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Critiques in The Kingdom: Social Messages in Layla Aljohani's Creative Writing

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Abstract

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The Saudi Arabian author Layla Aljohani embeds social commentary about patriarchy, female subjectivity, the US-Iraq war, and racism in her creative writing. This thesis investigates her novel Days of Ignorance as well as her creative nonfiction autobiography As I Have Grown, which has not yet been officially translated into English, focusing on her rhetorical styles and paying careful attention to her invocation of morality and Islam in both works. Her works have been well-received in Saudi Arabia, so this thesis investigates possible reasons why her particular methods of rhetoric were both progressive and acceptable in the Saudi social context. The thesis concludes that she engages the national Islamic moral imperative which has demarcated the Saudi Arabian national identity since the solidification of power under Ibn Saud. Since its founding, the Kingdom has inextricably linked fundamentalist Islam to the national identity and the government has punished people who have opposed it. Aljohani, however, has never faced great criticism. Her characters claim that it is properly moral to empower women to an extent but irreligious to engage in violence or racism. Far from disregarding or challenging the Saudi Arabian religious-national identity, she invokes the Islamic moral basis of Saudi national identity to bolster social messages which qualify patriarchy, empower women, and condemn violence.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2019, the online Saudi Arabian magazine *Qafilah,* sealed with the logo of the state-owned oil company Aramco, released an op-ed about the new role of literature in the Kingdom. This article described creative writing as a "frontier" in which writers can engage "customary and existential issues" through "imitation, simulation, and description." The authors of the op-ed, Dr. Saleh Ziad and Manal Alowibel, claim that "the rising importance of creative writing characterizes the current cultural era in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." In Dr. Ziad's section, he even asserts that "the era of the novel is a discovery of freedom."[1] By making this statement, he claims that the current literary scene is demarcated by its liberty to engage with social issues. Although the word political is not used, the article argues that creative writing allows authors to comment on social, philosophical, and existential topics through their creative fiction. Shortly after this claim, Dr. Ziad presents a list of writers whose novels comment on social facets in Saudi Arabia. One such writer mentioned in the article by name is Layla Aljohani. In the conclusion, Ziad and Alowibel dub the new epoch the "era of the novel." They claim that social discourse takes place in literature and that Layla Aljohani is a significant figure in this conversation. This introduction will argue that literature is, in fact, a platform for social discourse in Saudi Arabia, and examine what that means and how censorship affects this. How readily do women participate in the literary sphere? What can literature offer in terms of providing a platform for social critique? And when is it decided that a comment went too far?

[1] Saleh Ziad, Minal Alowibel, "Al-Mashhad al-thaqāfī al-saʿūdī bayn intiṣār al-riwāya wa-buṭūlat al-qāri', *qafilah.com*.

In answer to the first question, the participation of women in the Saudi literary community has burgeoned within the last ten years. The period between 2001 and 2012 saw female writers publish at a rate five times greater than the previous decade, shown in the figure to the right.[2] This surge in publication coincides with widespread use of the internet. As the internet allows people to engage and transmit ideas from their own home, it offers a special opportunity to Saudi women otherwise relegated to the domestic sphere. However, the information in this table does not necessarily imply that men were publishing novels at significantly higher rates than women up until the cusp of the 21st century. While the first novel written by a Saudi female, Samira Khashugji, appeared in 1960, the first novel by a Saudi Arabian on record, al-Ansari, was published only 30 years prior.[3] The Saudi Arabian literary community began remarkably recently and, relative to other fields, in literature women have been able to participate from not long after its founding stages.

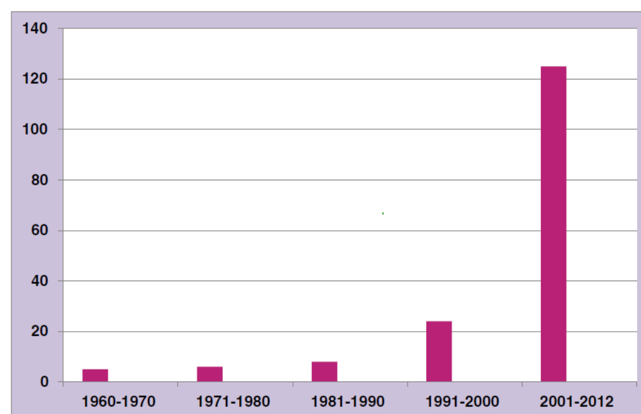

Fig. 1. The publication of Saudi women's novel.

N. Algahtani / Women's Studies International Forum 59 (2016) 26–31

Saudi writers developed an active community – the Saudi literary scene – around 1970, which correlates to the decade after the institutionalization of a public school system, to which women had access since its foundation. Before the establishment of public schools of Saudi Arabia, those who were writing were educated abroad. The Saudi public school system was

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[2] Noura Alghatani, "Defying convention: Saudi women writers and the shift from periphery to centre," *Women's Studies International Forum*, 59 (2016), 26-31.

[3] Alghatani, "Defying convention," 27.

established for both genders in the early 1960s.[4] The Saudi Ministry of Education's website proclaims that the government "has always recognized the right for women to be educated."[5] As public education affected literacy rates and the consequent literary community, and women could access public education, women have been able to gain access to the literary sphere. They contributed to the readership and, sometimes, the authorship. In 1970, the literacy rate in Saudi Arabia for males was 15% and for females 2%, but the school system revolutionized that. As of 2019, the literacy rate for both genders combined is 94%.[6] These statistics demonstrate how recent the base of Saudi readership developed. It is not true that men had been writing novels for centuries, accompanied by a recent surge of women's participation. Novels were a twentieth and twenty first century development in Saudi Arabia, which correlates with a rise in standard of living and an educated readership in the later decades of the 20th century. Not only have Saudi women been publishing at extremely high rates within the past ten years, but the history of creative writing is also extraordinarily equitable in its male and female participation.

Early female writers like Samira Khashugji, Huda Al-Rasheed, and Hind Baghaffer wrote throughout the 1960s and 70s. All of these women were educated abroad. They intentionally did not reflect Saudi society in their books, instead placing their protagonists abroad.[7] While their literary technique might be characterized as underdeveloped, these writers were pioneers. Both Western academic studies and online Arabic articles attribute the foundation of the Saudi literary scene to their era. A history of the developments of the Saudi novel in Arabic by Salwā Almīmān in *Dar alFaisal* magazine begins her account with this epoch of writers. Almīmān connects the

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[4] Madawi Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 95.
Mona Almunajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 63.
[5] Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia, www.more.gov.sa/openshare
Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, 77.
[6] World Population Review Literacy Rates, www.worldpopulationreview.com.
[7] Alghatani, "Defying Convention", 27.

development of their readership to the oil boom of 1973.[8] This probably refers to the fact that the seventies witnessed a massive accumulation of wealth and huge cultural reforms in urban areas. As the literary community was developing during this time, female writers contributed to the nascent stages of Saudi literary culture, but their writing did not engage Saudi political or social issues.

From these pioneers emerged a second generation of female writers who began to discuss their homeland. Among these writers are Amal Shata, Safiyya 'Anbar, Raja Alem, and Bahiyya Bu Subayt.[9] Alem's book *4 Sifr*, won a number of international literary prizes. Alem engaged historical customs and folklore specific to Mecca, but her literary style was "bombastic and she used unclear images", which probably added to a level of obscurity which rendered it apolitical.[10] After these women, in the 1990s, a generation of "Saudi women novelists started to draw attention to the importance of socio-political issues by focusing on reflecting the reality of their lives in contemporary society." [11] Layla Aljohani was mentioned by name in this list of writers from the 1990s who were willing to discuss Saudi society. About this generation of Saudi female writers, an expert on the history and politics of Saudi Arabia, Madawi Al Rasheed, stresses that their fiction has become a strategic platform for them to express their ideas because they can "hide behind an imaginary world, created out of fragments of reality, personalities, and historical moments."[12]

In addition to the scholastic attention this phenomenon has drawn, there is evidence from popular Arabic websites which demonstrate a positive perception of women's involvement and

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[8] Selwa Almīmān, "Al-riwāya al-saʿūdiyya al-muʿāṣira wa-taḥaddiyātihā", *daralfaisal.com*.
[9] Alghatani, "Defying Convention", 27.
[10] 'Abd al Rahman Muhammed Al-Wahhabi, *Women's Novel in Saudi Arabia: Its Emergence and Development in a Changing Society*, (Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 2005), 227.
[11] Al-Wahhabi, *Women's Novel in Saudi Arabia*, 273.
[12] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, 176.

integration into the literary scene. The *Qafilah* article from the introductory paragraph claims that in 2006 of the forty-one Saudi novels which had been published that year, twenty were by female authors and twenty-one by male authors. A public article in *Mekka Almukarrama* magazine listed prominent writers of the previous generation in 2015. Thuraya Alqabil and Mariam Baghdadi were listed along with eight males and, besides name and pronoun, no special attention was dedicated to their gender, as though there was nothing significant about including a female name on this list. [13] The online source *HiaMag*, which translates to "She" Magazine, corroborates women's contribution to Saudi Arabian literature in a blurb just before the biographies of the magazine's featured "Most Famous Saudi Female Writers".[14] Popular Arabic magazines seamlessly include women in the category of writer.

