Emails from Young Saudi Females: A Postmodernist Reading of the English-Language Edition of *Girls of Riyadh*

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Abstract

Contemporary Saudi literature vibrantly reflects the spirit of postmodernism, engaging with the rapid and multifaceted transformations reshaping Saudi society with the advent of the Kingdom's Vision 2030. Central themes such as social change, identity crises, the evolving role of young women, and the tension between tradition and modernity lie at the heart of recent Saudi narratives. *Girls of Riyadh* (2005) by Rajaa Alsanea provides fertile ground for such analysis, particularly through its use of emails as a narrative device. This study examines the English-language edition of the novel, treating it as a significant work of translated Anglophone literature. By analysing its postmodern techniques, this article situates the novel within postmodern Anglophone fiction while foregrounding its distinct Saudi cultural origins. The analysis is organized into four thematic waves, each highlighting a key dimension of Saudi female agency, identity construction, and socio-emotional struggle. These waves place the novel's techniques within broader global literary movements, such as feminist epistolarity, digital narration, and global postmodernism, demonstrating how the work participates in and contributes to English literary scholarship. Closely aligned with the transformative goals of Vision 2030, this study reflects the evolving Saudi cultural landscape and opens new horizons for exploring the intersection of literature, gender, and societal reform, extending scholarly conversations on narrative form, translation, and cultural transformation in contemporary world literature in English.

Keywords: Anglophone literature, translated literature, postmodernism, narrative form, global fiction, digital narration

1. Introduction

In the realm of contemporary Saudi literature and in parallel with the advent of Saudi vision 2030, few literary works have captured the dimensions of postmodern Saudi society along with its complexities, gender struggles, identity formation, and cultural negotiation as poignantly as Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2005). The current study examines the English-language edition of the novel, recognising it as a translated work that gains new interpretive layers in its Anglophone form. In this version, postmodern narrative techniques particularly the use of digital epistolarity operate within a broader tradition of Anglophone literary experimentation, thereby allowing the novel to be read alongside works in global postmodern fiction that challenge narrative authority, reconfigure female agency, and reshape the boundaries between local and global literary expression. Through its email-based narrative, the novel reflects postmodern aesthetics while highlighting the tensions between tradition and modernity within the context of Saudi society. By centring young female voices, Alsanea attractively challenges the patriarchal norms and values and offers a critical perspective on the sociocultural shifts reshaping the wholesale price portrayal of young females in Saudi Arabia in the current era of prosperity, reform, and change under the recently implemented Saudi Vision 2030 initiative.

The writer artistically employs a recent and typical narrative form that blends both old and new, traditional and recent ways of storytelling. The email format in the English edition of the novel operates on two interconnected levels: as a locally grounded narrative device reflecting the realities of Saudi women's lives, and as part of a wider Anglophone tradition of feminist epistolary fiction that has evolved in response to digital communication technologies. The use of emails as a narrative device throughout the novel is regarded as a pioneering narrative approach which not only mirrors the fragmented nature of postmodern Saudi identity but also provides a conclusive platform for the voices of young Saudi females (Khamis, 2010). The use of emails enables the four major characters of the novel to navigate the multifaceted intersection of tradition and modernity of the rich Saudi community in the age of digitality and transformation that has been recently overshadowed the whole country under the Kingdom's new vision and leadership. Further, the digital narrative form of emails used throughout the novel not only modernizes the epistolary form but also highlights the invisible nature of their communication, reflecting the complexities of identity in a globalized world of digitality (Al-Momani, 2010).

Furthermore, the narrative throughout the novel exposes through the lives of the four young Saudi females, namely, Qamrah, Lamees, Mashael and Sadeem, the different faces and facets of current postmodern Saudi society and the diverse women's experience within it. The four female characters of the novel share their personal stories, experiences, aspirations and struggles in the form of candid emails which

dramatically attract attention of readers of East and West and even invite them into their intimate female world within Saudi context highlighting their struggles and challenges that any contemporary young Saudi female may face in such a rich society steeped in traditional norms and values (Allen, 2008). In the Anglophone translation, these voices are mediated through English, creating a layered narrative space where Saudi cultural realities are reinterpreted and recontextualized for a global readership. This makes the novel not only a work of Saudi literature but also a vital text in world literature in English, contributing to cross-cultural feminist discourse and expanding the scope of postmodern narrative forms. The portrayal of the lives of these four young Saudi females situated in the city of Riyadh indicates that Al-Sanea attempts to challenge prevailing societal norms and offers a critical lens through which to explore themes of empowerment, struggle, and the quest for females' self-identity. The novel's portrayal of digital communication also serves as a platform for the characters to frankly express their desires and frustrations, allowing them to forge connections that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries. This digital struggle highlights the transformative potential of technology in facilitating dialogue and fostering community among women in patriarchal contexts like those of Saudi society (Sabry & Mansour, 2019).

