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Islamic Feminism at the Crossroads between Apologetics and Defending Women: Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* in Context

By Nouredine Bendouma¹ and Salim Kerboua²

Abstract

The concept of Islamic feminism provides a dialectic relationship that suggests that the two very different and seemingly irreconcilable trajectories of Islam and feminism are joining forces to achieve gender equality and social justice. It also evokes the question of which weighs more than the other, and prompts queries and worries about Islam, egalitarianism, and the oppression of Muslim women. This paper examines the Islamic feminism's order of precedence in the predicament of defending women versus defending Islam. By employing feminist methodologies and the method of textual analysis, this article probes whether the Islamic feminist project is solely about women's rights advocacy, and considers whether defending Islam is a pre-ordained inevitability. These issues are examined with reference to Rajaa Alsanea's Islamic feminist novel *Girls of Riyadh*. The novel depicts the lives of four young Saudi women and themes of love, relationships, marriage and divorce. It challenges traditional assumptions about Saudi Arabian society. The author of the novel has been caught in a crossfire of criticism for the novel's audacious and non-conservative depiction of Saudi life and culture. *Girls of Riyadh* aims to lay bare a deliberately hidden side of life in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Islamic feminism, Apologetics, Defending women, Arab culture, Patriarchy, *Girls of Riyadh*, Saudi Arabian literature

Introduction

Islamic feminism is a school of thought that “seeks rights and justice for women, and for men, in the totality of their existence” (Badran, 2009, p. 242). It is a feminist discourse grounded in an Islamic paradigm. The Islamic religion perceives women to be full human beings, equal to men in every aspect as long as they accept Allah as the only God, Muhammed as the Messenger of God, and Islam as the true religion (Wadud, 1999, pp. ix-x). With an intent to reclaim the egalitarian message of Islam, a religion which had been constructed by centuries of andro-centric readings of its sacred texts, Islamic feminism delves into an intellectual inquiry of the religious scriptures, history of Islam, and the Islamic scholarly literature. Islamic feminism endeavors thus to expose the cultural anti-Islamic attitudes towards women and to accentuate the Islamic view of women. Islamic feminists rely on the methodologies of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *tafsir* (exegesis) to reread the Qur'an from a feminist perspective. They revisit and question the validity of the *hadiths* that promote misogyny, and they critically examine and reappraise Islamic jurisprudence. This school of thought relies on the contributions of many writers and scholars from the fields of theology, sociology, history, and literary studies. Some of the most prominent seminal contributors to Islamic feminist thought are Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, Leila

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Ahmed, Asma Barlas, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Meriam Cooke, Valentine Moghadem and Margot Badran,³ even though most of them do not accept the label 'Islamic feminist.' Given that the expression 'Islamic feminism' suggests a "double commitment" to a position in faith and an obligation towards women's rights (Cooke, 2001, p. 59), a problem arises of whether this new self-positioning places emphasis on women's rights over Islam, or the contrary.

In this paper, we tackle the issue of whether Islamic feminism prioritizes defending women or defending Islam. This question is examined through Rajaa Alsanea's Islamic feminist novel *Girls of Riyadh*, a novel whose author argues "reveal[s] another side of Saudi life to the Western world" against stereotyped images (2007, p. vii). Therefore, the following questions are raised: does Islamic feminism put defending women before defending Islam? How are Alsanea's views about the issue manifest in her novel? In attempting to answer these questions, feminist methodologies as well as the method of textual analysis are used. Accordingly, this paper will be divided into a theoretical part where the literature pertaining to the problem at hand will be reviewed, and an analytical part in which the novel will be analyzed in accordance with the issue raised.

