The hidden treasure: (Re)branding Saudi fiction

Mohammed Albalawi

Abstract: Saudi fiction has witnessed immense literary development in recent decades. Many works have been critically acclaimed, and several have received notable literary awards. Unfortunately, Saudi fiction is not widely read outside Arab countries. The craft of Saudi fiction has gone virtually unrecognized around the globe. This paper intends to give more importance to Saudi fiction and open lines of communication between the Saudi literary canon and readers in other countries. By examining two selected Saudi authors, this study attempts to (re)brand Saudi fiction. The goal here is not to track every work of Saudi fiction, but to describe its artistry and attraction to readers worldwide.

Subjects: 20th Century Literature; Interdisciplinary Literary Studies; Literary/Critical Theory

Keywords: Saudi Literature; Abdo Khal; Rajaa Alem; Arabic Literature; Saudi Fiction

1. Introduction

The conventions of Arabic fiction have garnered attention from a range of critics fascinated by its aesthetics, style, subject matter, and national setting. Regardless of these critics' valid questions of its centrality, universality, or peripherality, Arabic fiction occupies an undisputed place in Western modes of literary representations, as evidenced by books and increasing numbers of scholarly articles. Yet scholars have dissected only a limited number of Arabic texts that lie at the intersection of cultural, colonial, and postcolonial studies. While this line of inquiry begins to elucidate the political functions of the critical observations made by Arabic fiction, it fails to account for the narrative variations within Arabic fiction. The nature of early discussions, and even some extended critical treatments, thus becomes an indicator of how views of Arabic narrative are reduced to limited deliberations. In this regard, discussions of Arabic authors and works that have been brought to light in research do not showcase Saudi fiction. The authors highlighted are mostly from Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria, and in a few cases, Palestine and Sudan. For example, there exist many studies of the works of Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Ghassan Kanafani, Yusuf Idris, Naguib Mahfouz,
Nawal El Saadawi, Ghada Samman, and Tayeb Salih. Meanwhile, celebrated Saudi authors have sought a wider audience for their fiction as their works have been largely ignored despite receiving accolades. Research scarcely touches the surface of the literary value of Saudi fiction, and avoids recognizing the multiple shifts and varieties in its expression. This article seeks to fill the gap in the global literary field regarding the craft of Saudi fiction by examining its progress and showing how the Saudi novel has excelled regionally and has the potential to shine globally. Thus, the aim of this research is to answer the primary question: How does Saudi fiction manifest itself in today’s global literary scenes? This study will provide a close reading of two works written by prominent Saudi authors: Abdo Khal’s Tarmi bi-sharar [Throwing Sparks] (2010/2013) and Rajaa Alem’s Tawq al-hamam [The Dove’s Necklace] (2010/2016). Through analysis of these novels, this study aims to expose how Saudi novels contain the same universality of experience seen in Western fiction.

2. Understanding the Saudi literary scene
Saudi Arabia is a diverse nation that has been influenced by many cultures.2 Many Saudis are of African and Turkish descent, living mainly in the western region of the country; others can trace their lineage to Central Asia. Such an ethnically diverse population has helped shape the Saudi cultural scene. Researchers have covered this territory before.3 Although Saudi fiction has structurally sophisticated narratives that not only expose society’s hegemonic practices but also reveal powerful imagery, and styles that portray its diverse culture, it has not been studied in depth or given a prominent place on the global literary scene. Careful study of the best examples of Saudi literature, however, should be revelatory.

Arabic fiction essentially subsumes the category of Saudi fiction; critics tend to focus on Arabic fiction—perhaps because Arabs are inaccurately identified as one group with a shared language, religion, and culture. But Arabs have diverse cultures, and a variety of religions. Where literary discussion is concerned, perhaps it is useful to review the historical value of Arabic fiction. While limited critical attention has been paid to Saudi narratives, interest in the Arabic novel and its historical development is augmented by eminent critics (Allen, 1995; Meyer, 2000; Said, 1997) and endorsed by others. The modern Arabic novel can be traced back to the nineteenth century, yet until the mid-twentieth century poetry remained the pre-eminent Arabic literary genre (Snir, 2001).6 During this period, the novel was perceived as a lesser or noncanonical genre. Only in the second half of the twentieth century did prose writing, especially the novel, become the leading form (Halevi & Sachs, 2007).

Many carefully crafted works of Arabic fiction have been widely hailed by critics as Arabic literary masterpieces. Examples of these works are Mawsim al-hijrah ila al-shamāl [Season of Migration to the North] (1966) by Sudanese writer Tayeb Salih; Rijāl fi al-Shams [Men in the Sun] (1962) by Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani; Al-thulathiya [The Cairo Trilogy] (1956) by the Nobel Prize-winning Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz; and Dhakirat al-jasad [Memory in the Flesh] (1993) by the Algerian writer Ahlam Mosteghanemi, to name just a few. Saudi literary tradition, however, is peripheral to the discussion. Only one Saudi novel has found its way onto the global literary scene: Abdulrahman Munif’s Mudun al-Milh [Cities of Salt] (1984).5 The dissemination of these novels is due to the interests of translators, as fiction is perceived by many as a rich source of material for translation. Roger Allen states that fiction is “the most frequently encountered literary medium in contemporary publishing” (Allen, 2003). But it does not seem prudent to dismiss contemporary publishing simply because it constitutes one possible reason for commentators’ neglect of the value of Saudi fiction. The limited number of published Arabic literary works in general, and Saudi ones in particular, is ascribed to the lack of translations.6 Translators usually take the views of professors of Arabic literature and Arab critics to determine which novels and authors to consider translating. They read brief summaries of these novels and choose the ones that appeal to them. Such limited choices result in a very small number of works eventually being translated and published. Moreover, Arabic literature in general needs to “justify itself and its usefulness by attaching itself to a social or political or historical issue that helps readers learn more about the Arab world or the Middle East” (Fakhreddine, 2018). Hence, Arabic literature is primarily read within
the paradigm of social or historical practices. According to Fokhreddine, “Literary scholars are often concerned with Arabic novels as historical and cultural records regardless of their merits as novels” (Fokhreddine, 2018). Moreover, the late development of modern Arabic fiction led scholars to have “reservations … about the appeal and literary value of Arabic fiction, either in translation or in original form” (Khalifa & Elgindy, 2014).