Finally, the novel engages with postmodern themes such as fragmentation, hybridity, and the questioning of grand narratives. The female characters' experiences reflect the fluidity of identity in a world where traditional roles are increasingly disrupted by modern influences (Badran, 2009). By situating these postmodern techniques within both Saudi and Anglophone literary traditions, this study demonstrates how the novel *Girls of Riyadh* actively participates in global postmodernism while offering a culturally specific critique rooted in Saudi literature and society. It also resonates with the broader discourse on Islamic feminism, as it navigates the tension between Western ideals of liberation and authentic Islamic teachings on women's rights (Hassan, 1987). This duality enriches the narrative and positions the novel as a significant text for understanding the manners and voices of female agency in contemporary Saudi Arabia (Cooke, 2001). Therefore, the current study aims to offer a fresh postmodernist reading of the novel, highlighting how its unique epistolary form and engagement with digitality contribute to a deeper understanding of young Saudi female agency in the capital city of Riyadh and cultural critique within the context of postmodern Saudi society. Most importantly, it highlights the continuing strength, loudness and intensity of young girls' voices in the city of Riyadh articulating and reclaiming their own narratives in the society and even serving as a powerful catalyst for all marginalized and silenced young females everywhere to rise, speak out, and reshape their place in the society.

2. Author and Text in Context

Rajaa Alsanea (1981- present) is a contemporary female Saudi writer best known for her debut novel Girls of Riyadh in 2005. The novel narrates the stories of four young females from the city of Riyadh as they navigate love, friendship, and social expectations. She was born on September 11, 1981, in Kuwait as the youngest of six children of a wealthy Saudi family. Her family relocated to the city of Riyadh while she was still a child after the sudden death of her father. She grew up as an orphan and completed her degree in dentistry from King Saud University at the heart of Riyadh in 2005. Pursuing further education in the United States, she obtained a master's degree in oral sciences from the University of Illinois at Chicago College of Dentistry in 2008. She later served as an assistant professor at the same institution. She emerged as a provocative and prominent Saudi literary female writer following the publication of her debut novel Girls of Riyadh (2005).

The novel was first published in Arabic in 2005 and subsequently released in its English-language edition in 2007, translated by Marilyn Booth. This study focuses on the English-language edition as a work of Anglophone literature, examining its narrative form, stylistic features, and thematic resonance within postmodern literary discourse. Written in a unique and modern style that blends Arabic expressions with English idioms, the novel's English version offers a distinctive case of translated literature that participates in the global circulation of postmodern narrative forms. From an Anglophone literary perspective, the novel employs postmodern techniques such as epistolary narration, metafiction, and narrative fragmentation. The setting remains rooted in Riyadh's society, yet the translation enables the text to engage with global postmodernism, feminist epistolarity, and digital-era storytelling narrative strategies that resonate strongly with contemporary English literary studies. It presents an intimate portrayal of four young Saudi females, namely, Qamrah, Mashael, Sadeem, and Lamees whose weekly email exchanges explore marriage, love, friendship, cultural expectations, and the tensions between tradition and modernity.

Thus, the novel emerges as a momentous work in contemporary Anglophone world literature, marking a shift toward postmodern narrative techniques that challenge traditional storytelling. Its English-language edition allows these techniques to be read, analysed, and debated within broader English literary scholarship, while its controversial reception reflects deeper societal tensions, particularly around gender and cultural expression. By blending localized postmodern elements with a bold critique of social norms, Alsanea's novel not only amplifies the voices of young Saudi women but also contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations about the transformation of narrative authority in global fiction.

3. Literature Review

Over the past two decades, beginning with its original Arabic publication in 2005 and followed by its widely circulated English-language edition in 2007, *Girls of Riyadh* has attracted sustained and wide-ranging scholarly attention for its groundbreaking narrative form and unflinching critique of women's roles, rights, and the intricate sociocultural dynamics of contemporary Saudi society. The novel's reception has transcended regional boundaries, prompting debates not only in Arab literary circles but also in global feminist and postcolonial discourse. Literary scholars have approached the novel through various critical lenses, including feminist, sociocultural, and linguistic frameworks. Yet, despite this breadth of engagement, the work's distinctly postmodernist dimensions particularly its sophisticated deployment of fragmentation, metafiction, and digital narration remain relatively underexamined in sustained academic

analysis. This critical lacuna presents a fertile opportunity to contribute fresh insights into the intersections of postmodern literary aesthetics and Gulf Arab sociocultural critique. Accordingly, this literature review is structured into three thematic layers: feminist, modernist, and structuralist. Each layer highlights how prior scholarship has framed the novel while also revealing the conceptual space for a postmodernist reading. This concise review of preceding studies on the novel has been organized into these three critical perspectives and presented in chronological order to ensure a coherent progression of scholarly thought and to shed light on the development of critical interpretations over time and space.

The first and foremost layer of this review focuses primarily on feminist readings, as the novel has been the subject of extensive analysis through a feminist critical lens. This body of scholarship reflects the novel's catalytic role in shaping conversations about female agency in contemporary Saudi Arabia, both within and beyond the Arab world. Darraj (2007) in the study entitled "*the Girls of Riyadh: Redefining the Boundaries of Female Experience in Saudi Arabia*" addresses the novel from a feminist perspective arguing that Rajaa Alsanea has utilized the coded resistance rather than the direct and overt activism to criticize the current human rights of the young Saudi females in the modern Saudi society. Al-Mahadin (2009) regards the novel as a dynamic platform for reimagining female agency within a traditional social framework. He interprets it as a literary emblem of transformation, serving to reset and reconstruct young Saudi women's identities within the conservative structures of modern Saudi society. In same vein, Al-sharif (2010) in the study entitled "Gender, Identity and the Novel in Gulf Regions" considers the novel as a piece of Islamic feminism where Saudi women can express autonomy within religious and cultural constraints, arguing that the protagonists' efforts to negotiate love and selfhood are acts of resistance within acceptable boundaries. Similarly, Mirabella (2011) in "Between Tradition and Globalization: The Conflicted Female Identity in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*." Argues that the characters in the novel can be regarded as hybrid identities who are caught between two extremes of western and non-western modernity demonstrating how young Saudi females reshape their own agency and rights within the modern Saudi society.