Now that women's participation in the Saudi literary scene has been confirmed with extensive evidence, the scholar must turn to an investigation of the topography of that scene. Many sources indicate that creative writing is a space for social reflection in Saudi Arabia. In an online review of a Ph.D. thesis titled *The Novel in Saudi Arabia: Emergence and Development 1930-1989* by Sultan S.M Al-Qahtani, the reviewer Abdulla Abu Heif claims that in the 1980s the novel addressed the cultural and historical changes.[15] Abu Heif explains what AlQahtani claims: "This [recent] generation of novel-writing began their creative lives by tackling the problems of their homeland through narrative art."[16] Al-Qahtani, and by extension Abu Heif, characterize the most recent generation of writing in their willingness to address national and social problems in

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[13] Farouk Saleh Basalama, "10 udabā' saʿūdiyūn ashamū fī ithrā' al-thaqāfa ba'd jīl al-ruwwād," *makkahnewspaper.com*.
[14] Abeer Al-Amoudi, "Man hunna ashhar al-kātibāt al-sa'ūdiyyāt?" *Hiamag.com*.
[15] Abdulla Abu Heif, "Nash'at al-riwāya al-saʿūdiyya wa-taṭawwuruhā tārīẖiyyan wa naqdiyyan," *alriyadh.com.*

their writing. In the dissertation in the middle of an argument about how Egyptian writers influenced Saudi writers, Al-Qahtani claimed:

> ‘Abd Allah Jifri is an outstanding example of those who appeared in the eighties, when Saudi Arabia offered a more favourable climate to writers, he began by imitating Egyptian writers, particularly in his use of the internal monologue and in his employment of Egyptian dialect. *This generation of [Saudi] writers started their creative life by treating their country's problems in fiction*. They made themselves familiar with the universal genre of the novel. To begin with, they imitated other authors, but, later, they established their own individual styles. Once they had mastered the rudiments of their craft, they were willing to experiment*, sometimes they followed convention, sometimes they defied it*. Depending at first on the cultural traditions of those they imitated, they discovered their own sources, artistic, academic and social, on which they were able to draw. *The obstacles that faced aspirant Saudi novelists have largely been set aside by these writers*.[17]

To document a historical phenomenon, Al-Qahtani and his reviewer understand the 1980s as a pivotal moment when writers began to directly engage Saudi customs. They began “treating their country’s problems in fiction.” Similarly, Salwa Almīmān from *Dar Alfaisal* magazine describes the recent developments of novels in Saudi Arabia as a “social movement.” A little farther down in the same paragraph, Almīmān purports, “for the novelist, the novel derives its fundamental strength from its absolute freedom.” This, along with the *Qafilah* article, confirm that two primary source Saudi-Arabian magazines have associated the current “era of the novel” with the word “freedom.” Thus, the *Qafila* magazine, Al-Qahtani’s Ph.D. thesis, Abu Heif’s review of it, as well as the Western attention which Saudi short stories have received in anthologies like *Voices of Change* and *Beyond the Dunes*[18], all assert that there is a relationship between the novel and the reflection of culture. All of these sources claim that Saudi literature

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[17] Sultan S.M. alQahtani, *The Novel in Saudi Arabia: Emergence and Development 1930-1989* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Glasgow, 1994), 117. The emphasis is my own.

[18] Abu Bakr Bagader, Ava Heinrichsdorff and Deborah Akers, *Voices of Change: Short Stories by Saudi Arabian Women’s writers* (Boulder Colorado: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 1998).
Minasur al-Hazimi, Ezzat A. Khattab, *Beyond the Dunes: Anthology of Saudi Arabian Short Stories* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

performs the function of reflection with perspective. Through creative writing, if not outright critical commentary, creative writing serves as a platform for social engagement.

Just as these secondary sources consistently demonstrate that creative literature is a platform for interpretive social engagement, one can demonstrate the same in analyzing various individual novels. In 1975, *East of the Mediterranean* and *Here and Now or East of the Mediterranean Revisited* by Abd Al Rahman Munif depicts political prisoners who struggle for freedom against a "dictatorial regime [which] creates an absurd reality whereby the individual who struggles for freedom is sent to jail."[19] For his opposition to the royal family, Munif was stripped of citizenship and cast out of the country.[20] Munif is considered a pioneer Saudi writer. In 1998, Turki al Hamad wrote *Phantoms of the Deserted Valley*, a trilogy about a young man who "is torn between family loyalty and his yearning for social justice."[21] Although in his youth al Hamad was involved in Salafi activism, later in life he was dubbed a secularist and Saudi liberal. After al Hamad published the trilogy, in which "the main character muses that perhaps God and the devil are two sides of the same coin," several clerics issued religious decrees against him. They accused him of apostasy and called for his death.[22] At that time Crown prince Abdullah offered bodyguards to al Hamad, but on December 24, 2012 al Hamad was imprisoned for tweets against the government. He was released in 2013.[23]

In 2004, Rajaa alSanea published *Girls of Riyadh* through a Lebanese press.[24] The two first scenes of the book involve four women drinking champagne, which is forbidden in Islam, and one dressing up as a man so that they can go to an Italian restaurant with no escort, which

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[19] Geula Elimelekh, "Freedom and Dissidence in the Arabic Prison Novels of ʿAbd Al-Raḥmān Munīf." *Die Welt Des Islams*, 52. 2 (2012), 166–182.
[20] "Abd Al-Rahman Munif", *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
[21] Kate Kelsall, "Lifting the Veil: Three Influential Saudi Novelists," *www.theculturetrip.com*.
[22] "Saudi Intellectual Dr. Turki al Hamad", *www.memri.org*.
[23] "Detained Saudi Writer Turki al Hamad freed", *www.gulfnews.com.*
[24] Rajaa AlSanea, *Girls of Riyadh*. Trans. Marilyn Booth (London: Penguin Books, 2008).

disregards the decrees stipulated by the religious council and the government about the importance of an escort, *maḥram*. Upon publication, *Girls of Riyadh* was immediately banned in 2005, but when major international success came from the book, that decision was retracted in 2008.[25] A final example is *The Others* written under the pseudonym Siba al-Harez, published in 2006.[26] *The Others* depicts a teenage lesbian discovering the lesbian scene in Saudi Arabia through online chatting. According to an Arabic online review, the book offers "harsh criticism for Saudi society."[27] Unsurprisingly, this novel was censored and banned.[28] However, PDFs of it are readily available on the internet. All of these books engage in political messaging and received negative repercussions including bans, fatwas issued against the authors, or complete revocation of citizenship.

Saudi Arabia does not guarantee freedom of the press nor due process.[29] An extensive list of people who have been punished for speaking out against the Saudi Arabian government can be compiled. Among the most famous are Raif Badawi and Jamal Khashoggi. Raif Badawi operated a website called "Free Saudi Liberals" where he advocated for reforms to Saudi Arabia's theocracy, calling for a separation between religion and the state and questioning the Kingdom's male guardianship system. Badawi was convicted of "insulting Islam through electronic channels" and was sentenced to ten years in prison and 1000 lashes.[30] After the first 50, there were international protests, so up to now the other 950 have been postponed.[31] The world will have to see if Raif Badawi is released in 2023.

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[25] Wenche Ommundsen, "Sex and the Global City: Chick Lit with a Difference", *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 5.2 (2011), 107-124
[26] Ahmed Mahmoud alQasem, "Qirā'a fī riwāya (al-āẖarūn)", *www.diwanalarab.com*
[27] Ahmed Mahmoud alQasem, "Qirā'a fī riwāya (al-āẖarūn)", *www.diwanalarab.com*
[28] Alghatani, *Defying Convention*, 30.
[29] Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia 2019", *www.amnesty.org.*
[30] United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, "Raif Badawi", *www.uscirf.com*.
[31] Billy Perrigo, "We are very worried Jailed Saudi Blogger Raif Badawi's Family Say…" *Time Magazine*.

Similarly, Jamal Khashoggi was a prominent Saudi journalist who, before his immigration to the United States, covered the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the rise of the late al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden. He went into a self-imposed exile in 2017 but continued to write a monthly column for the *Washington Post,* in which he criticized the policies of Prince Mohammed Bin Salman the de facto ruler.[32] According to the original records of the *Washington Post's* archive, Khashoggi published articles titled, "Saudi Arabia is Paying the Price for Betraying the Arab Spring" on December 5, 2017, "Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince is Acting like Putin" on November 5, 2017, "Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Already Controls the Nation's Media. Now He's Squeezing it Further" on February 7, 2018, "By blaming 1979 for Saudi Arabia's Problems, the Crown Prince is Peddling Revisionist History" on April 3, 2018, and "Saudi Arabia's Reformers now face a terrible choice" on May 21, 2018. In the last one mentioned, Khashoggi wrote:

> Women and men who championed many of the same social freedoms — including women driving — that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is now advancing were arrested in Saudi Arabia last week. The crackdown has shocked even the government's most stalwart defenders.
>
> The arrests illuminate the predicament confronting all Saudis. We are being asked to abandon any hope of political freedom, and to keep quiet about arrests and travel bans that impact not only the critics but also their families. We are expected to vigorously applaud social reforms and heap praise on the crown prince while avoiding any reference to the pioneering Saudis who dared to address these issues decades ago. …
>
> The message is clear to all: Activism of any sort has to be within the government, and no independent voice or counter-opinion will be allowed. Everyone must stick to the party line.[33]

As the reader probably knows, on October 2, 2018, Khashoggi was murdered in the Saudi Arabian consulate in Turkey. [34] In the United Nation's investigation of this murder, Special

