The above lines show Islamic feminism as a movement that paves the way to those female who are confined within the four walls of domestic household. The women who were only given the duty to look after their family and children are now heading towards the public sphere. The state has also made some provision for the rights of women who were deprived from their basic rights. Because of the frequent pressure from women activists and feminists, women under Islam are breathing relieved air.

In the same manner, Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan feminist writer and sociologist, in her book *Beyond the Veil* explores the historical links between the religion of Islam, the societal oppression of women, and the suppression of democracy in predominantly Muslim society. She tries to free the right of

interpretation from the iron grip of the patriarchs and instead give an interpretation with a feminist perspective. Mernissi explores the relationship between sexual ideology, gender identity, social policy organization and the position of women in Islam. Feminism is not making women strong, women are already strong. It's about changing the way the world perceives that strength.

As we know, Michelle serves as Alsanea's mouthpiece in her criticism of the Saudi Arabian society, she questions about the traditional limitations and conventions imposed by society. She also questions to her friend Gamrah and says:

Let's be honest to each other here. If Rashid hadn't appealed to you, you wouldn't have accepted him. You had the right to say no, but you didn't. So you'd better drop all this 'fate' theory, all this stuff about us not having any hand in any of our life paths. We always act the role of the helpless females, completely overcome by circumstances, and as if we don't have a say in anything or opinions of our own! Utterly passive! How long are we going to keep on being such cowards, and not have even the courage to see our choices through, whether they are right or wrong? (135-36)

Alsanea, in the above lines, tries to show the awareness of women about their rights and self-identity. She also tries to show how girls of Riyadh are being able to raise voice against the domination. Through the characters, Alsanea emphasizes on the issues of the women in the modern world which is focusing about. Alsanea also suggests those victims of patriarchy to be alert because the religion authority may seize the rights of women.

A feminist critic KetuKatrak in her book, *The Politics of the Female Body* analyzes the effects of female resistance and its result for the empowerment of female. She says that when female speaks about their right and condition that helps to gain

certain status in the society. The act of speaking enables women to achieve a good status. She further argues:

Speaking orally and writing or performing the stories as well as in street theatre is significant act of resistance. They serve as the models for the other women in the larger project of resistance in terms of location women exile from their bodies and communities in which they are placed, or which they relocate provide sustaining or un-hurting environment for the body to be inhabit. A politics of female body includes the construction and control of female sex. (10)

The above lines, demonstrate the importance of understanding gender issues. It requires a clear understanding that being a woman, one should not tolerate the domination either by the people or by the society. The act of speaking through the various mediums enables women to understand the trauma of female. Women should have the feeling of sisterhood among all in the society. There should be strong bond among them so that they can share their pain and sorrow as well as they can understand their psychology. If that kind of situation takes place, it will be easy to resist and raise the similar issues. To overcome the problems, the critic Ketu Katrak suggests them to speak through various mediums

Likewise, the unknown narrator not only speaks about the suffering of women in conservative society of Riyadh but also questions to the tendency of looking divorced women in the Islamic society. She writes:

I'm getting many, many responses rebuking and insulting Um Nuwayyir, and censuring the families of my friends who have allowed their daughters to spend a single evening at the home of a divorced woman who lives alone.

Wait a minute. Is divorce a major crime committed by the woman only? Why

doesn't our society harass the divorced man the way it crushes the divorced woman? I know that you readers are always ready to dismiss and make light of these naive questions of mine, but surely you can see that they are logical questions and they deserve careful thought. We should defend Um Nuwayyir and Gamrah and other divorcees. Women like them don't deserve to be looked down on by society, which only condescends from time to time to throw them a few bones and expects them to be happy with that. Meanwhile, divorced men go on to live fulfilling lives without any suffering or blame. (185)

Above lines speak about the truth of patriarchal Islamic society where only women are blamed for divorce and restrictions begin only for them. So, here, Gamrah expresses her feeling with her friend Michelle: "You're so lucky, Michelle. You can relax and live your life the way you want to! There's no one shadowing you and breathing down your neck, asking every minute where you're going and where you've been! You're free and don't have to hear people's relentless gossip" (187-88). In the above lines, Gamrah expresses her frustration towards the thinking of conservative Islamic society. Michelle frequently advises Gamrah to be tougher and meaner in asserting herself and not to give an inch when it came to defending her own rights. Here, Michelle talks about freedom and women's rights, the bonds of religion, conventions imposed by society and her philosophy on relations between the sexes.

Here, Gamrah shows her anger on patriarchal Islamic mentality upon the divorced women with her mother:

Why? Why do I need a man to shield and protect me? Does your brother think I'm a disgrace, or I cannot protect my own self? You people do not realize that I am a grown woman now and I have a son! My word should count and I

should be listened to! But no! You think absolutely opposite from how any reasonable family would think. (207)

Gamrah in the above lines questions to the patriarchal notion of the society where men assume that they give so called protection to the women. Gamrah clears that the voice of the woman also should be listened by the society and women also should have their own respectful identity.