Expanding on the feminist perspective, Abdullah and Rasheed (2018) argue that the novel's use of the email format as a narrative device offers a distinct medium through which young Saudi women articulate their voices, enabling forms of feminist expression and identity negotiation within a virtual, modern space. In a similar vein, Albader (2020) contends that the novel provides a comprehensive portrayal of contemporary Saudi women who utilize email correspondence as a tool for social critique and transformation, both within their own society and beyond. Engaging with these feminist readings, Khan et al. (2019) offer a more destinated perspective, arguing that Alsanea's feminist discourse diverges from Western liberal paradigms. Instead, they assert that the novel aligns with Islamic principles of gender justice, proposing that it "attempts to Islamize feminism rather than secularize it" (p. 76). The protagonists, according to this view, seek autonomy, dignity, and moral integrity within the ethical framework of Islam.

Moreover, Bendouma and Kerboua (2023) emphasize that the novel should not be interpreted merely as a straightforward critique of patriarchal norms of the Saudi society, but rather as a notable and religiously grounded advocacy for women's rights within an Islamic society and context. In their views, Alsanea's narrative resists binary categorizations of Western liberal feminism versus traditional conservatism. Instead, it oscillates between subtle forms of resistance and thoughtful calls for reform, reflecting a careful negotiation between cultural authenticity and the desire for gender justice. This duality allows the novel to maintain fidelity to Islamic values while simultaneously challenging restrictive social practices. Such an approach resonates with a growing body of Muslim feminist scholarship, which emphasizes internal reform and the reinterpretation of religious texts to promote women's agency. In this view, the novel can function as part of a broader discourse that seeks to reconcile faith with feminist ideals, advocating for social change from within rather than through secular or external frameworks.

The second layer of this review examines the novel from a modernist perspective, focusing on how its themes, narrative style, and structure reflect key characteristics of modernist literature. While the modernist lens may seem less immediately associated with *Girls of Riyadh* than feminist readings, its value lies in unpacking how the novel's experimentation with temporality, narrative fragmentation, and cultural mediation situates it in dialogue with both Arab modernism and global postmodernist trends. Remarkably, the novel has been received differently in Western and Arab contexts, revealing different cultural and critical reactions and frameworks. In this regard, Yamani (2008) affirms that these narrative strategies align with broader postmodern aesthetics, especially in their struggle to fixed meanings and traditional narrative closure. Moreover, the novel's bilingualism of both Arabic and English has generated considerable scholarly discussion regarding hybridity, audience reception, and cultural translation. In the same vein, De Young (2009), in her study entitled "Marketing Muslim Women: Girls of Riyadh and the Politics of Reception" argues the novel's portrayal of Saudi females reduces their experiences to new stereotypes. It aslo presents them as consistently oppressed Muslim youth. Similarly, Lau (2009), in her article entitled "The Muslim Woman as Celebrity Author and the Politics of Translational Reception: The Case of Rajaa Alsanea" links the novel's international acclamation to Western fascination with Muslim women's voices, which in return has motivated global publishers to promote such narratives widely.

According to Hammoudi (2013), Alsanea utilizes the narrative form of emails as a fresh and modern narrative technique that resonates with postmodern elements throughout the novel. The inclusion of footnotes to explain Saudi customs further suggests a dual readership: local audiences familiar with the culture and an international readership unfamiliar with its gradations (Al-Betawi, 2025). This strategic mediation of culture aligns with Mead's (2008) observation that the novel simplifies cultural complexities to cater to Western expectations, thereby revealing a deeper tension between literary commodification and cultural authenticity. Though the novel is strictly prohibited in the country causing legal and personal issues and challenges for the writer, it is sighted to become a bestseller both across the Arab world

and globally. It also critiques the internalization of patriarchal values, particularly through the depiction of conservative women who act as agents of social conformity. The main four characters of the novel, Qamrah, Mashael, Sadeem, and Lamees, each of whom faces distinct struggles related to love, marriage, societal expectations, and personal identity. Their experiences expose the limitations placed on women's emotional and physical autonomy. Lastly, Vavichkina and Vlasova (2019) emphasize that the novel effectively captures both the public morality of Saudi society and the private psychological struggles of its youth. Therefore, it is regarded as a typical narrative that illustrates the broader social and emotional icon of negotiating such contradictions.

The third and less explored layer of this review focuses on the novel's form and postmodern features. From a formalist point of view, the novel uses narrative techniques that reflect postmodern aesthetics. Its email format challenges traditional storytelling. It shapes the line between fiction and admission, between public and private spaces, and between author and narrator (Booth, 2010). The metafictional voice often speaks directly to the reader. This self-aware narration weakens traditional narrative authority and reflects postmodern doubt about fixed truths, as seen in the works of Hutcheon (1988), McHale (1987), and Lyotard (1984). Most recently, Altman (2024) notes that the novel's digital epistolary form creates multiple perspectives and a sense of intimacy and reflects the ear of digitality. This is a key feature of cyberfeminism storytelling as it gives space to marginalized female voices in the digital age and challenges dominant patriarchal narratives. The novel also uses frequent code-switching. It mixes Qur'anic verses, classical poetry, and modern pop culture. This blending creates a postmodern appropriation. As Al-Ghamdi (2019) explains, it resists fixed identities and challenges rigid ideas about morality, gender roles, and cultural belonging. While the novel has been widely studied from different perspectives as mentioned earlier, there remains a major gap in analysing its postmodern literary aesthetics. Most of the existing scholarship focuses on the novel's themes but pays little attention to postmodern dimensions such as narrative fragmentation, metafiction, hybridity, and its digital epistolary format. This study, therefore, addresses that gap by focusing on the novel's formal experimentation and by examining how these structural choices reconfigure debates on identity, voice, and female subjectivity in the contemporary translated world literature.