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[32] "Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist's death", *www.bbc.com*
[33] Jamal Khashoggi, "Read Jamal Khashoggi's Columns for the Washington Post." *Washingtonpost.com*
[34] "Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist's death," *www.bbc.com.*

Reporter Agnes Callamard concluded that Khashoggi's death "constituted an extrajudicial killing for which the state of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is responsible." Turkish officials have proclaimed that 15 Saudi agents arrived the previous day and preemptively removed the security cameras from the consulate. Saudi Arabia first claimed that Khashoggi had left the consulate unharmed. That story lead to five agents admitting to the murder but maintaining that the crown prince knew nothing of their plans. The UN reporter, however, found that "there was 'credible evidence' that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and other high-level officials were individually liable."[35]

While Badawi and Khashoggi are politically charged, violent examples, the punishment of activists is not an uncommon action. Last year, in 2019, thirteen women categorized as activists by Amnesty International were brought to trial in a criminal court of Riyadh. Although Amnesty International does not offer a list of all names, it confirms that these "activists faced charges for contacting foreign media, other activists and international organizations, including Amnesty International. Some were also charged with 'promoting women's rights' and 'calling for the end of the male guardianship system'."[36] Eight of these women have since been released, but five continue to be detained. In addition to the example of the thirteen women, Mohammed al-Bajadi, a founding member of the Saudi Civil and Political Rights Association, has remained in prison without charge or trial since his detention in May 2018 until now.[37]

This type of action has a long history, which can be traced back several decades. On November 6, 1990 dozens of women in Riyadh staged a protest against the ban of women driving. All of these women were arrested for a day, had their passports revoked, and many lost their

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[35] "Jamal Khashoggi: All you need to know about Saudi journalist's death", *www.bbc.com*

[36] Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia 2019" *www.amnesty.org*.

[37] Amnesty International, "Saudi Arabia 2019" *www.amnesty.org*.

jobs.[38] One of the prominent activists and writers in this movement was Wajeha Al-Huwaider, whose story elucidates the politics surrounding activism. In 2003, she used to write for the Arabic language daily *Al-Watan*. However, in one article she claimed that Saudi Arabian citizens were feeling disillusioned and were looking to the United States for solutions to their problems. Her articles and a couple short stories were banned.[39] She now writes in English for the *Washington Post*.[40] In 2007, Al-Huwaider founded a Non-Governmental Organization, "Association for the Protection and Defense of Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia". In 2011, Al-Huwaider attempted to help a Canadian woman escape an abusive relationship. Al-Huwaider was briefly charged with kidnapping, which, among other things, testifies to the infantilization of grown women under Saudi law. These charges were dropped in court. A year later, after Al-Huwaider engaged in other activities to promote human rights, especially through the organization she had founded, Al-Huwaider was charged with a crime related to the Canadian woman. Although the charge was lessened from kidnapping to purposely inciting divorce, al-Huwaider was given a sentence of 10-months in prison and a two-year travel ban—after the case had already been thrown out of court the first time, and in direct contradiction to the Canadian woman's testimony.[41] It is understood that the activism was punished. Al-Huwaider exemplifies the dangers of speaking out against the government too directly. Aljohani published in this time frame.

This year, on March 10, 2020, Ben Hubbard released a book titled *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman*.[42] This book documents how the government has come to solidify political power in the age of the internet. All of this is to say that there are severe and

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[38] "Saudi Women Make Video Protest," bbc.com.
[39] Lucy Poescu, "Wajeha Al-Huwaider and Fawzia al-Oyuini," *literaryreview.co.uk.*
[40] Poescu, "Wajeha Al-Huwaider and Fawzia al-Oyuini," *literaryreview.co.uk.*
[41] Poescu, "Wajeha Al-Huwaider and Fawzia al-Oyuini," *literaryreview.co.uk.*
Shahla Khan Salter, "Canada Turned a Blind Eye to This Woman's Black Eye," Huffpost,co.
[42] Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed Bin Salman* (New York: Random House, 2020).

sometimes deadly consequences for speaking out too strongly against the Saudi authority. From these examples it is known that outright dissent, as in an editorial or a call to activism or a published piece which directly criticizes the king of the country, are considered by the government unacceptable and punishable. This conclusions is corroborated by the story of Al-Hamad, whose progressive literature was allowed but whose tweets got him in trouble with the government. Direct criticism is not acceptable in the Saudi context.

Therefore, when Saudi literature offers interpretive, even critical social messages, whether overtly or subtly, there is potential risk for the author. The reflection which literature has been performing for Saudi Arabia operates in an environment where, depending on interpretation, could have severe consequences. There seems to be a contradiction between the freedom associated with the sphere of creative writing and the dictatorial nature of the government punishing dissidents. If literature engages the society, as the scholars Ziad, Al-Owibel, Al-Ghatani, Al-Rasheed, Al-Wahhab, al-Qahtani, Halfawi, and Abu-Heif all claim it does, how does it toe the line of censorship? What messages are being propagated? How? These questions inspired my thesis on Layla Aljohani. This thesis will investigate Layla Aljohani's work considering these circumstances, focusing on what social messages are present and how they are delivered. This thesis will address her depiction of patriarchy, female subjectivity, and violence, which includes commentary on both international wars and racism.

Fortunately for her, Layla Aljohani has not experienced any significant negative reception. However, this thesis will argue that there are very concrete critical social messages in *Days of Ignorance* and *As I Have Grown*—but these messages are framed in a way which aligns with the Saudi Arabian national identity. Layla Aljohani even said herself in a letter to me that "When *Days of Ignorance* was published, Saudi Arabia was witnessing a wave of novels that issued on

several social topics, so I suspect that my book won its right from both praise and criticism. For me, I have always been far from any raised controversy about my books…"[43] This thesis will investigate why this is so. Who is Layla Aljohani? What are the messages in her books? And why were they acceptable?

Layla Aljohani, whose full name is transliterated in her email signature as Laila Saeed Soailem Aljohani, has published several novels and short stories. When *Banipal* magazine, a UK publication for modern Arabic literature written in English, debuted her work in 2004, Aljohani had published *Love Always Remains* in 1995 and *The Wasteland Paradise* 1998, from which an excerpt was featured in *Banipal 20*.[44] Her biography on their website explains that she was born in 1969 in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia. She earned a B.A. in English Literature from King Abdul Aziz University in Medina and an MA in foreign languages. Aljohani's autobiography in the English anthology of Saudi Arabian short stories *Beyond the Dunes* claims that she earned a Ph.D. from the University otalf Tiba in Medina.[45] Because of our email exchange, I can confirm that she currently merits a professorship at the University of Tabuk. Since the *Banipal* interview, Aljohani has written at least two other exciting works: *Days of Ignorance* and *As I Have Grown*.[46] The novel *Days of Ignorance* was published in Arabic in 2007 by a Lebanese press under the title *Jāhiliya*, a critical and fascinating choice discussed in the first section of the fourth chapter of this

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[43] Aljohani, personal communication. February 2020.
[44] Banipal Magazine: Magazine of Modern Arab Literature, "Laila Aljohani," *Banipal.co.uk.com*
[44] The publishers of Love Will Always Remain are a mystery yet to be solved. The dominant edition of *The Barren Paradise, al-Firdaws al-yabāb*, was published by an Arabic editor manshūrāt aljamal in 2006. The first edition was by munathama alyūnskū in 2005.
[44] Layla Aljohani, *al-Firdaws al-yabāb* (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2006).
[45] *Beyond the Dunes: An Anthology of Modern Saudi Literature*, Biographical Information, 517.
[46] Layla Aljohani, *40 Min Ma'na an Akbur* (Demam, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Darathar Publishing, 2015);
Layla Aljohani, *Jāhiliyya*, (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Edāb, 2007).
Layla Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, Trans. Nancy Roberts (Doha, Qatar: Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation publishing, 2014).

thesis. The word *jāhiliya* means "the times of ignorance," so the title suggests that the behaviors of the characters are negative and that they are ignorant of Islam. *Jāhiliya* was translated to English by Nancy Roberts in 2014, and for some scholars in America, especially the literary scholar Valerie Anishchenkova. The other work is a creative nonfiction autobiography titled *40 Fī Maʿnā ʾan Akbur* which literally translates as *Reaching 40: The Meaning of Maturing.* However, because the respect offered to people above the age of forty would not be culturally meaningful in an English translation, this text will be referred to in this thesis as *As I Have Grown*. The past tense was chosen to elicit its reflective qualities. These two works, the novel *Days of Ignorance* and the nonfiction creative autobiography *As I Have Grown*, will function as the primary texts for the thesis to come.

This thesis will use *Days of Ignorance* and *As I Have Grown* as examples of books which embed social commentary in creative writing. Aljohani's social commentary touches on, but is not limited to, patriarchy, female subjectivity, the US-Iraq war, and racism. This thesis will discuss the way her two books address, imitate, simulate, describe, and even subvert the list of social issues above, in that order. The second chapter of this thesis investigates patriarchy. The third addresses female subjectivity. The fourth addresses violence, which includes commentary on both the US-Iraq war and racism as well as some commentary on how wars have affected her development as a person. This thesis does not claim to be exhaustive. Nor does it claim to be definitive. However, as the thesis progresses, hopefully a pattern of social issues and specific perspectives about them in her creative writing will emerge. What issues does Aljohani address? How does she address them? Given that her depictions and portrayals were not censored and were reviewed positively, why are her rhetorical methods successful? This thesis argues that the primary pattern of argumentation is the invocation of traditional values, religious values, or Islam

directly. This demonstrates a traditional reform, as opposed to a radical reform. It seems that her depictions do not reject tradition or religion, but invoke them to further her progressive causes, checking patriarchy, rejecting domesticity, and ending violence.