Khalifa and Elgindy argue that with the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz receiving the 1988 Nobel Prize in Literature, translation into English of Arabic fiction boomed as interest in Arabic fiction increased across the globe (Khalifa & Elgindy, 2014). The situation was less positive for Saudi fiction, however. Because Saudi Arabia has never been subject to colonial domination, colonial studies scholars were less motivated to study Saudi fiction, and thus it entered less into translators’ considerations. As a result, Saudi narratives remained largely unknown to non-Arab readers. Even in discussions of post-9/11 anti-terrorism fiction, Saudi novels addressing the issue of terrorism have been disregarded. Almoghales et al. note that, “most [Saudi anti-terrorism novels] narratives have not traveled beyond the Arab World’s periphery” (Almoghales et al., 2018). Almoghales et al. continue to argue that Saudi novels, “have been studied in isolation as if it is a local or regional issue neglecting its international dimension” (Almoghales et al., 2018). But far from stepping into discursive and cultural discussion to show how approaches to Arabic literature have been influenced by social, political, and cultural constructs, this study endeavors to offer a reading of Saudi fiction in an attempt to show that it is worthy of greater acknowledgment and attention.

To better understand Saudi fiction, it is helpful to have a brief account of its development. The Saudi novel has gone through three distinct phases that have affected its structure and volume of activity. In his seminal Novel in Saudi Arabia: Emergence and Development 1930–1989 (1998), the Saudi critic Sultan Alqahtani traces the beginning of the Saudi novel back to Abdulqudoos Alansari’s Al-Taw’aman [The Twins] (1930). Though the novel’s premise is strong and interesting, centered on social change in Mecca and its transformation into modernity, The Twins did not have much impact locally or regionally due to its didactic tone, unsophisticated narrative, and minimal character development. Two important, and more developed, novels followed: Ahmad Alsebaee’s Fikra [Thought] (1948) and Mohammed Maghribi’s Alb’th [The Resurrection] (1948). They belong to what critics call “The Beginning Phase” (1930–1958) in the history of Saudi fiction (Zainalabdeen, 2016). Only fifteen novels were published in this phase (Alhazimi, 1981). The reason for such a small number of publications is that the Saudi literary scene was in an experimental phase largely influenced by the first wave of Saudi students traveling to Egypt in the 1920s, which included a group of Saudi intellectuals (Bafqih, 2016). This slow emergence and the lack of aesthetic elements generally employed by novelists rendered Saudi fiction invisible.

The second phase, “The Intellectual Maturity” (1959–1979), observed an advancement in terms of literary style, as evidenced in Hamid Daminhori’s Thaman Al-Tadhyyah [The Price of Sacrifice] (1959). This novel is generally agreed by literary critics to be the first literary Saudi novel (Alhazimi, 1981; Alqahtani, 1989). Mohammed Almuzaini argues that Daminhori’s storytelling was influenced by Egyptian novelists such as Naguib Mahfouz and Yusuf Idris (Almuzaini, 2011). Daminhori studied in Egypt in the 1940s, and was exposed directly to many great works published during his time there. Thus it is fair to say that The Price of Sacrifice was authored at a time when many great Egyptian novels were becoming popular. Such works include Mahfouz’s Khan Al-Khalili (1946) and his magnificent epic Cairo Trilogy (1956–1957), and Idris’s The Cheapest Nights (1954) and Isn’t That So? (1957), all of which embrace the strengths of Western aesthetics. The Price of Sacrifice moved other Saudi novelists to produce works that have similar strengths, such as Ibraheem Alhumaidan’s Safeenat Aldaya’a [The Ship of the Dead] (1969), which brought prestige to the Saudi novel. The Saudi novel was elevated further during this phase by Abdulrahman Munif’s first novel, Al-Ashjar va Ightiyal Marzuq [The Trees and the Assassination of Marzoq] (1973). His succession of carefully crafted works has found an audience regionally and worldwide (Alqahtani, 1994). The second phase also signals the rise of Saudi women writing fiction, particularly in the early 1960s. Sameera Khashoggi was the first Saudi woman to write a novel: Wadda’t Amali [Farewell
My Hopes] (1961), which highlighted life abroad. Similar in theme, Huda Alrasheed’s Ghadan sa yakoon alkhamees [Tomorrow Will Be A Thursday] (1977) and Amal Shatta’s Ghadan ansā [Tomorrow I Forget] (1980) were among the works in this flourishing of women’s creative writing (Zainalabdeen, 2016). Basma min Buhayrāt al-Dumû [Basma from Lakes of Tears] (1979) by Aisha Zahir differs from its predecessors, as it takes place between Jeddah and Riyadh, establishing interest in local settings and connecting the Saudi novel to a wider category of Arabic literature.