Margot Bardan in her book *Feminism in Islam* tries to show the history of the development of feminist movement which helps to clarify the condition of women in the past and the present days. The feminist movement which is taking place plays a crucial role to emancipate and free the women from the conservative doctrines in the male dominating Islamic societies. It changes the life of women from the deplorable condition to this phase which is really the great achievement in the side of women:

...The most dramatic and politically sensitive move was the presidential decree making fundamental changes in the personal status laws for the first time in fifty years. Some of the excess of patriarchal privilege were curtailed in an unprecedented manner with the expansions of women's ability to initiate divorce, added protection for women in divorce and controls placed on polygamy. Many men not only fundamentalists, were outraged, but for feminists the gains constituted an important, if still inadequate, step forward...There was significant number of highly educated women espousing feminism practicing law and medicine, teaching in university, working in business and engaging in writing and journalists. (42-43)

Badran in the above lines, tries to reflect the development of the feminist movement to clarify the condition of women in the past and the present time. Feminist movement

plays a crucial role to free women from the conservative doctrines in patriarchal Islamic societies.

In conservative society like Riyadh, prestige is more important than the feeling of somebody else. Everyone is so weak to face society and so selfish to risk the elite position, name, fame. In this novel, Faisal seems helplessness before the oppressive traditions and conventions of patriarchal society. He cannot fight with society for his true love and happiness. Choosing the safety of family and tradition over feeling, Faisal's heartbroken rejection leaves Michelle distrustful of men. In this context, Michelle expresses her feelings with her friends:

Sadeem, I didn't drop Faisal because I was no longer in love with him, as you imagine. I was crazy about that guy! But everyone here was entirely against him and against me. I have complete confidence in myself, and I know I can face whatever hassles stand in my way, but frankly I don't have the same confidence in Faisal or in any other guy in our sick society. I knew he hadn't come up with a solution to our problem. That's why I went on refusing him and denying my feelings and not letting myself be sucked into his weakness. I decided it was going to be me. You can be sure, Sadeem, that Firas and Faisal- even though there's a big difference in age-are stamped out of the same mould: passive and weak. They are slaves to reactionary customs and ancient traditions even if their enlightened minds pretend to reject such things! (288-89).

Alsanea in the above lines speaks about the true picture of the society. In conservative society, there is no courage to go against the norms and values of society. Everyone is afraid of being disgraceful. It is based on moral norms and values. By these established norms and values, women are betrayed and considered as nothing. In

above lines, Michelle doesn't let anyone playing with her feelings and suggests her friends to be strong. Michelle also says: For me, my number one is gone, but someone who's even better will come along! I will never sell myself short and I can never be satisfied with the crumbs (290). Here, Michelle suggests to Sadeem that she should dream about number one. Nothing is impossible. We don't deserve anything less and should fight for the goal.

Consequently, Michelle's thoughts near the end of the novel seem to put all men, including Faisal, in the same category. She expresses her extreme exasperation about men in the Saudi society, with a critical, unapologetic stance:

I could have challenged the whole world if my love had been from somewhere else, not a crooked society that raises children on contradictions and double standards. A society where one guy divorces his wife because she's not responsive enough in bed to arouse him, while the other divorces his wife because she doesn't hide from him how much she likes it! (289).

In the above lines, Michelle represents the alter ego of novelist Rajaa Alsanea. Because of her half-American heritage, she has an outsider's point of view. So, she frustrates and questions the restrictions imposed by the conservative society. Michelle's unapologetic stance confronts the ideas and practices of oppression and gender inequality. Society considers her too western to qualify as a wife for a Saudi man, which again highlights the double standards of the Muslim culture.

From these above analysis, there comes the conclusion that Islamic patriarchal society is so much bound by the conservative thinking where women suffer a lot. Here in this novel also Muslim people especially girls suffer in the name of prestige and honor of the family. Without the self identity of their own, they wander here and there in search for their one's own self. They suffers in terms of their desires and

expectations. In this novel, the narrator also a smart, motivated and enlightened twenty-first century young woman but yet not strong enough to face the whole society by exposing her true identity. In Saudi there are numerous laws, both religious and social. The majority of Saudis adhere to religious laws like praying, fasting, not drinking, etc. But when it comes to social laws like females not driving or men and women not falling in innocent love, the young generation is starting to question and refuse such time honored laws. Protagonists of this novel wander here and there for the search of their own. So societies they have visited taught them a lot to find their own terms and create their own environment themselves. In the novel, women face problems in finding the real independent identity because neither they can totally accept the twenty-first century's modernity nor they can go against it. They try to find their identity through their relationships with different people in their life. Gamrah was a good little Muslim girl but after marriage she is known as a divorced woman which is taken as disgraceful in Muslim society. In the search for good and respectful relationship, Sadeem gets betrayal from the man whom she trusts more. So through this novel, Alsanea depicts the struggles of Saudi women against the tyrannies of tradition for their love and respectful identity.