Islamic Feminism: A Historical Background

Considered as a new phenomenon, the first seeds of Islamic feminism began to germinate in the late 1970s and the 1980s, parallel to the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the rise of Islamic revivalism (Eyadat, 2013, pp. 359, 365). In the late 1980s, writers Margot Badran and Ziba Mir Hosseini observed "the emergence of a new consciousness, a new way of thinking, a gender discourse that was and is feminist in its aspiration and demands, yet Islamic in its language and sources of legitimacy" (Mir-Hosseini, 2006, p. 640). Viewed as the bastard child of political Islam, Islamic feminism came at a time when Islamism, or political Islam, was taking hold of many parts in the Middle East. Subsequently, it became very clear that the battle over women's rights had to be fought within a religious framework, for political Islam and its powerful religious discourse pushed women to the margins. According to Graves (1996), "Ayatollah Khomeini announced that Iranian women were no longer simply female citizens, but 'Muslim housewives', whose purpose in life was to give Iran many sons who would be true Muslims and citizens" (pp. 79-80). That new stance provided a justification for the "laws regarding the seclusion and veiling of women" (p. 80). However, by the early 1990s, the quarrel between these bitterly opposed 'isms', Islamism and feminism, found a common ground in the surfacing of a new gender discourse that came to be called Islamic feminism (Mir-Hosseini, 2019, p. 112). On the other hand, Islamic revivalism endeavored to embrace and support Islamic feminism in order to influence change in women's conditions. That legitimized Islamic feminists' access to the public political and social sphere, particularly among Palestinian and Egyptian women, besides other parts in the Middle East and the Islamic world. Furthermore, the period of the 1990s was marked by the emergence of an Islamic feminist vocabulary. It was used by modern Muslim women and men in order to detach Islamic thought and practice from accepted behaviors, beliefs, and customs practiced in the name of religion, yet which are considered oppressive of women (Afsaruddin, 2014, p. 298).

The term Islamic feminism began to circulate in the 1990s. It was used by many Muslims in their writings about the rising feminist trend in some Muslim-majority countries. Iranian anthropologist and prominent activist Ziba Mir-Hosseini can be considered one of the first to coin and use the term. She affirms that she was among the first to employ the term Islamic

³ For further information about these scholars and authors' works, see the list of references.

feminism for “the new gender consciousness and discourse that emerged in Iran a decade after the 1979 revolution had brought Islamists into power.” (Mir-Hosseini, 2019, p. 112). Ironically enough, however, the first women to voice this new discourse in Iran had an Islamist ideology, and some of them even contributed in opposing the previous form of feminism in the country, namely secular feminism. However, many of these women became disillusioned with Iran’s official conservative and marginalizing discourse on women. Therefore, instead of directing antagonism against it, women found a valuable ally in feminism (Mir-Hosseini, 2019, p. 112).

Moreover, Mir-Hosseini explains that the year 1979 is not solely associated with the Iranian Revolution, but it is also the year when gender equality gained a new international legal mandate. In fact, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (Mir-Hosseini, 2011, p. 69). The political rights of women were to be surveyed in all levels of the government, and their right to participate in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) among other rights was clearly guaranteed. CEDAW recognizes the historical and systematic discrimination and oppression that can be observed in stereotypes, and that are inherent in cultures and reinforced by political and religious convictions which only serve to hinder and impede the realization of gender equality (Cook, 2001, p. 188). Hence, member states of the UNO have to adhere to certain obligations such as to embody the principle of equality in their national constitutions and to adopt appropriate legislations prohibiting all discrimination against women (Hevener, 1983, p. 218). The CEDAW has been ratified by most states, including all Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa (El-Masri, 2012, p. 933).

On the other hand, with a long history of European colonialism and US intervention in the Middle East under the banner of the ‘War on Terror’ in the aftermath of 9/11, the image of the oppressed Muslim woman was used as a fallacious argument by the West in order to discuss the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Therefore, what started out as a war against terrorism soon became a battleground over human rights in general and the rights of women specifically (Pepicelli, 2008, 92). Muslim women, either in the Middle East or in the West, especially those who chose to veil, were put in an impossible position. They were either accused of apologetics if they claimed to have chosen the veil from an independent, personal conviction or if they defended their faith. Otherwise, they were charged as victims of “false consciousness” of their “repressive cultures” (Rich, 2014). This, in addition to the colonial discourses that sought to portray Islam as being static and irreconcilable with the basic features of modernity, central of which is women’s emancipation (Mir-Hosseini, 2019, 111), provides an explanation as to why many Muslim feminists would attempt to clear the image of Islam from Western stereotypes using an apologetic rhetoric.