Chapter 2: Patriarchy

Introduction

Saudi patriarchy is contextualized by the social system of pastoral nomadism which was practiced by the Bedouins tribes for thousands of years and a century of religious nationalism which united the country under the banner of the Saudi state.[47] While the pre-urbanized social system of the Arabian peninsula insisted on separate spheres for the sexes for thousands of years, the institutionalization of a national patriarchy was a development of the 20th century. During the conquest of Ibn Saud in the 1920s and 30s, as the tribes of the peninsula did not consider themselves ethnically homogenous, the common religion developed into the key factor that united the groups. Particularly, the House of Saud propagated a puritanical strain of Islam known as Wahhabbism, and framed conversion to the orthodox interpretation as a return to true Islam.[48] As the nation united under the common government, patriarchy grew into a national system. In his book *A Most Masculine State*, Madawi Al-Rasheed explains the transition between the two by professing, "The state and the Wahhabi movement gained control of the private patriarchy practiced in both the desert and the oasis, first through the *ulama* and later with the help of what is often referred to as the religious police ... Religion and power became inseparable, thus turning the Wahhabi historical legacy into a state project."[49] As Ibn Saud became recognized internationally as the king of these lands through the 1930s and as the discovery of vast oil

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[47] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State,* 53, 57.
[48] Leslie McLoughlin, *Ibn Saud: Founder of a Kingdom* (Hong Kong, China: Macmillan, in association with St. Anthony's College, 1993), 5.
[49] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State,* 57.

reserves presented a more and more enticing prospect, the religious council was firmly established as a governing body. Even in the state projects and progressive developments of the 1960s and after, the cultural legacy of the Bedouin tribes, coupled with the uptake of orthodox religion as a nation-building tool, permeated the social fabric.

The Bedouin tribes operated according to classic patriarchy. In classic patriarchy each individual, male or female, is designated a specific role. Valentine Moghadam defines classic patriarchy as "a pre-capitalist social formation" in which "the senior man has authority over everyone else in the family, including younger men, and women are subject to distinct forms of control and subordination."[50] Family structures in classic patriarchy are "extended, patrilineal, patrilocal, patriarchal, endogamous, and occasionally polygynous."[51] The woman moves into the man's house after marriage. The children identify with the tribe of the father. The marriage of a first cousin is acceptable to certain groups. In this system, "childbearing is the central female labor activity," and, "[The honor of women]—and, by extension, the honor of their family—depends in great measure on their virginity and good conduct."[52] Moghadam claims that "within the household [women] may influence their male patriarch informally, but that is their only access to power…if women sought public influence, they had to go through the patriarchs."[53] However, Madawi al Rasheed nuances this by emphasizing that the senior female, especially the mother or wife of a senior male, merits great respect and commands power over many subordinates, male or female.[54] It is not that all males command all females, but that the hierarchical system subordinates specific people in a system whose axes are age and gender. This social system

[50] Moghadam, "Patriarchy in Transition*", Journal of Comparative Family Studies.* 35.2. (2004) 137-162
[51] Moghadam, "Patriarchy in Transition," 144.
[52] Moghadam, "Patriarchy in Transition," 141.
[53] Moghadam, "Patriarchy in Transition,"141-142
[54] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, 54.

existed in many parts of the desert peninsula since before the prophet Muhammed and characterizes Bedouin customs.

It is recorded that tribal custom of the pre-Saudi Arabian Peninsula often demonstrated only a "rudimentary knowledge of religious affairs," coupled with "beliefs in spirits, folk magic, and minimal religious rituals."[55] Previous to the conquest by the House of Saud, if a Bedouin man found himself in a conflict, he would have had to travel for miles to seek an Islamic legal opinion. Most disputes were probably solved according to tribal custom.[56] Among the Bedouin, the tribal law served as the primary moral order.[57] Bedouin women were subsumed by kinship and local honor codes, in which men and elderly women monitored their women's behavior and protected them. It is verified that Bedouin women worked outdoors herding, milking, and cooking with their faces uncovered, which is a range of movement not afforded to these sedentary women of Saudi Arabia after urbanization. Tribal justice codes varied. However, specific social contexts and spaces were controlled by women, where they could practice rituals for healing, fertility, and marriage. These possibilities stopped, however, with the development of *hujjar* settlements, fixed campsites for Bedouins, over which Wahhabi preachers maintained control. While Bedouin women may have enjoyed greater freedom of movement, it is certain that they were subject to a social system with severe punishments for sexual misconduct. Despite their participation in economic affairs like trading, herding, or farming, Bedouin women were still subordinated to the will of their patriarchs.[58]

[55] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, 57.
[56] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, 57.
[57] Frank Stewart, "Tribal Law in the Arab World: A Review of the Literature," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19.4 (1987), 473-490.
[58] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, 52-57.

Ibn Saud began his campaign within the context described above. His conquest would "purify" the religious beliefs of the tribes he conquered. As early as 1918, in response to a rival named Sharif Husain who declared himself "King of the Arab Countries," Ibn Saud sent missionaries to convert the Ataiba tribes to his version of Wahhabi Islam. Sharif Husain, a rival who also tried to conquer neighboring tribes, abdicated his claims to power in October of 1924 and Ibn Saud captured the city of Jidda in 1925. In the late twenties and early thirties, around the time Western powers like Britain, Russia, France, and Germany were recognizing Ibn Saud as the king of the lands he had conquered, an insurgent named Duwaish, a powerful sheikh of the Mutair tribe, censured the king for irreligious actions such as levying taxes on pilgrims and tobacco—which Duwaish understood to be a prohibited article. Ibn Saud could not afford to lose income from the Muslim pilgrims who were being pursued by zealots, so Ibn Saud organized a bureaucratic body to settle religious controversies.[59] This bureaucratic body evolved into the *'Ulama*, a council of religious scholars preoccupied with Islamic jurisprudence., and the Committee for the Promotion of Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong which has enforced religious decrees since. Striving to create a properly pious state became an important, nationalizing political force. The '*ulama* considers issues and decrees a religious answer, called a *fatwa.* The Committee for the Promotion of Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong has a specific religious police force which enforces the *fatwas*.[60] The state-mandated guarding of morality parallels the function which a tribal honor code served, which might elucidate why people were so receptive and even enthusiastic about these institutions at their founding, even if the situations are different.

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[59] KS Twitchell, *Saudi Arabia: With an Account of the Development of Its Natural Resources*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 97-100.
[60] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, 59.

It is important to concede that proponents of the patriarchal system of the Saudi state maintain that this system protects and serves women. In the times of classic patriarchy, it was important to protect women with young children. It was important that a man provide for his wife and children. To this day, the state guarantees that as an obligation of marriage. Should a husband drink, sin, or insufficiently provide for his wife and children, she can bring a case forward, and the legal sphere will act to protect her. The Committee of Commanding Right also protects married women from their husbands engaging in extramarital affairs. If a man is caught in an extramarital affair, he too will be punished. In those instances in which Islamically sanctioned polygamy is practiced, the man is Islamically obligated to provide for both wives equally.[61] As the Saudi government modernized, it retained the values of protecting and providing for women.

To reiterate, in the nascent stages of the Saudi government, the House of Saud adopted the role of a religious, moral enforcer. This patronizing system continued the tribal system of enforcing moral codes that had existed prior to the development of the nation. As oil trade expanded massively in the 1960s, the Saudi government pursued relatively progressive projects which bolstered the national identity. These projects included public roads and public education for both genders, as discussed in the preceding chapter. In fact, beginning in the 1960s the government opened public schools for girls *in spite* of the will of some conservative groups.[62] King Faisal famously addressed a group of angry tribesmen who had thrown rocks at a girl's school building in the Buraida district of Najd, professing, "There is no cause for argument between us. As learning is incumbent on every Muslim, we shall open the school. Those parents who wish to send their daughters should not be prevented. Others can keep their girls at home. No

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[61] The Holy Quran 4:3.
[62] Almunajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, 63.

one is going to force them."[63] In keeping with the national identity, King Faisal invoked Islam in order to impose a social development. A roads system which connects the people who lived in relative geographic isolation, a core curriculum for public schools, and the tremendous wealth received from oil prosperity all strengthened the national identity of Saudi Arabia at the expense of the tribal identity. The imposition of the state at expense of the tribe invoked Islam in order to justify a political agenda.

As a reaction to these national projects of the 1960s, a particularly conservative reactionary period ensued between 1980 and 2001. A series of fatwas were issued demanding the moral excellence of women. In fact, the council issued more than 30,000 fatwas about women alone in this time period, responding to specific social issues and new patterns of behavior which came with urban development and prosperity from the oil boom.[64] In these *fatwas*, marriage was promoted as a religious obligation, polygamy was endorsed, scholarships for women to study abroad were restricted, and the *maḥram* became required for many tasks. Even as restrictions on women grew, any action that increased women's piety and morality were encouraged by the government, which considered piety and domesticity to be her proper spheres.[65]

Layla Aljohani lived her teens and twenties in the conservative period in the 1980s and 1990s. Her novels offer meditation and critique of her perception of this patriarchy. The characters whom she creates serve a function beyond their personal subjectivity. Even if Hashem, the antihero in Days of Ignorance, dislikes silence and enjoys eating rice with bread, and even if his father was an orphan, the significance of these characters extends beyond the creation of an entertaining sense of personhood. Clear evidence exists to bolster the interpretation that these

[63] Almunajjed, *Women in Saudi Arabia Today*, 63.
[64] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, 111-112
[65] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, 111-112.

characters personify different attitudes towards patriarchy as a means to embed social commentary in creative writing. Aljohani depicts a rational, respectable, loving male patriarch as well as a despicable one. She juxtaposes these two figures in her writing, which allows the reader to make value-judgments and interpret social messages. Aljohani respects the heritage and traditions of her culture while subverting the specific aspects which are unfair. The vision presented by *Days of Ignorance* and *As I Have Grown* is compatible with Saudi religious nationalism because it centers its arguments around the agreed upon moral authority.