4. Postmodernism as a Theoretical and Methodological Lens

Postmodernism emerged as a literary theory in the late 20th century as a reaction to the existing limitations of ideologies of modernism. The famous theorists such as Linda Hutcheon and Jean-François Lyotard have significantly contributed to the understanding of postmodernism and its key ideas and concepts. Also, the works of authors like John Fowles and Andrej Blatnik provide insights into the characteristics of postmodern literary characters. The notion of the incredulity towards metanarratives introduced by Jean-François Lyotard (1984) is closely applicable in the context of the current analysis of the novel. Lyotard (1984) critiques the totalizing ideologies of modernity and emphasizes localized, fragmented forms of knowledge and discourse. This concept is particularly relevant to the English-Language edition of Girls *of Riyadh*, where the protagonists' narratives challenge dominant religious, cultural, and patriarchal metanarratives embedded in modernist Saudi society.

Significantly, this study engages with the novel's *English-language edition*, treating it not as a derivative translation but as an autonomous literary work in English. The analysis focuses on how postmodern narrative techniques such as fragmentation, metafiction, and hybridized voice are realized, transformed, and received in an English literary context. This allows the novel to be read alongside other works of contemporary global postmodern fiction in English, thereby positioning it firmly within the scope of Anglophone literary studies.

In the same vein, the theory of historiographic metafiction initiated by Hutcheon (1988) proposes another key postmodern perception, highlighting how narratives are not neutral or transparent but are instead self-reflexive constructs. Earlier to Hutcheon, McHale (1987) changes the focus of postmodern fiction from epistemology (what can be known) to ontology (what is), stressing queries about the construction of reality and the multiplicity of worlds. Applying this ontological lens to the English text reveals how linguistic choices, idiomatic shifts, and narrative rhythm reshape the novel's thematic tensions for Anglophone readers. The current study also touches indirectly Homi Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity, which destabilizes essentialist identities and explores the "third space" in which cultural meaning is negotiated. Mashael's character, for instance, occupies a liminal space that represents both resistance and ambiguity, which can be regarded as a hallmark of postmodern identity politics. Furthermore, the theory of performativity by Butler (1990) enlightens the current analysis of young Saudi female identity in the novel. The protagonists perform various socially scripted roles under patriarchal surveillance, yet their narratives display, to some extent, the instability and contestability of those roles manifested throughout the novel. By resting its framework in Anglophone postmodernist criticism, the present study expands the discussion to include feminist epistolarity, digital narration, and transnational literary hybridity as they appear in the English-language text of *Girls of Riyadh*. This focus not only reinforces the novel's relevance to WJEL's readership but also demonstrates how translated works in English can actively shape, and be shaped by, global postmodern discourse.

To methodically examine how the novel engages with postmodernist aesthetics and ideology, the current study employs a four-wave analytical approach grounded in the proposed postmodernist theoretical framework. Each wave corresponds to one of the novel's four main characters, Qamrah, Sadeem, Mashael, and Lamees, whose personal narratives unfold through serialized email entries. These waves are analysed not only as cultural narratives rooted in the Saudi context but also as instances of formal innovation resonating with established Anglophone postmodern structures.The first wave (Qamrah's emails) analyses narrative fragmentation and its reflection of the disintegration of traditional marital expectations and gendered cultural norms. The second wave (Sadeem's emails) explores metafiction focusing on how her narrative critiques romantic idealism while self-consciously constructing and deconstructing female identity. The third wave (Mashael's emails) investigates hybridity and cultural uncertainty, interpreting her identity through the lens of postcolonial tension and diasporic displacement. The fourth and final wave (Lamees's emails) examines the influence of digital techno-culture and the

novel's struggle to narrative closure. By aligning its methodology with the novel's serialized, email-based form and interpreting it through Anglophone postmodern criticism, this study reinforces *Girls of Riyadh* as not only a significant work of postmodern Saudi literature but also a distinctive contribution to the corpus of contemporary English-language fiction. This dual positioning that rooted in both cultural specificity and global literary dialogue.

5. Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of the novel follows a four-wave analytical approach, grounded in the postmodernist theoretical framework outlined in the preceding section. Each wave corresponds to one of the novel's four major protagonists, namely, Qamrah, Sadeem, Mashael, and Lamees. This structure not only enables a character-focused analysis but also highlights the multiplicity and fragmentation of voices as a hallmark of postmodern literature which mirrors the fractured social realities experienced by Saudi women. These four waves will be briefly introduced in the following subsection.