Constituting the Islamic Feminist Discourse

The pivotal argument of Islamic feminism is that the Qur’an, the central religious text of Islam, emphasizes the principle of equality of all human beings. The inequalities that characterize the practices and relationships between men and women, nevertheless, stem from the distortions carried out by patriarchal ideology and practices (Badran, 2009, 247). In the Qur’an, there are various verses (*ayat*) that stress male-female equality. In *aya* 13 in *sura* 49 (al-Hujurat), Allah says: “Oh humankind. We have created you from a single pair of a male and a female and made you into tribes and nations that you may know each other. The most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you.” Therefore, all human beings are equal, and the only difference between them is the practice of *taqwa* or piety. On the other hand, Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh* is the human understanding of the divine law (*shari’a*). It is deduced from

scriptural texts through interpretation or *ijtihad*. In many instances, it is announced in the Qur'an that a law for mankind is laid down. On the other hand, *fiqh* comprises the opinions of scholars who are qualified to interpret and derive laws from scriptural sources (Vogel, 2000, 4). Being modeled after its classical form in the ninth century, however, Islamic jurisprudence was itself entrenched in the patriarchal thinking of the day. Therefore, different contemporary formulations of the *shari'a* surfaced as a response. Furthermore, the *hadiths* are the saying and the descriptions of the actions of the Prophet Muhammad, and "... it is primarily over the *Hadiths* and their contents that Islam's sects and schools of thought have diverged" (Brown, 2014, 8). While one scholar evaluates a *hadith* as an authentic teaching of the Prophet, another may consider it a fabrication. The *hadiths*, too, have been predominantly used to support patriarchal ideas. They are either of debatable origin, or used out of the intended context, and have negative consequences for women.

In this sense, Islamic feminists like Amina Wadud, Riffat Hassan and the Saudi Arabian Fatima Nasef focus on the interpretation of the Qur'an. Some such as the Lebanese Aziza al-Hibri and Pakistani Shaheen Sardar Ali seek to inspect and examine formulations of *shari'a* backed laws, while others such as the Moroccan Fatima Mernissi and the Turkish Hidayet Tuksal explore and investigate the *hadiths*.⁴ Badran identifies the basic methodologies used by Islamic feminists as being the same classical methodologies of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *tafsir* (exegesis). To appropriately analyze Islam's sacred texts, women equipped themselves with the tools of linguistics, history, literary criticism, sociology, and anthropology in order to bring forth their experience and questions as women to their readings (Badran, 2009, 247-248).

Islamic Feminism and Islamic Apologetics

Apologetics is not a new phenomenon in Islam. Defending the Islamic faith against doubters and detractors had been the subject of many Muslim theologians and philosophers as far back as the seventh century. The emerging science at the time was called *ilm al-kalam*. Its aim was to "firmly [establish] religious beliefs by adducing proofs and ... banishing doubts" (Gardet, as cited in Cosman and Jones, 2008, p. 391). Islamic feminist arguments share many of the components of *al-Mutakallimun* (scholars of *ilm al-kalam*), with their intent to use rational thinking. However, *al-Mutakallimun* with their aim "solely to defend the ineffable truths of quranic revelation" (Cosman and Jones, 2008, p. 387) and Islamic feminists with their intent to defend women's rights within an Islamic paradigm vastly diverge in terms of emphasis. Islamic feminists have been criticized by many writers such as Raja Rhouni and Ibtissam Bouachrine for being apologetic. They believe apologetics only serves to subordinate Muslim women. As Bouachrine highlights, instead of encouraging critique, "Islamic feminists find it their job to defend and apologize" (2014, p. 71). Muslim women defend the very patriarchal structures that oppress them for fear of being accused of contamination by Western values. Bouachrine further argues that feminists such as Leila Ahmed, Fatima Mernissi, and Nawal Saadawi used to be self-critical in the past and adopted an unapologetic approach, but are now celebrating and embracing patriarchal institutions as means to empower Muslim women (2014, p. 71). The most influential figures of Islamic feminist thought, Amina Wadud and Fatima Mernissi, move in

⁴ For further readings, see Amina Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman* (1992) and *Inside the Gender Jihad* (2006), Riffat Hassan's *Rights of Women: Muslim Practice versus Normative Islam* (2003), Fatima Nasef's *Women in Islam* (1999), Aziza al-Hibri's *The Islamic Worldview: Islamic Jurisprudence* (2015), Shaheen Sardar Ali's *Gender and Human Rights in Islam and International Law* (2000), Fatima Mernissi's *The Veil and the Male Elite* (1987), *Women and Islam* (1991), and Hidayet Tuksal's *Kadın Karşısı Söylemin İslam Geleneğindeki İzduşümleri* (2000).

opposite directions in their apologetic histories, for when one used to be apologetic in the past, the other strives to be in the future.