Aljohani depicts those who are inspired by Islam as compassionate towards the rights of women. This might recall Margot Badran's analysis of Islamic feminism "who, Badran explains, articulates a discourse that relies on, "a single, or paramount, religiously-grounded discourse taking the Qur'an as its central text."[66] This is embodied in the character of the father in *Days of Ignorance*. She also depicts someone who disregards Islam disrespects women. This is personified in Hashem. Hashem is unworthy of respect, just like the fictional king in the anecdote from chapter 23 of *As I Have Grown* who loses respect. Because Hashem behaves badly, he is the antagonist. Because the king behaves badly, he loses influence. This chapter will delineate those aspects of the patriarchal customs which Aljohani venerates and the aspects of these customs she criticizes explicitly and implicitly in her novel *Days of Ignorance* and her autobiography *As I Have Grown*. The characters that she creates serve a function beyond their imagined subjectivity. Aljohani uses characters and metaphors to create a potent discourse of social criticism.

The Caricature and Critique of a Problem: Hashem

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[66] Sherine, Hafez, "Review of *Feminism in Islam: Secular and Religious Convergences* by Margot Badran." *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7.2 (2011), 114–117.

Hashem operates as the antagonist of *Days of Ignorance*, and thus his views and opinions are implicitly rejected. Hashem is the irascible, violent younger brother of the protagonist Leen. Hashem believes that Leen had a premarital affair, but their father does not believe this. Because punishing Leen would go against the will of the father, Hashem cannot act against his sister. Instead, Hashem nearly beats to death the man whom he believes has slept with Leen. The man's name is Malek. Malek is a black, Muslim non-Saudi citizen. Hashem's vicious attack on Malek is the central act of violence in the plot of *Days of Ignorance.* This paradigm reveals the complicated scenarios in which hierarchies of classic patriarchy contradict one another, as Leen is older but Hashem is male. There is an added layer of complication that Malek and Leen are in love but cannot marry, a predicament which will be discussed at length in the following subsection. Hashem perpetrates the crime which is mourned by the empathetic protagonist. Both online Arabic reviews and Valerie Anishchenkova's review of *Days of Ignorance* in the *Middle Eastern Studies* journal corroborate the interpretation that Hashem functions as the antagonist—Anishchenkova even dubs him "a repulsive spoiled loser," and adds that "there is also an overly neat 'good vs. evil' binary between Leen and Hashem": Leen is good and Hashem is evil.[67] The tension of the plot is exacerbated because the reader does not know whether Malek, lying unconscious in a hospital bed, will live or die. The story ends without any resolution and the reader is left to wonder.

Days of Ignorance is written in omniscient third-person narration. The interiors of the characters are described intimately by an external voice. It starts with the description of beating Malek nearly to death, then flashes back to Hashem's motivations and internal dialogue, which is

[67] Valerie Anishchenkova, "Review of Days of Ignorance by Laila Aljohani and Nancy Roberts," *Review of Middle East Studies* 51 (2017): 261-263.

repulsive and occupies the first fourth of the novel. Once Hashem's internal dialogue culminates in his act of violence described in the opening scene, Leen, the empathetic protagonist, steps to the forefront and tries to comprehend this violence. Leen reflects on herself and her brother, mother, father, and lover. She remembers that she had thought she would be in control of her life by the age of thirty, but realizes that she had been mistaken. These reflections are intertwined with observations about her family. Her mother rejected Leen once Hashem was born, because her priority was her son, who could offer her fulfillment. The mother's entire sense of self is predicated on her son, and his whims and moods greatly affect her, which Leen finds utterly pathetic. Alternatively, the father was overjoyed to have a daughter and prioritizes his daughter's thoughts, feelings, and needs. Leen reflects on him positively, and even keeps herself from going crazy out of loyalty to him. However, the father did not allow Leen to marry Malek, which hurt her very deeply but was motivated by love, as the father wanted to protect her from the burdens Malek bears. When Leen reads Malek's love letters, she emphasizes that Malek loved her for her mind and her unique qualities, not her physical beauty. After Leen's reflections, Malek's voice becomes the focus, but Malek does not offer his opinions as much as he recounts what happened to him growing up black in Saudi Arabia, imbuing his voice with martyrdom. Without any resolution of the question whether Malek lived or died, Leen decides she is living in an era of Ignorance, and descends into madness on the last page, screaming and mourning.

There are significant parallels between *Days of Ignorance* by Aljohani *and The Sound and the Fury* by Faulkner. Both novels are presented to the reader in a stream-of-consciousness omniscient third person. The reader can experience the divergences of thought and inner psychology of each of the characters, and the narrative can jump between perspectives seamlessly. In addition to this, a major tension of both novels is the woman's sexual life: if she

had a premarital affair, or that she had an extramarital affair, respectively. The deteriorating state of mind witnessed at the end of *Days of Ignorance* might evoke Quentin's deterioration at the end of the second part of *The Sound and the Fury*.[68] This parallel allows readers to understand the experience of reading *Days of Ignorance.* However, *The Sound and the Fury* does not have the same good versus evil binary which is represented in Leen and Hashem.

Aljohani's description of Hashem, his thoughts and motivations, is scathing. Hashem is so extreme that he forms a caricature, where negative features are greatly exaggerated. The opinions and behaviors linked to Hashem are the following: disregard for the females in his family, use of women for his own pleasure, incapability of holding a job or succeeding in school or providing for his family, disregard for his family's needs, extreme violence, and a disregard for Islam. Hashem is a caricature of a bad patriarch who makes stupid, hypocritical decisions and violent mistakes. In no passage in *Days of Ignorance* is Hashem explicitly censured independent of the perspective of another character. However, in one sentence Leen reflects that she is better than he.[69] The novel does not explicitly call Hashem evil, satanic, or wrong. Therefore, leaps of inference are incumbent on the reader in order to grasp the critique of the character of Hashem and to reach the conclusion that he is evil. That being stated, it is quite obvious that his character functions as a caricature, an exaggerated embodiment of the negative characteristics of patriarchy. Multiple Saudi reviews of the book understand him to be evil, corrupt, or lost. Also, the way his character relates to the rest of the text is negative. Exposure to his thought processes allows the readership to see the points which are being critiqued for themselves.

And it worked! The Arabic blogs and online reviews about *Days of Ignorance* vehemently criticize Hashem. The *alFaisal* review by Halfawi goes so far as to denounce Hashem as a,

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[68] Robert A Skaife. "The Sound and the Fury." *The Phi Delta Kappa* 34.9 (1953), 357–362.
[69] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance,* 77.

"violent, selfish, cruel victim of Satan's temptations."[70] The *Okaz* article calls him a "reckless youth" and explores why he is so terrified.[71] In a blog on *almuthaqaf.com,* the author says Hashem has a "sinful consciousness."[72] It is verifiable that these bloggers condemned Hashem and understood him as the antagonist. The body of online Arabic review pieces condemn and denounce Hashem, which means that they took the interpretative leap which this thesis argues was intended by the author.

The foremost factor which indicates that Hashem is a caricature is his hypocrisy. There is an egregious disconnect between Hashem's anxiety about his sister's premarital affair and the many instances in which Hashem had full intercourse with so many women that he cannot remember them! Furthermore, the author describes these two sentiments right next to each other in the text. The irony is made more emphatic by the juxtaposition. In one instance, Hashem recalls the first time that he had intercourse in a car. The next paragraph switches back to "teaching 'the animal' a lesson," referring to the way in which he intends to punish his sister's lover. The verb "laying" a woman is used in both contexts. Not only does Aljohani juxtapose his behavior with his outrage about his sister's behavior, but she also illustrates his sins with graphic details. Hashem recalls an instance when he takes a "little girl" at fifteen years old who he picked up in his car. He makes her wipe off her makeup before quickly satisfying himself in his own parents' house.[73] That is universally deplorable behavior. The narrative goes out of its way to expose Hashem's hypocrisy. Since Hashem is immoral himself while trying to control other people's morality, as though the national Islamic moral imperative only pertained to his sister, or only to

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[70] Khadija Halfawi, "Jāhiliyyat Layla al-Juhani: binyāt al-ḥaky wa-ʾanmāṭ al-sard," *www.alfaisalmag.com.*
[71] Muhammed Khidir, "ʿAn Jāhiliyyat Laylā al-Juhanī." *www.okaz.com*.
[72] Hussein Sarmak Hasan, "Al-Riwāya al-saʿūdiyya Laylā al-Juhanī fī riwāyatihā Jāhiliyya", *Almothaqaf.com.*
[73] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance,* 31.

women and not men, the caricature of Hashem impels the reader to wish that the national Islamic moral imperative be applied fairly.