The third phase, “The Renewal” (1980–present), is the essence of the Saudi novel. Influenced by the sociocultural changes in society brought about by increased wealth and improved living conditions, this phase has unleashed a stream of powerful works underpinned by the transformation of Saudis who have been exposed to the spheres of many cultures. Ghazi Algusaibi’s landmark Shogat al-Hurryah [An Apartment Called Freedom] (1994) is considered the first novel that dared to address topics untouched by many, such as political ideologies, identity loss, perception of others, human rights, terrorism, and sexuality (Zainalabdeen, 2016). The novel presents the experiences of four young men who leave their home countries in the Arabian Gulf to study at Cairo University in the late 1950s.13 The novel discusses political views—Arab nationalism, Baathist ideology, communism, secularism, and Nasserism—which are addressed by these four protagonists away from the restraints of their strict religious families.14 The influence of Algusaibi’s work is evident in a series of works that followed by other Saudi writers such as Turki Al-Hamad’s Al-thulatlhiya [The Trilogy] (1996–1998) and Abdo Khal’s Madon ta’kol al’ošhb [Cities Eating Grass] (1998).15 It should be noted that during the eighties and early nineties, many intellectual Saudis who studied in Western schools learned about modernism and observed its impact on the Western cultural and literary scenes. They were inspired by global writers such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, and others, and their reliance on Arabic writers was minimal.

This phase also brought Banāt al-Riyadh [Girls of Riyadh] (2005) by the young Rajaa Alsanea. The novel was controversial due to its inflammatory and daring content. It describes the romantic and sexual tribulations of four young women of the elite class in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia’s capital. The evasive narration may frustrate readers, but the novel has been critically acclaimed for its treatment of taboo that no Saudi author before Alsanea had approached so openly. The rapid transformation of Saudi society is evident in this work—it is this same transformation that has influenced many other Saudi novelists. They seek to formulate new parameters within the conventions of modern Saudi fiction, and in doing so, create narratives intricately mapping out their lives, dramatizing the struggle against coercive dialogue, and crossing social, religious, and political boundaries.

Before the Renewal phase, the tone of the typical Saudi narrative structure was calm and didactic. However, major events during this phase, such as the economic boom in the 1980s, the Gulf War of 1990, and the 9/11 tragedy and the geopolitical unrest that followed influenced Saudi novelists. In other words, these events were central to the manufacturing of a new, evolved narrative structure in Saudi fiction, as novelists sought to reconstruct a reality that had been obscured before. Zainalabdeen argues that the Saudi novel during this phase was able to record the transformations following these events with courage, in defiance of accepted norms (Zainalabdeen, 2016). The search for the truth occupied the minds of young authors, who questioned the validity of their experiences. Many voices emerged that added a psychological and philosophical depth to the paradigm of Saudi fiction. Novelists began writing experimental fiction influenced by global writers, positioning their narratives in realistic settings, and creating characters with issues concerning modern Saudi society.

Since the beginning of this phase, Saudi fiction has played a significant role in the Arabic literary scene: many male and female writers have had strong voices in Arabic literature, gaining regional fame. This study examines Abdo Khal and Rajaa Alem, for three reasons. First, Khal and Alem are excellent writers—the reader feels spellbound by their enthralling styles and smooth flow of themes and symbols, as well as the intimate bonds they create between the reader and their
characters. Second, not only have their works received high praise in the Arab world, but they have also captured the interest of foreign-language publishing houses. Thus, the need to translate Khal and Alem’s works is not difficult to justify. Finally, it seems logical to use examples who have had a profound impact, given the space limitations; all the same, this research argues that many others can lend themselves to similar treatments. What is important, however, is that Khal and Alem’s fiction has not garnered much scholarly attention globally, even though the place they hold in modern Arabic literature is akin to that of Vladimir Nabokov and John Steinbeck in Russian and American literature. In spite of their great importance, Khan and Alem’s novels were disregarded—not studied in depth, or only mentioned in passing.

3. Abdo Khal: a revealing look into beautiful prose and complex themes

Removed from the conventional narrative typical of Saudi literature, Khal emerged with his extraordinary ability to showcase the angles of everyday life in his works. Almuzaini argues that Khal is a landmark of Saudi literature because he shows people’s suffering in an unprecedented manner (Almuzaini, 2011). Khal’s novels employ new and dynamic language, a mixture of classical Arabic and its colloquial form, and have well-defined structures and well-orchestrated plots. While Khal prefers to expound in a philosophical fashion on his main themes, he sometimes invokes these by use of interior monologues and confessional modes. Khal, in common with many Saudi novelists such as Abdulrahman Munif, Hamid Daminihti, Ghazi Alguaisi, Rajaa Alem, Turki Al-Hamad, Yusuf Al-Mohameed, and Laila Aljahani, has successfully managed to occupy a pivotal place in the world of Arabic fiction. Yet these writers have struggled to go beyond the confines of their regional borders. In other words, Saudi novelists have sought to broaden the audience for their artistic creations, a collective goal that has always been in writers’ minds. While some authors have attempted to free their works from the cultural taboos of their native setting—for instance, An Apartment Called Freedom is set in Cairo—Khal brings a native setting to color the Saudi narrative, with Saudi culture enjoying significant presence in his work.

Khal’s first novel, Almawt yamor min hona [Death Passes from Here] (1995), showed great talent and artistic skill, delighting critics across the Arab world. Saudi critic and writer Hassan Alnaami notes that with his debut, Khal marks himself out as a novelist of great promise in Saudi fiction (2009). The 512-page novel’s themes of bitterness, injustice, superstition, and torture are reiterated throughout the novel, giving readers a sense of Khal’s engagement and craft. Khal masterfully creates an unpleasant experience for the reader. Mohammed Alkhazim acknowledges the writer’s brilliance in vividly describing injustice, as well as the novel’s suffocating atmosphere of cruelty and trauma, portrayed exquisitely in its stories of village life. Khal weaves an elusive tapestry of images, motifs, and symbols which are beautifully manifested in every facet of his novel. Moreover, the novel operates largely under the theme of tyranny and invokes a sense of merciless humiliation of the silenced characters, shaping the novel’s thematic assertions. The atmosphere is crammed with tragedies structured by the dualism of life and death. The inevitability of death penetrates the events described, unraveling the escalating trauma of worry and fear. Despite its bold use of a complex system of a narrative tools, marked by the contextualization of the characters’ social and cultural positions, the novel has gone unnoticed in the global world of fiction. Death Passes from Here is an exceptional literary work and a great fit for critical appraisals.