5.1 Qamrah's Emails: Emotional and Narrative Fragmentation

The emails of Qamrah, the first protagonist of the novel who is one of young four Saudi females of the city of Riyadh, narrates a persuasive tale of a young Saudi woman who navigates the mystifying downfall of idealized womanhood within a patriarchal Saudi society. Her emails further expose the gradual disintegration of her identity through emotional betrayal, cultural dislocation, and social condemnation. What begins as a hopeful detection of love and dignity soon devolves into a lived experience of separation between what tradition promised and what it delivered. Each moment of her story is imbued with the pain of fragmentation, yet also twinkles with the subtle stirrings of consciousness and redefinition as can be traced in the following extracts from the novel.

> Qamrah's heart was overflowing with joy at the idea of a husband, of love, of the romantic life she had always dreamed of. She had always believed, just as her mother had taught her, that a good woman's happiness was guaranteed the moment she got married. When she first saw Ahmed, she believed Allah had finally blessed her with her destiny." (pp. 16).

The above extract offers a vibrant portrayal of the concept of marriage in patriarchal Saudi society, emphasizing that it is not merely a personal milestone but rather the fulfilment of a broader social and religious narrative that promises women security, purpose, and societal acceptance. However, her husband's emotional negligence and eventual betrayal shatter the illusion of marital bliss. Qamrah's identity, once rooted in her role as an obedient, hopeful wife, begins to be lost. This moment reflects a key postmodern theme which is the failure of grand narratives. The marriage script, once assumed to be a universal truth, is exposed as a gendered construct that collapses under the weight of lived contradiction. Her self-blame for Ahmed's coldness and admiration reveals the depth of her internalized patriarchy, where a lady is expected to compensate for male absence with deeper submission.

As this emotional crisis goes on and deepens, Qamrah begins to interrogate the moral codes that have shaped her perception of self-worth and self-respect and emotional frustration. Her mother's moral advice and instructions as a wife remains as an echo in her ears that controls her behaviour towards her husband's treatment and actions to the last moment.

> Her mother's voice echoed in her ears: 'Patience, my daughter. That's what makes a woman respectable. Don't ever raise your voice or question your husband. Be patient and he will come around.' Qamrah clung to those words like a lifeline during the months of silence and coldness. But now, alone in her apartment, she wondered, who was teaching men how to be good husbands?" (pp. 43).

This moment of rhetorical questioning shows a clear shift in Qamrah's thinking. What she once accepted without hesitation now becomes uncertain. Her words reveal the unfair gender expectations in Saudi society where women are expected to suffer in silence and keep up appearances, while men are allowed emotional distance and greater freedom. From a postmodern feminist perspective, this marks a turning point. Qamrah begins to move away from being a silent victim and starts to think critically about her role and identity. She begins to see herself as someone who can question norms and make her own judgments. Her short stay in the United States further deepens her awareness and adds to her sense of confusion and self-discovery.

> Life in Chicago was like nothing Qamrah had ever known. Women wore what they liked, walked where they pleased, and laughed loudly in public. She watched them from her apartment window, sometimes amazed, sometimes unsettled. In the beginning, she would cross the street when men approached, covering her face instinctively (pp. 37).

This portrayal of cultural dissonance highlights Qamrah's encounter with Western norms of female autonomy and public expression, which contrasts sharply with her Saudi cultural conditioning. The comparison between her cultural conditioning and the liberated public behaviour of Western women destabilizes her sense of femininity. She experiences both envy and fear, simultaneously attracted to and threatened by this unfamiliar model of autonomy. Her invisibility in a non-shrivelled society function both as a release from the male gaze and as a new form of loss which in turns a symbolic erasure of the only mode of validation she has ever known. This passage captures the essence of what Homi Bhabha theorizes as cultural hybridity. This complex negotiation of identity aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity, illustrating the liminal space Qamrah occupies between tradition and modernity, East and West, self and other. Returning to Riyadh as a divorced woman further compounds her disaffection as can be traced clearly in the following situation depicted in the novel:

> When Qamrah stepped off the plane back in Riyadh, she could feel the judgment in the air. Her aunts looked at her with pity, but there was also a gleam of accusation in their eyes. 'A divorced woman,' they whispered behind closed doors. 'She must have

done something wrong. (pp.59).

This passage shows how Qamrah is seen as morally contaminated and marked by failure, shame, and inferiority. Even though she is the victim who has been victimized by the betrayal of her husband overseas, society treats her as if she is to blame. She becomes the target of public judgment, where watching and shaming are used to control behaviour. Her sense of self is not only broken from within but also damaged by how others view and treat her in the community. Yet amid this social erasure, Qamrah finds a faint but meaningful source of self-recovery.

> *She would often sit for hours just watching her son sleep. In his tiny breaths, she found hope. In his small fists, she found strength. If she could not live the life she dreamed of—of love, of partnership, of shared happiness. Her dreams would not die; they would simply be reborn in him. She would teach him to respect women. To listen. To love. She would do for him that no one had done for her (p. 61).*

The extract shows that Qamrah transforms traditional gender roles into a source of strength, empowerment and hope refusing to give in to despair. Instead, she invests her energy in raising a son who may one day challenge the very system that failed her. This narrative arc embodies a postmodern reconfiguration of identity and agency, illustrating how personal and cultural fragmentation can give rise to new forms of empowerment within global Anglophone literature.