Furthermore, Leen and Malek did not have a premarital affair. They did love each other from a distance and talk on the phone, but no sexual acts were ever committed between them, not even kissing.[74] In the instance where they are on the rooftop alone, Malek touches Leen's arm, so Leen stops him and tells him that she must go back. Hashem punishes as innocent person. Hashem does not serve justice. He punishes good behavior and commits bad behavior. The frame of the narrative urges the reader to think that he serves a hypocritical role. The hypocrisy of Hashem's character indicates that his opinions are invalid.

If one accepts that he is a caricature, one can turn one attention to the views with which Hashem is associated. Hashem does not accept the value of women who are not on the planet for his personal pleasure. Very close to the beginning of the novel, Hashem asks himself:

> What would life be like if God hadn't made [women]? If only He'd created them without their having anything to do with anybody. If only He'd made it so that they weren't mothers, sisters or wives. If only He'd made them for nothing but enjoyment![75]

What compelling questions! Why did not God put all the females on earth specifically for Hashem's personal enjoyment?! This is obviously a caricature of a bad attitude about women, completely void of any Islamic inspiration or moral imperative. It contradicts hadiths of the prophet which offer women equal value under God and verse 3:195 of the Quran which states "I (God) suffer not the work of any worker, male or female, to be lost." It also disregards women as Muslim believers. In the creation story of the Quran, God creates man and woman from the same *nafs*—a word that means person, personhood, or self.[76] Verse 4:1 of the Quran states that men and

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[74] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance, 98.*
[75] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance,* 15.
[76] The Holy Quran, 4:1.

women are created from the same spiritual essence. At the time this book was written, deep anxiety about developing piety as a woman's proper occupation permeated the culture. This anxiety was based heavily on religious passages which called on women to develop their spiritual selves. In light of this, Hashem's viewpoint is simultaneously blunt and irreligious. By establishing that Hashem is the bad guy and then associating him with this attitude, Aljohani condemns his perspective. Aljohani asserts the value of women as something more than adjuncts of men through a negative portrayal of Hashem.

Hashem's unacceptable attitude towards women is emphasized when he stares at women in his job at the handbag and perfume store. Hashem hates his work selling prayer beads in a kiosk because it prompts him to think of death. In contrast, Hashem thinks to himself:

> At the accessories shop, by contrast, death never passed by. Eyes passed by. Lips passed by. Hands passed by. Bodies passed by. But death did not pass by.[77]

This perspective is the gaze of someone who has separated body parts from the person herself. It is the illustration of objectification of women in the most literal sense. Women are objects. They are lips. They are bodies. Aljohani uses this gaze of the antagonist to assert that men should not objectify women. In the paragraph above this quotation, a friend says to Hashem, "Listen, boy. To get a peek at all those women is the chance of a lifetime."[78] These depict Hashem's and his friend's predatory attitude. Holding men responsible for gazing at women, as opposed to holding women responsible for tempting men to gaze, is an extremely politically charged sentiment. The Islamic veils of the women at the perfume shop were futile against the male gaze of Hashem and his friend. Despite the Islamic precautions taken by women, men stare as an act of their conscious will. This, combined with Hashem's reflections about how women

[77] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance,* 68.
[78] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance,* 24.

should have been put on earth for his personal enjoyment, places blame on the men. In the context of the "extreme, obsessive anxiety" about women as temptresses, words inspired by an essay by Khaled Abou El Fadl, which motivated many restrictions during the 1980-2001 period of Saudi society, this scene fights back.[79] When the men stare at covered Muslim women, the men are responsible for sexually objectifying them.

Finally, Hashem ruined his family. Hashem's actions cause great suffering for his sister, mother, and father, as well as for the man whom he nearly beat to death. The actions of Hashem broke the central duty that a man is supposed to perform: protecting and providing for his family. Aljohani holds little back in her depiction of how this irascibility and violence affects others. Hashem realizes as early as the first scene of the novel that, "If Malek died, he would die, too."[80] He begins to cry when he realizes that he will be punished. There will be a scandal. His marriage prospects will probably be ruined. He disgraced his family name—the one thing he was trying to protect. Hashem had justified to himself punishing Leen's suitor on the grounds that if word had gotten around that Leen loved Malek, there would have been a scandal. So, instead, Hashem nearly kills a fellow believing Muslim and causes a scandal. He causes the exact action he had attempted to prevent. Aljohani imbues his fundamentalist thinking with hypocrisy, ignorance, and pain. Hashem misunderstands the idea of protecting his family, and ends up hurting his family and himself very badly.

In her review, Anishchenkova dubs Hashem "one-dimensional and stereotypical" but also concedes that the strength of the novel lies in the "journey of the psyche into each of its characters," who are in order Hashem, Leen, the father, Malek, and back to Leen. While this

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[79] Khaled Abou El Fadl, "The Ugly Modern and the Modern Ugly: Reclaiming the Beautiful in Islam", in *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism,* ed. Omid Safi (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003).
[80] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance,* 4.

seems contradictory at first glance, this is an accurate assessment. His perspectives repulse the reader. His personal subjectivity is distinctly lacking, with the exception of the habits which his mother notices about him. He likes the TV on as he sleeps so he will not be exposed to silence, which, it is important to note, Aljohani venerates in *As I Have Grown* as a characteristic of internal peace. He eats bread with rice, which is not customary eating habits. He does not like being kissed, a trait that embarrassed his mother when he was a child. These antisocial and dissatisfying characteristics reveal a subliminal sense of being lost or confused, which is linked to his reactionary, violent, un-Islamic behavior.

Hashem, in contradistinction to his father, is not Islamically inspired. Hashem never prays. Hashem hunts pigeons near the holy precincts, which is a sin against the sanctity of the land surrounding the *Ka'ba*. Hashem does not use Islamic jurisprudence to make decisions. Hashem does not venerate God. Hashem does not submit to silence as Aljohani does in *As I Have Grown,* a characteristic associated with maturity. While the father is both Islamically inspired and compassionate towards females, Hashem is radical and misinformed. A man who disregards the females in his family, disrespects women, engages in violence, and neglects Islam, Hashem embodies a bad strain of patriarchy. He is young, inexperienced, irascible, and shows no understanding of or respect for the faith which he purports to uphold. He turns women into objects. He hurts his family. The character Hashem is a caricature of fanaticism and compels the reader to condemn him and his opinions. The social criticism which is offered by Hashem is a condemnation of his attitudes, and a disassociation of those attitudes from Islam.

The Respectable Patriarch: The Father

The father of Leen and Hashem is loving and just, and can be interpreted to represent a venerable patriarch. His perspective is the third section of the book, although that section is not rigid as it weaves in and out. If Hashem represents bad patriarchy, the father represents virtuous, Islamically- inspired patriarchy. He is named in the text Abu Hashem, a traditional honorific meaning Father of Hashem. In order to mitigate confusion, I will refer to this character as "the father." Many indicators in the text show that the father adjudicates fairly and lives up to his authority. The father protects his daughter. He allows the mother a great degree of control in raising her son. He is compassionate to the desires of his daughter and wants to help her lead a good life. He rejoices in Leen's birth. He trusts Leen to own her own objects. He would not mind if she drove a car. He believes Leen when she says that she did not have an affair. He encourages her education. However, he also does not allow her to marry Malek, someone marriage to whom he believes will cause her to lead a bad life, but he allows her to mourn for Malek when Hashem injures him. The father is Islamically inspired and attentive to the needs, foremost, of his daughter, and also of his wife, mother, and son. He only imposes his will on his daughter to the extent that it protects her. The father seems to be a respectable patriarch who is worthy of his position of authority.

The decisions the father makes lead to good outcomes in the plot. The father is caught between his various obligations and allegiances, but explains his reasoning logically in response to the familial framework he commands. Leen listens to her father and respects his decisions, as do the mother, Malek, and Hashem. The way that the other characters respect him, and the positive outcomes which most of his decisions cause, imbue the father with positive feelings. The reader can associate the father with smart, respectable decisions. Furthermore, many Saudi reviews propose that the father represents an empathetic character, which corroborates the

interpretation that the father represents an acceptable alternative to Hashem. One reviewer is Khadija Halfawi:

> The father's personality largely contradicts the son's. Far from compulsive parental stereotypes, we find great affection for his daughter and does not share the collective provisions that frame the society in which he lives. If he rejects the idea of marrying his daughter to a black young man, this is not related to initial objections about this union, but it stems from a self-awareness of the reactions that the matter will cause and a desire to maintain a good relationship with his surroundings. For this, we find him torn between the pain his daughter has and his will to protect her against all odds.[81]

This Saudi Arabian review understands the father as the antithesis of Hashem. Even when the father makes a decision which causes Leen great sadness, he does it, as the reviewer in this online Saudi magazine understands it, because of a "will to protect her against all odds," even with the understanding that racism is wrong. At the first moment he could, the father demonstrates his love for his daughter. He is overcome with joy at her birth. The scene of rejoicing about her birth also responds to the idea that the birth of a daughter is less exciting than the birth of a son, as "son preference has been demonstrated in the MENA region with different manifestations and at several phases of human development."[82] The Islamically-inspired patriarch of *Days of Ignorance* rejects this thinking. He rejoices at her birth. The specific passage which describes his thoughts venerates the baby girl, emphasizes that she is wanted, and incorporates religion into the occasion.