Khal’s second novel, Cities Eating Grass (1998), is another excellently crafted work that fascinated many. The two novels are thematically connected, depicting the vexed life of village people. The dark narrative of Cities Eating Grass takes place in the 1960s and presents a litany of stories about hardship, focusing on the experience of a young boy, Yahya, whose grandmother decides to take him with her for Hajj (the annual Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca) from a remote village near Yemen. The grandmother dies en route and the boy is left to his fate. Omar Alqazaq argues that Abdo Khal skillfully depicts the harsh life of the village and the struggle of those who escape and attempt to adjust to city life (Alqazaq, 2020). The novel is critical of the city, tackling the notion of alienation and its intersection of bereavement and anguish through Yahya’s trauma at the loss of his grandmother and his struggle to survive. In Cities Eating
Grass, Khal presents expressions of the pre-economic-boom experience, situated between the city’s hegemony and the village’s marginalization. On an allegorical level, the novel poses the issue of an existence plagued by poor socioeconomic conditions in a sparsely populated country. Khal creates a narrative structure that is central to the manifestation of Yahya’s fragmented identity during his quest for survival. He ties this to its setting in a difficult time when Saudi Arabia was reliant on Hajj revenues and limited agriculture.

Khal endeavors to explore the village and its marginalized groups in other works such as Alayam ala tukhbi’ ahad [Days Don’t Hide Anyone] (2002), Alteen [The Mud] (Allen, 2003), and Nubah [Barking] (2004). Mubarak (2005) says of Khal: “The center of his fictional universe is the village where he was born and which he left at a young age with his family in search of a better life.” Khal’s tough upbringing is apparent in most of his works. Mubarak adds that they, “have a rural ruthlessness and timidity,” and that, like their writer, “Khal’s heroes come from marginal groups and struggle for salvation.” Overwhelmingly beautiful language leaves readers in awe of Khal’s artistic prowess. In his delineations of characters, Khal incorporates a narrative strategy that gives voice to a marginalized community. The protagonist’s voice is submerged in a narrative dominated by a plethora of other voices belonging to marginalized characters.

In 2010, Khal received the most prestigious literary award in the Arab world, the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, for his dark novel Throwing Sparks (2010/2013). The novel is disturbing, frightening, and gruesome. It is provocative and daring as it chronicles the confessions of a hitman hired by a mysterious rich businessman living in a palace to punish his employer’s enemies by sexually assaulting them. The tumult surrounding the content of the novel obscured, perhaps, the accomplished aspects of the narrative structure. It would be fair to say that the initial response to Throwing Sparks was mostly related to the novel’s horrifying and malevolent characters and the embodiment of evil in its most impenetrable and tainted form. The horrific acts of gruesome and garish violence inflicted on countless victims prompted critics to assess the immorality of the novel’s protagonists and to judge them accordingly.

But the genius of Khal’s story is how compelling it is despite its vile actions and events. Given a substantial space in the narrative, Tariq, the narrator, represents marginalized groups: the narrative describes the dichotomy of wealth and poverty as it undeniably divulges the trajectories of power crucial to the sexual abuses described. The theme of moral collapse infiltrates the text, and the confined setting of the palace and the repetitive nature of Tariq’s acts lead to the downfall of some of the characters. The process of subjugation and silencing carries gender and class implications, as embodied by the palace and what resides between its walls. Turki Aldakheel argues that the novel vividly portrays a moral collapse, with the palace symbolizing tyranny—a manifestation of absolute power without consequences (2010). The palace is not a complementary element: often it is the very center of action. The businessman is possibly more prominently featured than any of the other characters. Though Tariq (over three decades) embarks on a journey of immoral collapse, his vile actions represent the ultimate degradation of a human soul. Khal’s work is an important addition to a genre that is considered “the quintessential Western cultural form” (Long, 2013). And it is important because, as Andrew Long argues, the West has insufficient knowledge about the literary scene in Saudi Arabia other than Abdulrahman Munif’s magnificent Cities of Salt trilogy.

The setting is the Saudi city of Jeddah. The narrator lives in a very poor district—a lavish palace is being built nearby, by the sea, depriving the district of its access to the shore. Most of the narrative in Throwing Sparks takes place inside the palace. The unfortunate residents of the district aspire to work at the palace. Only a few men are able to do so; when they do, they are faced with the cruel reality within the palace walls. The guests are prostitutes, corrupt businessmen, and immoral visitors. Throwing Sparks presents a view of a flawed society and shows a deep contrast between wealth, luxurious living, and power on the one hand and poverty, hardship, and weakness on the other. This major theme controls the novel and provides its underlying structure. The erection of
the palace creates intrigue among the poor residents and makes them want to find out more about life inside the palace. Everyone is desperate to find a way in. When one man, Issa, saves the wealthy businessman’s son from drowning, he is invited to work at the palace. Following his successful entrance, he attempts to find jobs at the palace for others in his ill-fated neighborhood and manages to do so for two friends of his: Tariq, the narrator, and Osama. On the surface, Issa seems to fight for a good cause: helping others improve their living conditions. However, the Arab critic Shawqi Yahya notes that by moving them to the palace, thus making them subject to its cruelty, Issa seeks to retaliate against those who have hurt him in the past (Yahya, 2012).