As a scholar of *hadith*, Mernissi provides a body of work that challenges the sayings falsely attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, which only serve to perpetuate patriarchy and misogyny. In her book *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Muslim Society*, she claims that “[p]aradoxically, and contrary to what is commonly assumed, Islam does not advance the thesis of women’s inherent inferiority. Quite the contrary, it affirms the potential equality between the sexes” (2011, 4). She is renowned for her contribution to Islamic feminism with her 1991 book *The Veil and the Male Elite*, in which she displays a critical point of view of many *hadiths* through scrutinizing their validity in light of the Islamic message. Mernissi’s work is centered on the *isnad* (narrator) of the *hadiths* which promote misogyny, by questioning the narrator’s psychological and political status. In this light, she focuses on the historical element of the *hadiths* rather than the *hadith* itself. This has been criticized by Raja Rhouni as being a foundationalist approach to knowledge production (Rhouni, 2010). In addition to the fallible nature of this approach, misogynist *hadiths* are not always narrated by unreliable narrators. Therefore, checking the validity of the *hadiths* will not be an effective means to achieve gender equality in Islam. Raja Rhouni’s study of the work of Fatima Mernissi arrived at the conclusion that she moved away from being critical of the patriarchal structures underlying Muslim societies and ultimately defended them. This is evident when Mernissi’s body of work shifted from secular to Islamic feminism. In her earlier secular views about the pre-Islamic era in her 1975 book *Beyond the Veil*, she argues that the pre-Islamic era entitled women in Arabia to more rights than did the arrival of Islam. Correspondingly, Mernissi’s later work (after the shift) is marked by an abandonment of criticism and a resurgence of apologetics. She talks about Aisha, the Prophet’s wife, saying: “She was wonderful. She was extremely lucky. She had a great husband, who loved this intelligence and this strength, and who gave her the necessary space for self-fulfillment. Later, I discovered the battle that she had led, the Battle of the Camel” (as cited in Rhouni, 2010, p. 202). Aisha is the main female figure in her 1987 book entitled *The Veil and the Male Elite*, “who emphasizes, for the new Mernissi, the early Islamic encouragement of female self-assertion” (p. 202). In addition, Mernissi repeatedly takes an apologetic approach, and one such case is when she writes in *L’amour dans les pays musulmans* suggesting that in Christianity, women’s awakening of desires calls for suspicion, whereas in Islam, these desires are celebrated in numerous sacred books on love (p. 201).

On the other hand, Amina Wadud’s specialized area of focus is primarily on the Qur’an for being the ultimate authority and the ‘original source.’ Secondary sources such as *hadiths*, interpretations, and other material are intentionally disregarded by Wadud because she believes that they display a “disconnection from the original text and its intent” (1999, xx). Besides, she is convinced that the Qur’an is infallible because it is well-preserved, whereas *Sunnah* has undergone various distortions, errors, and even contradictions throughout history which might be observable in the *hadiths*. Therefore, the Qur’an, for Wadud, is more important than *Sunnah*. She also draws a line between the Qur’an (text) which she considers as the source and the interpretations of the text (*tafsir*) which have been undertaken by people throughout different time periods, hence, “the Qur’an is the source, people are the resource” (2006, 208). Wadud emphasizes that the androcentric readings of the Qur’an served to marginalize women in both the social and intellectual fields. However, Wadud attempts to break this bias, because she thinks that *tafsir* or exegeses should not exclude women, as the “[a]cceptance of the pluralities of meanings...is an implied prerequisite ... of Qur’anic universal guidance” (2004, 327). Moreover,

Wadud employs apologetic rhetoric in her writings on women and Islam. In her 1999 book *Qur'an and Woman*, she attempts to show the Qur'an's inherent message of equality between men and women through highlighting women-friendly verses. This message, she argues, had been deformed by male-dominated readings of God's sacred text. Her *tafsir* is, however, criticized for its lack of persuasiveness (Rhouni, 2010, 256). For example, in interpreting the word "*daraba*" in verse 4:34, which invites the meaning of 'beating' the rebellious wife, she argues that it means "to set an example" (Wadud, 1999, 76). Her methodologies of reading the Qur'an show many weaknesses because of the lack of contextual analysis, concentration on linguistic interpretation, and overgeneralization (Rhouni, 2010, 254). All of this stems from her tendency to communicate in an apologetic voice that serves to blur the specified path of women's rights advocacy.