5.2 Sadeem's Emails: Metafiction and Gendered Cultural Norms

In the second wave of analysis, *Girls of Riyadh* shifts focus to Sadeem, whose story reveals the emotional and narrative complexities faced by women under patriarchal control. Through her emails, we can see how expressions of love and heartbreak are shaped not only by cultural expectations but also by an awareness of being watched and judged. Sadeem does not simply feel but she performs her emotions, knowing that every word and action may be misunderstood or misused. At the centre of Sadeem's story is her passionate yet doomed relationship with Waleed. This romantic failure is framed like a modern-day tragedy, rich in emotional intensity and literary references. In one of her most revealing lines, she writes:

> *I used to believe in fairy tales. In love that conquers all. In happily ever after. But Waleed taught me that even the most beautiful stories can end in silence. He didn't even look back" (p. 66).*

The above extract shows that Sadeem moves beyond simply telling her story. She reflects on her own belief in romantic ideals shaped by fiction, showing a deeper awareness of how stories influence real emotions. Further, Sadeem's heartbreak is not just personal but it is performative, written as a textual event where emotion is shaped, dramatized, and filtered through cultural expectations.

> *I wore the perfume he once liked. I replayed his messages. I wept like Juliet, alone in my dark room. I wanted to feel the pain, to memorize it, to become a woman transformed by sorrow (p. 71).*

Her reference to Juliet, a Western icon of tragic love, aligns her grief with a larger tradition of emotional performativity that crosses cultural boundaries. Yet, this emotional display is not simply romantic; it is socially shaped and ultimately punished. When Waleed ends the engagement after a brief physical encounter, the blame falls entirely on Sadeem:

> *It was just a kiss. A moment. But now I'm the girl who went too far. I didn't lose my virginity, but I lost my innocence in their eyes (p. 69).*

This distinction between physical virginity and social innocence reveals the paradox of emotional expression for women in conservative settings. Sadeem's performative emotions, once poetic and passionate, are now socially dangerous. As her emails progress, Sadeem becomes increasingly self-aware. She writes:

> *I used to write him long messages I never sent. I'd rehearse what I'd say if he called. But lately, I've started writing just for myself. I don't want to be the tragic heroine anymore. I want to write a new ending (p. 84).*

The extract above reveals that Sadeem shifts from romantic performance to personal authorship. Her writing moves to an act of self-expression and emotional agency. In postmodern terms, she transitions from a character trapped in a love story to the narrator of her own realist narrative. She lets go of closure and embraces ambiguity. This transformation becomes clear when she rejects Waleed's return:

> *He came back, said he'd changed. But I didn't believe in change that came without apology. I didn't want a recycled romance. I wanted something that didn't smell like regret (p. 91).*

Her response is concise and powerful. She no longer plays the passive, forgiving woman. Her words are sharp, deliberate, and emotionally literate. She sets the pace of the conversation and refuses to fall back into old roles. In a later email, Sadeem reflects on the nature of stories themselves:

> *Maybe our stories aren't meant to be told like fairy tales. Maybe they're like patchwork—messy, torn, unfinished. But even that is beautiful in its own way (p. 94).*

This statement sums up the novel's metafictional approach. Sadeem critiques the demand for tidy endings and idealized roles. Her voice embraces emotional complexity, narrative fragmentation, and authenticity over perfection. Thus, the second wave of analysis shows that Sadeem uses emails to explore how Arab women's emotions are shaped by social scripts, literary tropes, and cultural judgment. Her heartbreak becomes a site of transformation. Her emails reveal the postmodern depth of female subjectivity in the novel.

5.3 Mashael's Emails: Hybridity and Cultural Uncertainty

This third wave of the analysis highlights the character of Mashael as the most international and culturally hybrid among the four protagonists. Her identity is shaped by her bicultural heritage in the sense that she was born to a Saudi father and an American mother and by her experience living between global cities and the conservative norms of Riyadh. Her email correspondence captures the emotional and intellectual struggles of hybrid identity as can be traced in the following:

> *When I walked into that wedding hall in Riyadh, it wasn't my accent that made them stare—it was something else. The way I stood, maybe. Or that I looked them in the eye. Or that I didn't lower my voice when I spoke. It's like they could tell, from the first second, that I didn't quite belong (p. 98).*

Mashael's discomfort does not stem from overt rejection, but from the unspoken social codes that define who belongs. Her body language which was shaped by American norms of confidence and openness clashes with Riyadh's silent expectations of female modesty and restraint. Her foreignness is not marked by language or clothing alone, but by an embodied difference that invites subtle, persistent forms of exclusion.

Her emotional journey becomes more complicated when she enters a relationship with Faisal, a Saudi man who initially embraces her distinctiveness. However, his openness fades under the weight of family and societal expectations.

> *He once told me I was refreshing— 'like a breeze from another world,' he said. But later, when it got serious, he said his family didn't think I was 'from a good enough background.' As if my mother's passport was some kind of stain on my soul (p. 104).*

Mashael's words express more than romantic disappointment; they serve as a broader critique of cultural norms. In her world, love is filtered through tribal and genealogical ideologies that view hybridity not as enrichment, but as contamination. Her narrative voice gains strength through its metacultural irony, reflecting a sharp awareness of her in-betweenness. She navigates the space between cultures not with confusion, but with a critical eye, using irony to expose the contradictions and limitations of both worlds:

> *I'm too Saudi to be American and too American to be Saudi. When I wear a scarf, they say I'm pretending. When I take it off, they say I'm disrespectful. When I speak English, they mock me. When I speak Arabic, they correct me. It's exhausting to live in translation (p. 109).*

In the above extract, Mashael articulates clearly the psychological strain of occupying the "third space". Her emotional exhaustion does not arise from personal confusion, but from a heightened self-awareness: the constant need to explain, justify, or mediate her identity in a society that values uniformity and cultural legibility.