Infused with comparisons between classes, the novel addresses the struggle between two different ways of life. Yet the novel abandons the usual choice of suggesting that poor people are weak and need to be saved. Khal generates a different mood in the story. The district’s residents are sexually virile, and through their sexual exploits they appear powerful, similar to the palace owner. Even though the owner is described vividly, his name is unknown, which drives others to name him “Alsayed.” The name is ironic, as in the Arab world the word “Sayed” is used to show respect to an honorable man. It is the equivalent of the English word “master.” But “the Master” is a mysterious figure who employs people to perform indecent tasks as the novel exposes the filth behind the luxury, in strong contrast to the positive media image surrounding the palace. The Master constantly seeks to fulfill his needs no matter the costs and is impossible to please. Tariq notes, “Even though I had spent many years punishing his rivals, I received no appreciation from the Master, other than when he was watching me at it” (Khal, 2013). The Master’s power is absolute and because of his extreme wealth, he dominates his guests. More importantly, he controls those who are marginalized, without a voice of their own.

Yet the novel is not just an indictment against the Master: the narrative dramatizes individuals from a range of social positions and insists on the subjectivity of characters’ perceptions, which are influenced by environmental forces. The palace where all the atrocities occur is symbolic. It alludes to any place governed by an evil master with nearly unrestricted power and influence. The presence of the palace is distinctive, as much so as other symbols in creative writing, but Khal goes further and puts emphasis on multilayered implications such as identity loss, violence, patriarchal subjugation of women, sexual tribulation, hypermasculinity, and delusion. Tariq feels escaping his abject poverty to be appointed at the palace is a miracle—until it becomes evident that he has been chosen for a horrific task: punishing the Master’s enemies through unspeakable acts. After three decades of entrapment, Tariq breaks down. Frustrated at himself for performing his abhorrent role as a punisher, Tariq says, “I served no other purpose; only when [the Master] had a victim in tow would everyone scurry around the palace looking for me as if in search of a lost key” (Khal, 2013). Beyond this identity struggle, Khal remains committed to the portrayal of structural poverty and conditions of marginalization through the stories of other characters. The novel is narrated chronologically, but frequent flashbacks to the early years in the district provide background to the main characters. The narratives of Tariq and his friend Osama and Issa intertwine throughout the book. It is a novel about the confessions of a torturer—a torture/victim narrative—where the narrator explicitly reminds the reader of his terrible actions and the malicious life he has led. The novel begins vigorously, with a confession: “Outcast and dispirited, I embraced a life of crime. Standing in the punishment chamber, I would contemplate my naked body, bruised and degraded by the cruel and brutal acts it had performed” (Khal, 2013).

Throwing Sparks can be interpreted in many ways. It lends itself to a Marxist examination of the classes and their resources and limitations: the Master is a representation of the elite with absolute power, as opposed to the people of the slum. It can be analyzed psychologically through its topics of narcissism, personality disorder, revenge, torture, and more. The protagonist offers an important and interesting angle of investigation, as Khal provides a rich context to explain his behaviors. The novel presents a significant number of themes that are evident in many esteemed literary works. In his important analysis “The Vision of Collapse in Throwing Sparks” the critic Alrasheed Bu Shair notes that Khal endeavors to follow Western literary traditions, especially in using techniques such
as stream of consciousness, flashbacks, and flash-forwards (Bu Shoair, 2012). Khal also deploys metafiction in his narrative—a feature prominent in global postmodernist works when novelists blur boundaries between real and fictional worlds. In such novels, it is uncertain whether the events, actions, and people are fictional. Khal infuses his narrative with historical events, such as the 2006 collapse of the stock market in Saudi Arabia. The narrator describes how Issa reacts to the loss of his stock shares: “his entire account was wiped out in one stroke, down to the last piaster on the paper statement. Issa was left to wander the streets naked and deranged, hurling abuse at the high and mighty of the city” (Khal, 2013). Brian McHale explains this feature in his seminal Postmodernist Fiction: “postmodernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions […] that bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects” (McHale, 1987). In many instances, Khal utilizes reality in the novel, causing confusion.

Another important tool that Khal employs is intertextuality, which functions to build a relationship with many other works. For example, he inserts a biblical reference: “As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons. I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my taste” (King James Bible, 1769/2008, Song 2:3 quoted in Khal, 2013). Khal clearly encourages the reader to acknowledge the quotation by drawing their attention to it. Even the title itself is taken from a Quranic verse about hell, which “throws sparks [as huge] as a fortress.” Khal uses this reference to describe the suffering of marginalized people. They suffer because they are victims of an unjust system that silences them. Khal does not limit Throwing Sparks to the fringe of marginalization though; he also reveals the sufferings of the protagonists caused by powerful people. Discussing marginalization is an important theme in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century literature. Moreover, instability of personality is evident in the way characters behave in Throwing Sparks. For example, Tariq’s personality is presented as broken and unstable. Tariq knows that he plays a vile role in the palace. He confesses, “I have been carrying around this old carcass of mine for half a century” (Khal, 2013). Not only does Tariq understand his corruption; he also loathes himself. However, he continues to perform his role. The novel is charged with such contradictions, which can be attributed to fragmented psychic experiences. There is no escape from this role. Tariq helplessly believes he is “a small fish caught in a net behind a fishing boat year[n]ig to escape the trap” (Khal, 2013). Tariq is stuck. He is not only unable to escape, but also in constant danger: “I was, after all, at his mercy, and he could destroy me any time he chose to. I wondered what was stopping him” (Khal, 2013).