Badran (2010) observes that some Islamic feminists are withdrawing from apologetics. This detachment, she argues, has been associated with lesser antagonism towards the label Islamic feminism and feminism per se (p. 37). She calls the move away from apologetics "stage two" in Islamic feminism, and Amina Wadud epitomizes this shift. Wadud emphasizes the urgency to view the Qur'an "as an utterance or text in process" (as cited in Badran, p. 37) and not a fixed text. She maintains that "[o]ne important aspect of this challenge confronts the possibility of refuting the text, to talk back, to even say 'no'" (Wadud, 2006, 191). Furthermore, she criticizes the notion of interpreting the text, if the text itself is unacceptable. The Qur'an, she argues, indulged and guided certain customs which were pervasive at the time and place of revelation. However, these practices were deemed unacceptable later on. She takes the example of slavery which was allowed but nevertheless became unacceptable, then projects the case of slavery to consider polygamy and wife beating (2006, p. 37). For Wadud, saying 'no' to the things which are no longer acceptable does not mean rejecting the text. On the contrary, it can be viewed as celebrating it by bringing to the fore the higher principles of the scripture. She argues that "[w]ith our human development of postmodernist and deconstructionist disciplines of meaning, we accept the fact that we are potentially guided by the text, even if not limited to its particular utterances" (2006, 197). Furthermore, this radical shift also marks a departure from her earlier hermeneutical methodology which focused on picking out women-friendly verses, because:

such an approach is both fundamentally dishonest and ultimately futile; arguments about male/female equality built on the systematic avoidance of inconvenient verses will flounder at the first confrontation with something that endorses the hierarchical and gender-differentiated regulations for males and females that so many reformers would like to wish away. (Ali, 2006, pp. 153-154)

Additionally, writers Rhouni and Bouachrine call for a break with apologetics, and an adoption of a critical position. Considering the identifier 'Islamic' which, Cooke (2001) suggests, should refer to an intellectual commitment, not an identity (61), Rhouni suggests a 'post-foundationalist islamic feminism' (lower case intended) that transcends the restrictions of classical theology and jurisprudence (2010). Bouachrine points out that "[t]he West owes many of its accomplishments to a long history of unapologetic critique, including self-critique" (2014, 71). This critique, these writers argue, can only be achieved by breaking with the constraints which dictate captivity to the scholarly traditions the islamic feminists seek to disrupt. Working within the spectrum which originally contributed to the subordination of women is similar to

running round in circles. It is, therefore “very difficult,” as Valentine Moghadem (2002) argues, “to win theological arguments. There will always be competing interpretations of the religious texts, and the power of the social forces behind it determines the dominance of each interpretation” (p. 1160). Islamic feminism is fundamentally different from Islamic apologetics, because it provides clarifications about the wrong practices conducted in the name of religion in order to marginalize women, and consequently offers an egalitarian reading of religious texts. It is, thus, not about defending Islam but about defending women within Islam.

Defending Women versus Defending Islam in Rajaa Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh*

Girls of Riyadh is a 2005 epistolary novel written by Saudi Arabian writer Rajaa Alsanea.⁵ The novel has been subject to controversy, and it is banned in Saudi Arabia due to its provocative content. Although the novel is written in an epistolary style, Alsanea emphasizes that she is happy to have created a genre of her own. The novel takes place for the most part in Riyadh, as well as in the cities of London and San Francisco which Sadeem and Michelle visit in the story. *Girls of Riyadh* introduces four characters, while the fifth is the unknown narrator who claims to know all four girls on a personal level. The story revolves around the privileged characters of Sadeem, Gamrah, Michelle and Lamees. These attractive young women are placed at an intersection between their desires, their attempt to be good Muslim women, and the socio-cultural limitations that pervade Saudi Arabian society. They live spontaneous lives and break with the stereotypical image of Saudi Arabian women. Furthermore, the novel claims to show the true, hidden face of a society that diligently attempts to exhibit the markers of conservatism and traditional values.

The novel is an Islamic feminist text because it ceaselessly criticizes the cultural patriarchal practices of Saudi Arabian society. These practices have no roots in religion, but only in customs and traditions. In addition, the novel makes continuous reference to Islamic sacred sources such as Qur’anic verses and *hadiths* of the Prophet claiming legitimacy of women’s rights in Islam. The Islamic feminist school of thought seeks to expose misogynistic practices carried out by the androcentric thinking of the Arab and Muslim world and to empower women within a religious framework. Shirin Ebadi argues that “[the] divine book (the Qur’an) sees the mission of all prophets as that of inviting all human beings to uphold justice ... The discriminatory plight of women in Islamic societies ... has its roots in the male-dominated culture prevailing in these societies, not in Islam” (as cited in Badran, 2005, 22). *Girls of Riyadh* demonstrates its intent to walk the path of the intellectual Islamic feminist project in its attempt to bridge the gap between theory and reality.