> [The father] thought back on the feeling that had come over him when the nurse brought him the happy news of her birth. God, it was a though it just happened yesterday. And today he suddenly realized that his daughter had turned thirty. Her grandmother had placed her in his arms and he'd recited the *adhan* in her right ear and the *iqama* in her left. As he did so, he'd been flooded with a waves of bliss that made him feel as though he were floating on air. Then he left Leen, her mother, and her grandmother at the hospital and headed for the holy precincts. He felt as though he ought to say thank you to God for the gift He'd given him…[83]

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[81] Khadija Halfawi, "Jaḥilīa Layla Aljohani banyāt alẖakī wa-ʾanmāṭ al-sard." *www.alfaisalmag.com.*
[82] Mesbah Fathy Sharaf, Ahmed Shoukry Rashad & Elhussien Ibrahim Mansour, "Son Preference and Child Under nutrition in the Arab Countries: Is There a Gender Bias against Girls?", *Middle East Development Journal* 11.2 (2019), 199-219
[83] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance,* 111.

This passage demonstrates a celebratory moment in which the female child is respected, loved, and wanted in conjunction with Islamic virtue. The father properly feels love for his daughter. This contradicts a pervasive notion in Saudi Arabia that the birth of a daughter is less valuable than that of a son. The father of Leen, who functions as a respectable voice of reason, behaves completely opposite to that. His love for his daughter is visceral and overwhelming. He expresses this love by bringing her to God, reciting the *adhan*, the call to prayer, in her right ear and the *iqama*, the passage recited before prayer starts, in her left. His daughter is a gift from God. Out of respect for that gift, which is out of respect for God, the father heads to the holy precincts to give thanks. By portraying the father as both pious and extremely reverent to his daughter, Aljohani unites valuing females with Islamic virtues in general. Aljohani insists that piety and respect for women natural go together by depicting them in the same, respectable person. The assertion of the value of this female character, however, operates within the patriarchal system. The father's love for his daughter occurs under his authority. The real patriarch respects and loves his daughter, and links the recognition of her prodigious value in his life to God.

However, the father, as a patriarch, is in charge of his daughter. He has the authority to tell her no, even when she is 30 years old. The father understands this responsibility and does not take this authority lightly. The following passage illustrates the way he understands his authority:

> [The father] had been close to her in the past, but he hadn't felt the need to protect her the way he did now. And he would protect her. He certainly would, even if he had to cause her pain the process. She would suffer for a while, then recover. Her recovery might take a long time. Yet that would still be more merciful than losing her forever. She'd been given to him once, and never again would he have another daughter like her.[84]

[84] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance,* 111.

There is love in his attitudes. The father considers his duty to protect his daughter greater than his duty to please her. The father's commitment to protecting his daughter is a patriarchal attitude, but a tremendous gap exists between this patriarchy and the patriarchy impersonated by Hashem. The father is authoritative. Even if his daughter is thirty years of age, she is still his daughter, which means that she has an obligation to obey. He also has an Islamic duty to keep her in the best place he can. This sentiment is predicated on the notion that the father relegates his daughter for her own good. Even if he causes her pain temporarily, that is still "more merciful than losing her forever." The father has the authority to cause her temporary pain *as long as* he also protects and provides for her. This is a reflection of the father's benevolent patriarchy. This sentiment will be more fleshed out with his opinions on Malek's proposal.

First, it is important to note that the passage stated above ends with an affirmation of Leen's individuality. The father must protect Leen not only because she is his daughter, but also because he would never have another daughter like her. This is an affirmation of her unique identity. In fact, this is a concession to individual female subjectivity, which the next chapter investigates, in the context of patriarchal authority. The father is burdened with the decision whether or not to allow her to marry Malek and to allow her to grieve for him precisely because of her unique spirit. The assertion of power over her is coupled with an understanding that she is an inimitable individual. But he nonetheless refuses the suitor whom Leen loves because he is black. This might appear irreligious if one does not hear his justification. The paragraph which describes the father's thought process is apologetic. The father says, "Other people will judge my daughter and I cannot subject her to that," implying that he would not make the same judgment, but that he is still responsible for preventing his daughter from being subjected to a bad reputation to the absolute best of his abilities. Malek asks him, "Sir, is it because I'm black?" And the father

stays silent, because "if he said 'no' it would be lying but he couldn't say yes." [85] This introduces a layer of discourse about race which illuminates and condemns Saudi xenophobia and racism, extensively discussed in the last chapter. But the father is not a target of criticism. He does not function as the antagonist. The father, cast into an unfair situation, must protect his family more than please them. The father condemns racism but perpetuates it under the belief that his daughter is too precious to be subjected to that scorn. Even if the father is not himself racist, in the instance that he cannot change a cultural conception he will protect his daughter, against her will. There is great love in that way of thinking.

> Father: Forgive me, son, but I can't just cast my daughter aside and let people destroy her.
> Malek: But sir, are you saying that if you let her marry me you'll be casting her aside?
> Father: Not at all, son. But you're enlightened and perceptive, and you know what I mean. The problem isn't with you. It is with the people who have no compassion. And I can't expose my daughter to that kind of treatment.
> Malek: And what concern are other people to us? You can stop them in their tracks. This is your daughter, sir, and her happiness is more important to you than other people. Or am I wrong?
> Father: Of course it is, son. But…
> Malek: But what, sir? You've given me your answer without even thinking. And without consulting your daughter!
> Father: No offense, son, but it is simply out of the question. I've told you that I can't let my daughter be treated that way.
> Malek: Is it because I'm black, sir?[86]
> [Father stays silent.]

Several notable patterns in other Saudi Arabian short stories written by women venerate and profess faith in the properly inspired patriarch who embodies the Islamic moral imperative. In "Tears of Joy and Sorrow" by Jamilah Fatani, a girl is taken out of school which causes her to endure a serious depression.[87] However, just at the point when the reader expects the protagonist

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[85] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance,* 114.
[86] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance,* 113-115.
[87] Bagader, Heinrichsdorff, and Akers, *Voices of Change,* 29.

to pursue some sneaky method to re-enroll herself, which would perpetuate the tension in the plot, she has a rational face-to-face conversation with her father in which she explains that she enjoys schools because she can "learn in a systematic way." The father listens, concedes, and agrees to re-enroll her, in accordance with a patriarchy which prioritizes the interests of his daughter. This demonstrates a relationship in which negotiation is possible and listens to reason. The plot abruptly ends with a wholesome scene of the protagonist walking across the stage at graduation. This short story features a female protagonist attaining what she wants through a patriarch. There is immense faith that the authority will do right by her.

Similarly, in "Duties of a Working Mother" by Wafa Munawwar, a mother struggles to complete all of her domestic duties and maintain her job as a teacher.[88] The husband introduces the idea of her retiring, but then she completes a list of domestic duties in a short time frame and explains to the husband that she enjoys teaching. She reminds him that her right to work was in the marriage contract. The husband listens, agrees, and she continues to teach. She appeals to the man's sense of reason, and he does right by her.

Finally, a third piece which illustrates a parallel phenomenon to the split between Hashem and his father is Hanif Kureishi's short story, "My Son the Fanatic." This story delineates the gap between a father who is having an affair with a white woman and his religiously militant son. While some differences between the characters of Kureishi's and Aljohani's stories are beyond the scope of this paper, in both stories the son represents militant fundamentalism in opposition to the father. In these stories, old patriarchy is a traditional system of justice. It is not a system of oppression.

Finally, this is reflected in the way Leen feels loyalty for her father.

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[88] Bagader, Heinrichsdorff, and Akers, *Voices of Change, 45.*

> When her father had come to the hospital that dawn, he hadn't said anything in particular. He had remained silent the entire time. Once or twice she'd caught glimpses of him squeezing the edge of his chair and trying to avoid looking her in the eye. She hadn't said anything, since she did not suppose words would be of any help to him, but for his sake she had resisted falling apart. That was the least she could do, she thought. Then she realized that she loved her father not simply because he was her father, but because he loved her in this different sort of way, and because he did not just claim to understand, but he lived that understanding. It pained her to think that for days now, her father had been the victim of a bitter struggle between his love for her and what her brother Hashem had done.[89]

The father loves her because he has particular reverence for her individuality. He checks up on her because he is deeply concerned with her emotional state and happiness. He understands her. His understanding is manifest in his actions. He is attuned to her desires. Now, this passage also introduces a new concept: that the father is caught between his obligations to his son and those to his daughter. Does he protect his son? Does he avenge his daughter? How will his daughter survive and retain vitality knowing that her younger brother would nearly beat to death the man she loved? The struggles involved in the respectable patriarch's obligations presents itself, but no solution appears. The father figure in *Days of Ignorance* respects women and God. His respect for women operates within a framework of extreme religious piety. The father is a traditional, loving, Islamically inspired patriarch, and the actions he takes when he empowers his daughter are compatible with traditional values and Saudi religious nationalism.

The Subversive Metaphor of the King

While *Days of Ignorance* is fictional, Aljohani's other book, *As I Have Grown*, is autobiographical, and the commentary she offers in it is immediate. In a fictional piece, there are layers of separation between a fictional character's opinions and the real world, but there is less

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[89] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 55.

separation in this creative non-fictional text. *As I Have Grown* consists of twenty-eight chapters, each about a page-and-a-half or two pages long. Each chapter addresses a different facet of the lessons the author has learned in her process of maturing. Among them are what it means to mature, how wars impacted her understanding of the world, why she decided not to have children, what the value of company is versus the value of isolation, how she has developed a propensity for silence, how existential doubt plagues her, and how her joy has deepened with age. The language is beautiful and ornate. It is assumed that the author is the protagonist, and she writes about her real history using first person pronouns.