> *When I told Faisal that I loved him, really loved him, his face went blank. It was like I'd broken some rule I didn't know existed. Later he said, 'You're too forward. You make things too easy.' And I thought—since when is honesty a flaw? (p. 108).*

In this moment, Mashael's Western-coded emotional transparency comes into direct conflict with traditional expectations of female passivity. She is not punished for crossing a physical boundary, but for daring to express desire. This tension reflects broader postcolonial critiques of gendered behavior, where women's expressions of desire are often equated with a loss of virtue or moral failure. Yet, Mashael refuses to adopt the posture of victimhood. Though her voice reveals emotional pain, it remains intellectually assertive and critically self-aware. She does not retreat into silence or shame; instead, she claims her right to feel, to speak, and to question, challenging the cultural scripts that seek to define and contain her.

> *People kept telling me to compromise. To become more 'adjusted.' But what they really meant was: be less. Speak less. Dream less. Want less. But I don't believe in that kind of peace. I believe in the kind that starts from truth—even if it's hard to hear (p. 113).*

In the extract above, Mashael rejects the assimilationist logic that demands the erasure of difference in exchange for social acceptance. Rather than conform, she embraces complexity as a more honest expression of identity and asserts her right to inhabit the discomfort of nuance. Her narrative resonates with postmodern sensibilities—particularly the refusal of binary thinking and the affirmation of fluid, evolving subjectivities.

What makes Mashael's emails especially compelling is their existential reflectiveness. Her story becomes more than a personal account; it transforms into a meditation on identity under erasure. She writes not just to recount events, but to confront the fragility of the self in a world that demands simplicity, coherence, and cultural legibility.

> *There are days I wish I could just choose one life. One culture. One script. But maybe that's not who I am. Maybe I'm not here to choose. Maybe I'm here to write something new—something messy and unfinished and real (p. 117).*

As Jia Lia et al (2024: 388) argued "the integration of cultural values with sustainable practices sustains this harmonious coexistence", this passage moves beyond cultural critique and enters the realm of narrative ethics. Mashael comes to view her life not as a fixed storyline but as an open manuscript. Moreover, her hybrid identity becomes a site of possibility rather than conflict. It allows her to imagine new forms of spiritual and moral belonging that do not fit neatly within the binary of secular liberalism versus conservative religiosity. Her position between worlds invites a reconfiguration of values, where faith, agency, and ethical reflection coexist beyond rigid cultural or ideological framework.

> *I still pray when I feel lost. Not because someone told me to, but because I believe in something bigger than this world. I wear my jeans and my faith together. Maybe that's my hijab (p. 122).*

This declaration disrupts the false binary between modernity and spirituality, as she articulates a deeply personal Islam. Her spiritual practice is inward, autonomous, and resistant to both Western secular assumptions and the rigid gatekeeping of local orthodoxy. In doing so, she reclaims faith as a private, evolving journey rather than a public marker of conformity. Thus, Mashael's narrative enriches the narrative architecture of the novel. Her emails are not merely confessions or romantic musings; they function as critical reflections, cultural diagnoses, and acts of narrative reimagining. She occupies the role of a transgressive intellectual, offering insights that reach beyond gender and romance to interrogate the epistemology of cultural identity itself. Mashael writes not from the margins, but from the intersections of East and West, tradition and modernity, faith and freedom. Through her voice, the novel articulates a vision of Arab womanhood that is plural, fluid, and irreducibly hybrid.

5.4 Lamees's Emails: Techno-culture and Youth Agency

From the outset and deep reading, Lamees's emails reveal her fluency in the digital lifeworld. Her messages are often structured with bullet points, embedded references, and hyperlinks. This digital literacy is not merely stylistic but it displays her capacity to organize knowledge, build persuasive arguments, and participate in broader sociocultural dialogues beyond traditional constraints.

> *I googled everything. I read fatwas and medical journals. I joined a couple of health forums, and within a week, I knew more about women's reproductive health than most doctors I've met. When the university doctor tried to scare me into silence, I quoted her three sources. She blinked. I walked out smiling (p. 129).*

This passage encapsulates Lamees's techno-agency is not detached from Islamic values, but rather rooted in knowledge-seeking, critical thinking, and strategic self-education. The internet, for her, is not a space of alienation but of discovery and empowerment, reflecting a postmodern reliance on decentralized knowledge systems that challenge authoritarian and institutional control. Where Qamrah succumbs to patriarchal structures and Mashael resists them through hybrid identity, Lamees circumvents them altogether through a strategy of autonomous self-discipline and strategic religiosity.

> *I chose the veil myself. No one told me to wear it. No one made me. I woke up one morning and realized: my body, my decision, my modesty. So, I wore it. But not because I was disappearing, I wore it to be seen the right way (p. 132).*

Her decision to veil herself becomes an act of both religious commitment and subjective reorientation. The language she uses "my body, my decision"—echoes the rhetoric of global feminist discourse, yet it is framed within the idioms of faith and modesty. In this sense, Lamees performs what scholars of Islamic feminism describe as 'faith-based agency', a mode of action in which religious piety becomes a source of empowerment, not subjugation.