The narrator of the novel repeatedly sends emails to people in Saudi Arabia and tells them the personal stories of Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle, and Lamees. She talks about the thorny topics of love, relationships, marriage, and divorce. Although she repeatedly receives offensive emails from people claiming she is distorting the image of the Saudi society, she claims that the stories of these girls are real and represent just a small specimen of the entire society. In order to have the liberty to openly voice her opinion and avoid criticism, she displays a flawed and a spontaneous personality. She shows that she is being critical and unapologetic in what she says about her society (p. 56). Consequently, she critically poses serious questions about the often deliberately overlooked problems that engulf the Arab world. She for example addresses the question of divorced women: “Is divorce a major crime committed by the woman only? Why

⁵ The novel was originally published in Arabic under the title *Banat Al-Riyadh*. It was translated into English by Marilyn Booth in 2007.

does not our society harass the divorced man the way it crushes the divorced woman?" (p. 172). She also defends divorced women and blames society for their weakened state by saying: "We should defend Um Nuwayyir and Gamrah and other divorcees. Women like them don't deserve to be looked down on by society" (p. 172), whereas divorced men in comparison "go on to live fulfilling lives without any suffering or blame" (p. 172).

In this regard, Gamrah, whom the novel opens up with, is a conservative young woman caught in an arranged marriage. She moves with her husband, Rashid, to the US where he intends to study for a Phd. There, she starts feeling her husband's cold, disdainful treatment of her. She soon discovers he has been having an affair with Kari, a Japanese woman he knew before their marriage. After her secret discovery, she plots to have a child with him, despite his insistence on living without children. In fact, she thinks a newborn child will urge him to rethink their relationship. After arranging a meeting with Kari, in a resounding move that is intended to inform her husband about her exasperation with their relationship, she soon becomes aware that he has never loved her and married her only to maintain tradition in his family. Rashid urges Gamrah to apologize to Kari for speaking in offensive language, and when she refuses, a "slap land[s] on her right cheek, and the sound of it echoe[s] in her head" (p. 84). In reference to this incident, the narrator begins chapter 13 of the novel with a *hadith* that the Prophet "did not beat a single servant of his nor a woman, nor did he strike anything with his hand" (p. 82). Correspondingly, the narrator's tendency of picking and choosing the texts that show Islam's disfavor of violence against women, while turning a blind eye to the qur'anic verse about the chastisement of a rebellious wife,⁶ shows the fragile nature of assuming an apologetic position.

Following the humiliating events in the US, Rashid carelessly divorces Gamrah, and she returns to Riyadh with their child, ashamed. She is shunned by her society, as divorcees are looked at with contempt and obloquy and are subject to social stigma. Gamrah's uncle, Abu Fahad, feels that it is his responsibility to get her married as soon as possible to avoid disgrace. He arranges to meet with Abu Musa'ed, who seeks a wife in the wake of his divorce after ten years of marriage. Abu Musa'ed thought his ex-wife could not bear children. To his surprise, he learns afterwards that she bore a child with her new husband. Abu Musa'ed addresses derogatory remarks to Gamrah upon their meeting to ask her hand for marriage. He refuses to "raise a kid who isn't [his] own" (p. 190), and uses offensive and humiliating language which naturally leads Gamrah to walk out of the room. Although both Gamrah and Abu Musa'ed are divorced, shame and disgrace are heaped only upon women. Gamrah is met with anger and threat from her uncle that is addressed to her mother, as though she does not have a voice in the matter. He believes that she is spoiled and has no shame, and that she needs "a man to shield and protect her" (p. 192). He epitomizes the reality and mentality of the entire Saudi society, for divorcees are thought to impact the fate of their sisters and kin. Her uncle's concern about people's talk exceeds his concern about women's feelings. He addresses Gamrah's mother by saying: "People are always talking, sister, and besides, we have other girls in the family who should not pay for what people say about your divorced daughter" (p. 192).