Khal also instills cynicism and suspicion toward metanarratives in Throwing Sparks. For example, the narrator notes, “I have been struggling with my beliefs day after day for fifty years. I have come to realize that history is made up of deviants, grafters, thieves, opportunists, panderers, fornicators, pederasts, megalomaniacs, and conners. Low lifes advance the story of mankind as much as saviours” (Khal, 2013). Metanarrative, conceptualized by Jean-François Lyotard, is the employment of grand historical stories that modern discourses, including fiction, borrow and utilize (Lyotard et al., 1984). Lyotard explains that metanarrative is a form of ideology that validates the inclusion of historical events. The narrator is cynical of these stories and even doubts the role religions have played in history. He says that religion is, “a long, dark tunnel […] we pick and choose our way through it to justify our goals, both honorable and immoral” (Khal, 2013).

That Khal has won a prestigious literary prize is interesting because he, and Saudi fiction as a whole, is young compared to authors from Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Morocco who have dominated the Arabic literary scene for almost a century. Throwing Sparks continues to enthuse Arab critics with the beauty of its composition and emotive appeal, important components of a great novel. James Averill notes that great literature has “universal appeal” and can attain greatness globally by “appealing to emotions that are basic to human nature” (Averill, 2001). Yet Khal’s work, along with many Saudi novels, has not been appraised beyond the constitutive effects of local and regional cultural conditions. Even more relevant to the present discussion is that
Throwing Sparks provides insight into the universal human condition, which makes his work accessible for readers worldwide, not only for an Arab audience.

4. Rajaa Alem: vibrant writing that explores the unexplored

Earlier Saudi female novelists—in the pre-1980 era—shared a simple artistic form and theme: romantic love (Alhazimi, 1981; Alqahhani, 1994). Their works were given minimal critical attention due to the fact they did not depict Saudi settings, characters, values, and more importantly, Saudi women’s concerns (Alnaami, 2009; Alsaqaf, 1999). However, since 1980, Saudi women’s fiction has evolved radically, and its themes and structures have achieved critical status as authors have begun to reflect on modernization and challenge taboos in a conservative society. In other words, Saudi female authors moved toward realism, as seen in works such as Rajaa Alem’s Tariq al-Harîr [The Silk Road] (1995) and Khatam (2001); Amal Shata’s Adam Ya Sidi [Adam, Sir!] (1997); Laila Aljohani’s al-Firdaws al-Yabûb [The Waste Paradise] (1998); Qumasha Alulayyan’s Unthâ al-Ankabût [The Female Spider] (2000); Rajaa Alsanea’s Girls of Riyadh (2005); and Badriyya Albishir’s Al-Urjûha [The Swing] (2010), to name just a few. While many Saudi female novelists challenge patriarchal authority and use it as a central theme, Alem’s novels utilize patriarchy within the context of other social issues, such as modernity, globalization, travel, and work. Alem’s works are rich in surrealism and symbolism; they are also highly realistic, as evident in Fatma (2002) and Covering (2005).

Alem’s fiction is not an independent stream, but a tributary of the main river of modern Saudi fiction, which seeks to escape its geographic boundaries. Carrying new thoughts which have influenced the perception of Saudi fiction and led to a broadening of the horizons of Saudi writers, Alem’s novels free themselves from the traditional images. Alem and other contemporary Saudi female writers have departed from the stereotypical landscape, where love and marriage are still key themes, to the adoption of unconventional narrative techniques and in-depth explorations of topics ranging from globalization, capitalism, and power/class dichotomies to racism and oppression.

Alem was the joint winner of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction in 2011 for her novel The Dove’s Necklace. Another Saudi author winning this prestigious prize—and the first woman of any nationality—is a clear indication that Saudi fiction has developed. Nourished by the press, Saudi fiction had acquired a certain popularity, though not yet global status. Alem’s fiction is an example of Saudi work that successfully fulfills all the artistic requirements but fails to maintain a high position in international literary circles. Changes in social and economic conditions have prompted the appearance of many great works of Saudi literature. Western critics, however, have reduced the diversity of experiences of Arab writers from different nationalities to a single “postcolonial” category, where Saudi literature fails to mark out its own space as its novels do not incorporate postcolonial discourse.

Alem managed to catch the attention of Saudi society with her masterpiece The Dove’s Necklace. The story takes place in a Meccan district, where the body of a young woman is discovered in the Lane of Abu Alroos (Lane of Many Heads), an old part of Mecca. The body is neither claimed nor identified, and people are horrified by the corpse’s decomposition and nakedness. The narrator describes the scene vividly: “In her death the woman was a breathtaking nude portrait, one leg bent and the other stretched languidly out, rebellious breasts pointing in opposite directions, reveling in the attention of the sudden crowd, who were captivated by the bloom of darkness between her legs” (Alem, 2010/2016). Detective Nasser investigates the death, and Alem weaves the plot with the characters he questions and the places he visits. Because Nasser is a resident of the district, he suggests as possible identities for the victim the names of two girls who have disappeared from the area. The first is Azzah, who loves Yusuf, a reader of history who knows everything about the history of Mecca. The second, Aisha, was in a car accident and was sent away to Germany to recuperate. There she fell in love with her German doctor, leading to long email exchanges. The novel has two main parts: the first takes place in Mecca and revolves around the
investigation of the murder. The second is set in Spain, where new characters, related to those in the first part, appear to affect the cultural history of Mecca with their international business dealings.