Unlike the other characters who struggle with loss or heartbreak, Lamees's trajectory moves toward self-authorship and civic contribution. After completing her medical studies in Riyadh, she applies to study in Canada, articulating a vision that is both professional and spiritual:

> *I want to be a doctor who understands more than just illness. I want to understand suffering, healing, dignity. And I want to take that understanding back to Riyadh. Because our women deserve more than lectures—they deserve compassion, respect, and real care (p. 140).*

This moment in her emails reflects not only her career ambition but also her social ethics. Her aspirations are not rooted in personal escape or Western assimilation, but in a return movement. Crucially, Lamees does not present herself as flawless or superior. Her journey is full of doubts, hesitations, and moments of cultural tension.

> *Sometimes I wonder if I've become too sharp, too opinionated. My aunt says I'm 'hard to marry off.' But maybe that's not my fault. Maybe the problem isn't me—it's the idea that a smart woman is dangerous (p. 135).*

In this self-reflection, Lamees identifies a persistent cultural trope: female intelligence as a social threat. Yet she does not internalize that critique. Instead, she frames it as a cultural problem, positioning herself in quiet resistance. This is the hallmark of her postmodern agency not loud rebellion, but reflective defiance, an internal clarity that transforms cultural critique into lived practice. Lamees also demonstrates an awareness of the fragmentary nature of postmodern narratives, refusing the closure that often defines female characters in traditional novels. In one of her final emails, she writes:

> *I'm not waiting for a husband. I'm not waiting for a perfect moment. I'm writing my life like a Wikipedia page—updates, edits, footnotes, all welcome. Just don't expect a final draft anytime soon" (p. 144).*

This metaphor is strikingly contemporary and deeply postmodern. It captures a sense of narrative impermanence, open-endedness, and revision. It also implies a shared authorship, inviting collaborative identity formation rather than solitary, fixed subjectivity. Through this lens, Lamees's narrative resists the typical telos of marriage or tragic sacrifice. Furthermore, her emails illustrate that being a believing Muslim woman, a medical student, a tech-literate global citizen, and a reform-minded thinker are not mutually exclusive identities. In essence, Lamees's voice is emblematic of a generation of women who are deeply embedded in techno-culture, yet grounded in faith; who are ambitious, but socially conscious; who are emotionally resilient, intellectually confident, and narratively open-ended. Her story challenges simplistic binaries and offers an alternative vision of Arab womanhood.

To conclude, the analysis of the current study, the four protagonists of the novel, Qamrah, Sadeem, Mashael, and Lamees, collectively

illustrate the multifaceted struggles and evolving identities of young Saudi females navigating tradition, love, culture, and modernity. By focusing on the novel's narrative techniques as Anglophone literary expressions, each character exemplifies distinct postmodern tensions: Qamrah's fragmentation, Sadeem's metafictional self-awareness, Mashael's cultural hybridity, and Lamees's engagement with techno-culture and digital narration. Their email correspondences function as innovative sites of feminist epistolarity, enabling multifaceted self-expression and critique that disrupt fixed notions of Arab and Saudi femininity. Rather than a singular narrative trajectory, the novel offers a wide polyphonic exploration that resonates with broader trends in global postmodern fiction, reflecting the fluid social realities of a transforming Saudi society. This multi-voiced and transnational approach not only enriches the novel's literary form but also contributes to ongoing conversations within Anglophone and translated literature, emphasizing the intersection of global digital culture and feminist narrative strategies.

6. Conclusion

The present paper has examined *Girls of Riyadh* in its English-language edition through a comprehensive four-wave postmodernist framework, revealing how the novel's digital epistolary form becomes a deliberate and innovative literary strategy for articulating the emotional, cultural, and gendered struggles of contemporary young Saudi women. By foregrounding its epistolary structure within a global, Anglophone literary space, the novel demonstrates how local narratives can be reframed to engage directly with international readers and critical discourses in English literature worldwide. Each protagonist embodies a distinct facet of postmodern female subjectivity, fragmentation, metafiction, hybridity, and technological agency and thereby destabilizing conventional narrative authority, challenging hegemonic gender discourses, and embracing open-ended, pluralistic self-representation. The analysis further demonstrates that the novel redefines narrative space as a contested transnational arena of negotiation, where young Saudi females assert agency across both digital and cultural boundaries, recasting personal storytelling into a form of literary resistance and cultural re-interpretation. This process is particularly significant in the translated, Anglophone context, where linguistic mediation not only shapes reception but also situates the work within the evolving canon of global postmodern literature**.** In doing so, the English edition functions not merely as a translation but as an active participant in Anglophone postmodern literary traditions, particularly those that merge localized narratives with experimental forms, digital narration, and feminist epistolarity. Beyond its immediate literary implications, this reading of *Girls of Riyadh* contributes to broader scholarly conversations in postmodern Anglophone fiction, translated literature, and global feminist discourse, while offering pedagogical frameworks for integrating Gulf literature into English literary studies curricula. By explicitly linking Alsanea's narrative techniques to dominant modes of Anglophone postmodernism. Last but not least, in the context of Saudi Arabia's vision 2030 and the sweeping cultural, social, and literary transformations it heralds, this study highlights the transformative capacity of literature particularly in its translated and globally circulated form to serve as a site of dialogue and cultural negotiation between tradition, reform, and personal agency. Such works invite literary scholars, educators, and policymakers to engage Anglophone literature not as a peripheral mode of expression for Arab narratives, but as a vital, dialogic platform through which contemporary Saudi identity, reformist thought, and gendered agency are explored and contested on the broader global context.

not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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