The novel's apologetic stance surfaces once more when discussing the issue of divorce and society's view of divorcees. The narrator opens up chapter 33 of the novel with a *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad: "The virgin's agreement to a marriage must be sought by her guardian, but the widow or divorcee has more right to her own person than does her guardian" (p. 188). She highlights through the chapter that society adopts behaviors that are un-Islamic, because sometimes culture carries more weight than religion. A woman's value is measured by her

⁶ See *surah* An Nisa, *aya* 34.

virginity in Arab societies. Therefore, the eyes of disdain never follow men, even though they could be the source of the problem. Only women are to blame because they either possess or lack something (virginity) that elevates or disparages their value. However, the narrator chooses to look the other way and divert the eyes of criticism from the *hadith* itself. It is as if she considers that the *hadith* gave divorced women rights and neglects the *hadith's* discrimination between female virgins and non-virgins. Alternatively, her unapologetic stance is nevertheless directed to Arab culture which stresses traditions more than it does religion. Subsequently, the narrator with her quotation of this *hadith* does not adopt an unapologetic position the way Amina Wadud (2006) emphasizes: to talk back or even say 'no' (p. 191), but a different, muted form of un-apologetics with an aim to criticize culture instead. The narrator unconditionally accepts Islam's texts, but rejects the practices conducted by men in the name of these texts. She attempts to highlight the rights that Islam bestowed upon women, which again represents a form of uncritical apologetics that attempts to clear the image of Islam from misogynistic attitudes.

In a different plotline, Sadeem, during her engagement period with Waleed, chooses to take their relationship further when she feels that Waleed is eager for their first night. She feels the need to satisfy her husband-by-marriage-contract, and wears the black nightgown he has bought her, which "reveal[s] more of her body than it conceal[s]" (p. 32). And since Sadeem decides to present herself as a gift to Waleed in order to make him happy, she does not attempt to stop him. "She was convinced that he wouldn't be satisfied unless she offered him a little more of her 'femininity,' and she was willing to do anything to please him, the love of her life, even if it meant exceeding the limits she had spent her lifetime guarding" (p. 32). However, after their night together, Waleed's behavior changes towards her as he refuses to call her and changes his phone number. He finally puts an end to their relationship when he sends her divorce papers. She is destroyed by his decision because she has given him the most precious thing she has: her virginity. The issue of virginity continues to haunt her after years of breaking up with Waleed. As it is imperative for brides to be virgins on their wedding night, all hope for Sadeem to get married again is lost.

In fact, virginity for girls is a prerequisite of entering marriage in many Muslim societies, and female premarital sex is forbidden because the loss of virginity is considered equal to promiscuity. Contrarily, pre-marital sex for males is deliberately condoned. This also highlights the double standards of men who want to engage sexually with women before marriage, yet when they choose to get married, they require women to be virgins. In this sense, virginity decides the fate of women, which explains the prevalence of the surgical procedure that attempts to repair the hymen to fake virginity. Mernissi (1982) argues that "artificial virginity exists because men ask the impossible" (p. 185). Sadeem engages in a relationship with Firas whom she knows in London. Firas seems like the kind of man who would value and cherish her. However, when she tells him about her past relationship, she notices a slight change in his behavior. He requires her never to talk about her relationship with Waleed again. Eventually, Sadeem and Firas's relationship comes to an end because his parents will not agree on his marriage to a divorcee. Firas marries another woman in order to satisfy his parents and to conform with the tradition of marrying a virgin. Hence, as Mernissi argues, "virginity is the manifestation of a purely male preoccupation" (1982, p. 183) in a society that worships it as emblematic of innocence and purity; that is why losing virginity renders a woman flawed beyond repair. Sadeem's friend Michelle's more critical point of view of societal norms and men's thinking surfaces when talking with Sadeem. She thinks that Firas's decision is but an "escape strategy of an immature little boy" (p. 181). She believes that he thought it over and arrived at

the conclusion that he would be the loser if he were to marry a divorcee while he, himself, has never been married before. In addition, he occupies an esteemed position in society and aspires to become a government official. Michelle believes that “[he is] not going to take one who is flawed from the start because she’s been divorced, and then watch people devour [him] with their waspish tongues” (p. 181).

Consequently, Michelle’s thoughts near the end of the novel seem to put all men, including the love she could not have, 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! (p. 270)

Michelle represents the alter ego of novelist Rajaa Alsanea. Michelle is the embodiment of critique in the novel for her constant criticism and refusal to accept conventionalism and traditions. Because of her half-American heritage, she has an outsider’s point of view. She is thus frustrated by the restrictions imposed by society in the way of love relationships. She becomes deeply in love with Faisal, who is also deeply in love with her. However, their relationship is doomed to fail. Like many Saudi men, Faisal is a prisoner under the custody of traditions, mores, and customs that he must conform to. He acquiesces to his mother’s continuous warnings that her half-American heritage is an undesirable quality. Michelle understands his hints and decides their relationship should end. She is considered to be too Western to qualify as a wife for a Saudi man, which again highlights the double standards of the Saudi culture. She becomes very critical of the imposed limitations, and of the women accepting these limitations without question. Her attitude is treated with reluctance by her peers. This highlights the novel’s inclination to emphasize that the oppression of women is perpetuated by the very oppressed women themselves.