In his article “A Free Spirit in Mecca,” Jonathan Wright notes that *The Dove’s Necklace* is about “the oddness of being human, transcending place and time” (2016), and compares it to Euro-American literature such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*, and William S. Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*. *The Dove’s Necklace* frees itself from the religious aspects of its setting in Islam’s holy city of Mecca and tells a story of evil and extremism. The novel is important because it records the rapid changes in Mecca, the center of the Islamic cosmos, as it moves into modernity. On the surface, *The Dove’s Necklace* appears to be about a mysterious crime, but it dives deep into postmodern Mecca and registers the city’s transformation. Novels that take place in Mecca are rare. Alem manages to reveal an unexplored world, showing its traditions, history, and philosophy. A unique aspect of the story is that Alem gives voice to the Lane of Many Heads, making it one of the narrative voices that speaks to the reader to find the truth about the crime, and to provide a perspective of Mecca’s intricate traditions:

I’m the Lane of Many Heads, a champion at holding my breath; it’s a title I’ve earned through my enviable skill at confronting the impossible. Since no one ever bothered to dignify me with streetlights, I’ve learned to sit in the darkness, getting high on deep drags of the stink of trash and sewage, the clamor of discordant voices, like any old forgotten backstreet. I like to hold my breath for a few minutes before I slowly let it out through my mouth in rumors and legends and whispers of forbidden things. It’s how I torment the people who live here, how I’m able to send them trawling through their history for some antidote to the unholy gloom they live with, something to protect them from the atomic age that’s about to crush them. (Alem, 2010/2016)

Alem uses anthropomorphism brilliantly, and the reader, according to the critic Ayman Bakr, must accept the existence of the Lane of Many Heads as an active entity, not a metaphor, that moves people with a will as strong as their own (Bakr, 2019). Here, the Lane of Many Heads demonstrates people’s struggle with the present. People want to cling to the past, so as to escape their looming destiny. But history neither helps them understand their present nor prepares them for the future.

The legitimacy of history is questioned even by other characters. Yusuf, though he is presented as “a history nerd” who is passionate about old Mecca, does not trust history. Yusuf records his observations in his diary, which the detective acquires; one of its entries reads:

We were watching Mecca wake up, though Mecca doesn’t have to wake up because she never sleeps: she only dreams, of the prayers and the footsteps of circumambulating pilgrims. And the dove: we undo the collar around its neck and the dove shakes it off like a splash of water. The thread that connects me to you makes a rainbow out of these colorful feathers, fanning them out over the Meccan horizon. (Alem, 2010/2016)

Yusuf is passionate about Mecca. His passion is mixed, however, with a profound sense of disappointment and loss over the demolition of old sites to build an eruption of architectural bling. Yusuf is filled with nostalgia and deeply moved when he sees a photo of a *mahmal* moving through the streets of Mecca. Yusuf imagines himself being part of the *mahmal* in an attempt to reread history through such experience, because he knows Mecca has changed since the arrival of capitalist corporations that have sought to invest in the city.

Even more interesting is that the novel renders sociological, historical, feminist, and orientalist insights within the multiple worlds the author creates—realist, supernatural, fictional, and mythological—in a unique experimental practice. Critic Fawzi Suwailih describes *The Dove’s Necklace* as an experimental novel that has successfully presented social transformation using intertextuality and multiple narratives and settings, and that redefines reality by freeing itself from having the
events seen through the consciousness of a single narrator (Suwailih, 2018). Alem’s stylistic techniques and narrative are extraordinary. For example, the emails that Aisha and her German doctor exchange add an interesting aspect to Alem’s narrative. Nasser gains access to the messages, and reads them at intervals throughout the novel. In one email from Aisha, Nasser reads:

Tell me, why do you insist we find our own private language? Does my Arabic not get through to you? Do I not understand your German? That leaves us with broken English. Thank God you can chalk up my incoherence to the language and not a limited intellect. But let’s turn our backs on this talk and chatter. Let’s talk like people lost in a forest: don’t pretend that you can understand the forest that’s taken hold of you, but carry on walking; your feet plunge into rain-soaked earth, branches laden with last night’s dew graze your forehead, you bask in the scents of untouched blossom and greenery and submit to the forest’s entreaties, its gentle breezes. This is the language I want us to use to get to know each other. Talk to me like you talk to a trail; walk over me, walk over me and through me, in silence or chaos; run or tiptoe or crawl so that every muscle of your torso brushes over me; allow me to extend my tongue and devour you as you pass over me. (Alem, 2010/2016)

Aisha and Alem’s other female characters serve as windows through which Alem incarnates Saudi women’s concerns and values. Here Aisha defies the language barrier and shows her devotion to keep the relationship alive and strong. Even more noteworthy is how Alem challenges taboos by speaking to sensitive topics in Saudi society such as love and sex, indicating a bold adherence to realism. For a long time, Saudi literary efforts have been affected by legislative and restrictive practices that hindered approaches to works deemed sensitive in terms of their political, moral, or religious content. Saudi female writers were unable to liberate their characters from social and cultural constraints. But a new generation have broken the taboo and created a new discourse that speaks to women’s freedom of expression. Noura Alqahtani explains, “this new generation of Saudi woman writers often depict their protagonists as educated and intellectual women, seeking self-expression through their writing which liberates them from social and cultural constraints” (Alqahtani, 2016). Alem, and many other Saudi female writers, have been keen to express sensitive topics. Aisha’s message shows that she is a passionate and sensual person. Not only do her emails reflect women’s rebellious mood toward cultural traditions, but they also obstruct the narrative. The traditional detective story is intertwined with Nasser’s obsession with Aisha’s rambling emails, which slows down Nasser’s investigation.