### III. Interconnection between Women, Culture and Identity

Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* deals with the position of women in patriarchal Muslim society which is a very deplorable condition because they don't have any identity. They are always subordinated in terms of their desires and expectations. So, women struggle for their dream of freedom and identity. They want to be free and independent from physical, emotional, cultural and other restraints. They want to be in the state where they can do what they wish or desire. Because of the socio-cultural hierarchy created by their male counterpart, they cannot struggle firmly against them. But modern women have understood their strength and now they do not want to abort their wishes to maintain socio-cultural relationships. They fight and carve the way for their freedom and independence as men do to get their dreams fulfilled. They find their dream, freedom and self-respect more important than their men and anything else. Therefore, protagonists in *Girls of Riyadh* chart their own destinies and assert their own individualities.

This novel *Girls of Riyadh* has a rich moral and life values. It tells a story about four young Riyadh women who struggle against the tyrannies of tradition for their love, respect and self strong standpoint. This novel is very destructive and it also depicts a story of feminine courage that is inconsistent with Saudi's traditional closed cultural environment.

Alsanea in the novel presents woman characters as the protagonists to reflect the hanging condition of women between homegrown tradition and global modernity. Gamrah, one of the protagonists, moves to Chicago with her newly married husband dreaming of freedom, independence and respectful identity but she cannot fulfill her dream and is betrayed by her husband. Then she returns to Riyadh with a disgraceful identity of a divorced woman. Sadeem also gets betrayal from the man whom she trusts

more and becomes disgraceful. Michelle is also in search for her cultural identity as she is from American mother. She leaves her country in the search of her respectful and peaceful life. Lamees only becomes successful in getting her respectful identity in her personal life and career also. Protagonists of this novel face many problems of identity crisis and suffer from the oppressive mechanisms of society but they also quest for their rights. Alsanea, by applying western tints to her novel, defies the conservative Arab society with the emergence of her four characters who confront the political culture of Saudi Arabia as a social force. Alsanea uses the internet as a medium to communicate to her readers both male and female. Alsanea delineate the suppression especially on the suppression of women. *Girls of Riyadh* stress that women are taken as minority.

Women in Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* are still victims of male-dominance, strict traditions, tribal customs and misuse of religion in a very conservative society like Saudi Arabia. In spite of harsh circumstances they live in, strong women like Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle and Lamees who do not give up and surrender but carve their own way and assert their identity by embracing modernity and retain the good values of their religion and culture. Culture is a defining feature of a person's identity, contributing to how they see themselves and the groups with which they identify. Person's understanding is shaped by the values and attitudes prevalent in the surrounding society. In this analysis, Alsanea challenges the Islamist regimes of Saudi Arabia by contentiously incorporating prohibited issues such as homosexuality, the quest for love and identity and subjugation of the women in her work. She generally attempts to demonstrate that perception of Islam and society as an obstruction to the Arab woman and her struggle for independence. They easily subject women to

physical abuse, humiliation and verbal abuse, divorce, impose marriage on them and have a shaky dependent identity.

This novel depicts the relationship between Lamees and Nizar as an exceptional example that must follow because they are totally complementary. The equal roles Lamees and Nizar mutually agree to uphold set an epitome of the principles of Islamic feminism. These principles advocate full equality between men and women in the public and private spheres as Margot Badran states.

In conclusion, in addition to revealing patriarchal practices, Alsanea committed herself to changing such conditions in the process of storytelling that women can also increase their awareness of themselves and of other woman. In this analysis, protagonists show that being strong means living active, having a job and being able to withstand opposition etc. It ultimately shows that women should not be chess pieces driven by men. In spite of the harsh circumstances, female characters of this novel live in, we found strong women like Sadeem, Gamrah, Michelle and Lamees. Although they experience all odds, pain and heartbreak, they don't give up. They fight with full determination, hopes and dreams, and find their way out, chart their own destinies and assert their own individualities. In fact they prove that happiness can be found even in the face of challenges. Alsanea presents her female characters bold and strong that embrace modernity and retain the good values of their religion and culture. Muslim women must assert their autonomy over patriarchal opposition, in which they can speak of themselves as full and independent human beings with minds and spirits as well as bodies. Women characters of this novel are strong and do not give up at the worse condition but carve their own way and assert their identity by embracing modernity with the values of their religion and culture.

This study is not against the culture or abandoning heritage rather it is about finding happiness and fulfillment within one's own circumstances.

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