Moreover, Michelle’s unapologetic stance confronts ideas and practices of oppression and gender inequality without resorting to a religious justification. She never refers to religious sources to show that these practices “are not only un-Islamic but anti-Islamic as well” (Badran & Sikand, 2010). However, she is intensely irritated as she feels the injustice of her own society has trespassed all limits. Michelle does not defend religion from the usurpers of its interpretation nor the cultural power structures of her society. She does not reveal any signs of entering debate or questioning the religious validity of the practices conducted in the name of Islam. Thus, her views are more secular than they are Islamic. Her dissatisfaction stems from the notion of universal equality of all human beings. Her unapologetic attitudes are reactions to a society that pretends that women are blessed with equal, inalienable rights, yet displays the contrary.

The final protagonist, Lamees, is the only one of the four girls who effortlessly succeeds in finding a love match. She works hard and seems uninterested in the time-consuming topic of love that her peers are always discussing. Her indifference, however, does not stem from religious or pious convictions, because she does not seem to mind defying strict religious teachings. This is clear when she joins Michelle on the night of Gamrah’s wedding “in consuming a bottle of expensive champagne” (p. 18). Nor do her convictions stem from societal and cultural conformism. This is evident in her friendship with the Shiite girl and in dating her

friend's brother, defying the norms held by Saudi Sunni society which bring external ideological and political conflicts to internal everyday life. Her un-involvement in love relationships is mainly because of her devotion to study. Ultimately, she finds love after she succeeds in her professional career and gets married after a short period to Nizar. Their relationship is subject to envy among her friends, because it is as perfect as they imagined relationships would be.

The novel seems torn between disparaging the male-dominated culture and the norms governing the Saudi society and championing the exiguous, exceptional examples of gender equality and social justice. It depicts the relationship between Lamees and Nizar as an exceptional example that must be followed because “[t]hey were totally complementary” (p. 245). They both agreed that she would take care of everything that involved budget and home affairs, while he lends “a hand, every day, in cleaning and washing and cooking and ironing” (p. 245). The equal roles that Nizar and Lamees 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 (Badran, 2009, p. 250). Lamees chooses to wear *hijab* after their honeymoon, in a clear demonstration of the novel's advocacy for the freedom of choice when it comes to dress code. It shows the novel's position about the dilemma which preoccupies both Muslim feminists and Islamists. Saudi scholar and writer Mai Yamani (1996) writes that: “The relevant question for Muslim feminists today is the element of choice attached to the garment, and whether it is a woman's right to choose whether to veil or not” (p. 20). Therefore, Lamees's choice to wear hijab shows that the choice to veil or de-veil is the woman's only. The novel acknowledges the few examples that show authenticity when “Lamees decide[s] that she would start to wear [the veil] whenever non-Muhram men were around, following the rules of Islam” (p. 244).

Conclusion

Islamic feminism does not provide a “coherent identity” as Meriam Cooke argues. It stands at the crossroads between the two seemingly opposing and mutually exclusive identities of Muslim and feminist. It, therefore, expresses a specific self-positioning which questions Islamic epistemology with a view to expand on a faith position, not to reject it (2001, 59, 60, 61). However, Islamic feminism is different from Islamic apologetics, even though many Islamic feminists succumb to the temptation of apologetics. It is a critical project that seeks through research and scholarly investigation to expose the androcentric readings of religion which only serve to push Muslim women to the margins. *Girls of Riyadh* clearly demonstrates that Islamic feminism is about defending women, although some apologetic tendencies are present in the novel. The novel, while not directing critique towards religious sources, does not defend the power structures responsible for the oppression of women. Alsanea inclines to address Western audiences through showing “another side of Saudi life” (vii). She insists that women should “carve out their own way—not the Western way, but one that keeps what is good about the values of their religion and culture, while allowing for reform” (viii). This shows her middle ground position between being apologetic to the West, and being critical of the power structures underlying Saudi society. To conclude, Islamic feminism is more feminist than it is Islamic. Being unapologetic means that if Islamic feminists were to choose between women or Islam, they would unquestionably choose the former.

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