5. Conclusion

Building on the appraisal of her work, Alem has contributed to the development of the Saudi novel and entered the debate around serious contemporary social issues in Saudi Arabia. The elements of postmodernity, such as psychic fragmentation, the blurring of fiction and reality, intertextuality, parody, and other narrative conventions such as magic realism and alternative history are part of many major Saudi novels. Saudi literary works have invaded the Arabic literary circles previously dominated by Egyptian, Syrian, Iraqi, and Lebanese writers. Khal and Alem are still preeminent, as their works are established, but more Saudi authors are achieving similar literary status, producing works that rise to the status of world literature. For example, Mohammed Alwan’s Mawt sağhir [A Small Death] (Alem, 2016) was named the winner of the 2017 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, making him the third Saudi author in less than ten years to receive the Arab world’s most prestigious literary award. The novel is a fictional account of the life and travels of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, the Sunni scholar, from his birth in Andalusia to his death in Damascus. Although A Small Death is a historical novel that moves away from any serious treatment of social issues in Saudi Arabia, it still enjoys great status thanks to Alwan’s creation of a beautiful piece of art that touches the reader’s heart and soul in a novel that relies heavily on character rather than plot to tell its story.
While earlier authors were sensitive to the religious implications of their positions, contemporary Saudi authors have pushed and challenged boundaries. Contrary to works from the first two phases, later authors, as seen in the examples of Alem and Khal, have created well-defined literary structures that mimic those of great international literature. It is evident that Saudi fiction has a lot to offer. The phrases “great literature” and “outstanding novels” often refer to works from Europe or the United States, neglecting outstanding novels from other parts of the world. Whereas this study does not question the novels that have made it into the canon, it calls for a transnational visibility of Saudi works and their relocation from the periphery to the center of global narratives. As David Damrosch writes: “In world literature, as if in some literary Miss Universe competition, an entire nation may be represented by a single author …” (Damrosch, 2009). This study has presented Saudi fiction and showed its potential to gain recognition worldwide. Through imitation, translation, and adaptation, Saudi fiction has become well developed. Khal's Throwing Sparks and Alem’s The Dove’s Necklace are examples of a Saudi literature that has grown in size and recognition in Arab literary circles, but the literary output of Saudi Arabia is far from being limited to these two titles. Many other Saudi novels whose regional successes attest to their talent and the depth of Saudi literature qualify for similar reception and broader recognition. This study has striven to declare Saudi literature and Saudi authors worthy of serious critical attention. It calls for a move toward collective literary actions that promise more visibility for Saudi fiction on the literary world stage.

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**Author details**
Mohammed Albalawi
E-mail: molbalawi@uj.edu.sa
ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2550-9439

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**Notes**
1. Roger Allen is perhaps the most important non-Arab writer in the area of Arabic fiction. Allen’s books are an important precursor to myriad studies on Arabic literature. He is also the translator of many works of modern Arabic fiction. See, Allen (1995, 2003). See also, Snir (2001) for a thorough account of modern Arabic literature.
2. Although in the West, Saudi Arabia is usually synonymous with Islam, the themes of Islam and/or Islamophobia will not be addressed in this research.
3. See for example, Lipsky (1959), Al-Hariri-Rifai and Al-Hariri-Rifai (1990), Long (2005), and Determann (2014).
4. The word “Arab” refers to people who live in the Arab world, contrary to the common misconception of characterizing Arabs as people who come from the Middle East, a geographical region that encompasses a wide range of ethnicities.
5. This novel chronicles the encounter between Americans and Arabs in an unnamed Gulf emirate in the 1930s.
6. In order to publicize Saudi novels, particularly contemporary works, certain methods might be used, such as organizing cultural events locally and globally to promote Saudi works, opening lines of communication between Saudi critics and their counterparts around the world, and marketing Saudi literature in Western media.
7. Khalifa & Elindy provide an interesting account of why Arabic traditions were not considered for translation (Khalifa & Elindy, 2014).
8. The Saudi literary scene witnessed notable counter-novels in response to the attacks of 9/11. Novels like Rih al-jannah [The Winds of Paradise] (2005) by Turki Al-Hamad and Hamoud Al Yateer fi Breda [Where Pigeons Don’t Fly] (2009) by Yusuf Al-Mohaiemeed are famous examples.
9. Some critics divide the historical development of Saudi fiction into four historical phases. They end the third phase in 2001 and argue for a fourth phase, which could be referred to as the “post-9/11 phase.” For a fuller account of the development of the Saudi novel, see, Alnaami (2009).
10. Egypt was, and is still, a highly influential cultural center. For a detailed account of the impact of Egyptian cultural and literary scenes in the Arab world, see, Shalan (2002).
11. The novel was renamed The Ship of the Loss due to censorship constraints.
12. The delay in the formal education of Saudi girls, because of tribal resistance to female education, was a major factor in the delayed emergence of the Saudi women’s novel.
13. At that time, Egypt was the center of academic learning in the Arab world.
14. The Baath Party was founded in Syria. It called for unification of the Arab world into a single state. Nasserism is an ideology based on the thinking of the former Egyptian president, Gamal Abdel Nasser.
15. The third phase also saw a rapid increase in the number of novels compared to the first and second phases combined: between 2000 and 2011 there were 576 works published.
16. Abdo Khal was born in 1962 in Al-Majannah, a remote village in Saudi Arabia’s far south.
17. The prize is supported by Britain’s Booker Prize Foundation.
18. Abdulrahman Munif has been widely translated and has received international critical acclaim.
Munif’s works include: The Trench (1991), Variations on Night and Day (1993), and Endings (1998). They focus exclusively on Middle Eastern history, especially oil discovery and its impact.

19. The Kiswah [the textile covering of the Kaaba] used to arrive on a camel’s back from Cairo to Mecca in a precarious journey inside a ceremonial litter known as the Mahmal.

20. See, (Schwartz et al., 2009) for a detailed account of the impact of censorship on the Saudi literary scene.

21. Examples of similar novels that have defied taboos include Rajaa Alsanea’s Girls of Riyadh (Allen, 2003), Zaynab Hifni’s Larn A’ud Abki (I Stopped Crying) (2004), Laila Aljahan’s Jōhilyya [Days of Ignorance] (2007), Umayma Alkhamsi’s Al-’Uwa’d (The Leafy Tree) (2008), and Badiyya Alibishi’s Ghadimiyyat Sharih a [Love Stories on al-Asha Street] (2013).

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