The subversive metaphor of the king is found in the twenty third chapter, the primary subject of which is friendships which have withered away. It depicts an irresponsible authority figure who loses power, like Hashem. The king is deposed, *makhlūʿ,* because he is irresponsible, also *makhlūʿ*. The pun is clearly intended. As the king of this metaphor does not comport himself properly, he is not worthy of his power and loses an internal battle to silence. The criticism of an irresponsible king in this passage invokes the same message which condemns Hashem. In order to understand the mechanics of the metaphor, one must read the whole passage. My translation of the passage follows.

> As I grow older, my friendships also grow older with me. Some of them grow older in order to stay, while a few grew older in order to waste away, but how should I feel when an old friendship wastes away in front of my eyes, without my having anything to do or say about it? How should I feel when I see it, the friendship, as it dissolves day by day, not because of one offense of one person or one thing, but rather because it did not retain possession of what will make it last for a longer time? It has grown old to such an extent that it will necessarily die, and has ripened to such an extent that it is beginning to shrivel, and it becomes ready for its throne to the extent that it will no longer be able to bend – even a little – so that days full of my preoccupations, boredom, doubt, and disappointments with it all pass over it. Sometimes in front of my eyes it seems that when I contemplate it that an [unrestrained, irresponsible, or usurped] king, sitting every day on his throne, who does not think of anything except the fact that he is king, and does not see anything except the fact that he is king, despite that life—all life—has changed, and [he/ kings and paupers] no longer rules it—at least in my interior—neither kings nor paupers

> rule inside me in the least, so nothing rules [inside me] anymore except continuous doubt—a tormenting desire that very few understand, which is far away from everything and makes due with silence.[90]

One does not live in a monarchical state which does not grant freedom of press and then invoke the image of a deposed king lightly. One especially does not describe the king as an unwise, unhelpful person whose primary activity is sitting around thinking about nothing but himself. The cultural context of punishing writers who publish against the patriarchal governmental and religious establishment is well exemplified in the cases mentioned above in the introduction. So in this passage, it is significant that a king who once ruled inside her is deposed on account of a homonym. The major message is that, just as some of her old friendships fizzle out, a metaphorical king who controls friendship decisions loses his influence on her interior. But this passage could conceal much more than its surface message about friendship if one accepts the argument that the metaphor of a king is intended to convey a politically charged image

So, if one takes into account the fact that the stakes for speaking against the establishment are high, but that a metaphor of a deposed king who loses an internal battle to existential doubt is imbued with some level of political charge, then one is left to wonder about the extent of the political charge. This *makhlū'* king sees nothing but himself, so he is arrogant, and he loses his influence to doubt, so he is weak. Furthermore, even if the metaphorical king only represents an apparatus which influenced the author's interior, the actual king of Saudi Arabia and his advisors have taken up the role of a moral leaders, so they quite literally rule interiors of a person too—at least that internal apparatus which remembers right and wrong behavior, which is what this king of friendships performs. And the ambiguity of her syntax seems clearly intentional. Despite the

[90] Layla Aljohani, *As I Have grown*, 50. For the Arabic, see appendix I.

Saudi state's history of punishing writers who write against its authority, this metaphor applies to the figure of a king the principle that an irresponsible patriarch should not maintain power.

It is fascinating that Aljohani could include the image of a deposed king in her writing and yet receive no backlash. If one were looking at this passage from the perspective of a government official, a simple metaphor clearly pertaining to friendship must mean nothing bad. But the metaphor describes a good-for-nothing king who is disposed by doubt, and if only the second half of the quotation were cited, these lines could be very troubling to the governmental establishment. On the one hand, it is just a metaphor. On the other, it is a metaphor which challenges unworthy authority. Like the character of Hashem, the king represented is imbued with undesirable characteristics. The king is haughty, thinking that no one and no thing is equal to himself. The first action the king does is to sit on his throne. He does not fight. He does not adjudicate. He does not think. He does not command. He sits! The use of the word "sit" negatively characterizes the king.

The word "unrestrained", *makhlū'*, is the passive participle form of the verb *khala*'. The verb *khala'* means to extract, to depose (e.g., a ruler), to divorce, and to be morally depraved.[91] *Makhlū'* could technically mean an extracted, deposed, divorced, or morally depraved person. The dictionary gives the main definition of the direct object form *makhlū'* as "unrestrained, inhibited, wanton, wild, unruly, reckless, heedless, irresponsible, crazy, mad."[92] Describing the king as *makhlū*' simultaneously means that he has engaged in bad behavior, as evidenced by his loss of his influence over her interior, and that he has been deposed, also as evidenced by his loss of influence over her interior. As one reads this sentence in Arabic, the syntax strongly indicates that the subject is the king until the very last clause, when it is discovered that neither kings nor

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[91] JM Cowan, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 296-97.
[92] JM Cowan, *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 297.

paupers rule inside her. Only doubt rules inside her. If the author did not provide the signs for u-vowel suffixes on the words “kings” and “paupers,” indicating that they function as the subject of the sentence, a reader might not even think they were subjects. She leads the reader to believe that the king has been deposed until the last possible clause, when she clarifies that the subjects are kings and paupers. While the inclusion of the word “paupers” tones down the vehemence of this metaphor, it does not do so until the king is already so far implicated in the action that it seems like imminent criticism, constituting a case of brinksmanship. On the other hand, if the king were not *makhlū*’ it seems he would have legitimacy.

Ambiguous grammar and the use of a homonym convey the idea that a king has been irresponsible and has been deposed in the interior of the writer. The king loses to doubt. If a king who is irresponsible no longer rules inside her, then he has lost his legitimacy because of his irresponsibility. Like the character Hashem, who loses the respect of the reader when he engages in *makhlū’* behavior, the king loses his position for the same reason. The use of this metaphor implies that a ruler’s claim to rule is contingent on his proper comportment based on the moral imperative which nationalized Saudi Arabia. While Hashem had the distance of being a fictional character, this king has the distance of being a metaphor. Nevertheless, the idea behind both depictions is a call to true traditional religious values.

Conclusion

Aljohani’s social criticism of patriarchy in both her novel *Days of Ignorance* and her autobiography *As I Have Grown* is veiled and qualified in a way which makes palatable the criticism of patriarchy. In *Days of Ignorance* the characters are fictional, and the most progressive ideas like celebrating the birth of a daughter, allowing her to drive, encouraging her to excel in

school, and believing her when she says that she did not have a premarital affair, are attributed to the character of the father, a valid patriarch. The anxiety which is provoked by the character of Hashem as irascible, violent, and disrespectful towards women is mitigated by the character of the father. Furthermore, the author associates piety and inspiration by Islam with the character of the father but shows a disregard for piety and religion on the part of Hashem. She associates violence and disrespectful behavior with a character who disregards Islam, but gentle, empowering, respectful behavior with a character who venerates and practices Islam. In this way, she frames the progressive messages in the culture in a way which cooperates with cultural expectations.

Similarly, in the case of the metaphorical king, the layer of separation is that this comment operates in a metaphor. Because this king of her interior is unrestrained and irresponsible, he loses influence on the author's interior. This metaphor applies to the image of the king the notion that unrestrained patriarchy, like the patriarchy represented by the character Hashem. The message which can be inferred from this is if a king does not behave in a responsible, morally upright way, he will fall. While this message may not be acceptable in an op-ed, the metaphorical king is a figment of her imagination. And even if that sentence were to appear in an op-ed, it still maintains that a male authority figure will retain his authority if he acts according to the Islamic moral imperative that unified the nation and allowed the government power in the first place.

It should be noted that Aljohani herself does not agree with this interpretation, or at least did not admit to it in my email exchange with her. I asked, "…[As] there is a stark difference between Hashem and his father, how do you understand this difference? Would you say the father is worthy of his authority but Hashem is not? Would you say the father is a true Muslim whereas Hashem is not?" Aljohani answered:

> It is the difference of generations, the generation in which Hashem grew up differs from his father's generation in the way of life itself, and its well-being. The spoiled son will not

> be like his understanding father. Moreover the father grew up as an orphan, and perhaps this is what made him more understanding of his daughter Leen than her brother Hashem. The novel does not seek to present a picture of a true Muslim and a non-real Muslim, it is concerned with monitoring some reality without even entering into interpretations, explanations, or analyzes.

So, it might be that my interpretation is wrong! This response certainly complicates the assertion that she appeals to Islamic values. I believe that the characters obviously and consistently embody disparate social attitudes, corroborated by the clear “good vs. bad” binary which Anishchenkova described in her review of the novel, and that overlays with the common vision of “good” as in “Islamically correct”. Associating “bad” with “Hashem” invokes shame for his beliefs. I believe that Aljohani answered this question with a disclaimer about interpretation because the progressive social message is obvious. I believe that she wanted to keep the interpretation of the reader the fault of the reader and to avoid admitting that she intended it. I do, however, agree with her that a generational gap is a key factor in explaining the differences in their behavior, as do the three Saudi reviews in *Okaz, Dar alFaisal, and almothaqaf*. The difference between the son, who is described as lost and spoiled, and the father, who is described as benevolent and loving, suggests that the younger generation of men misunderstand the nature and working of patriarchy. Nostalgia for the older generation might be seen as content for reform by invoking history. Even with this response, I believe that the text conveys a scathing social critique of patriarchy, seen in the characters of Hashem, the father, and the metaphorical king.

Chapter 3: Female Subjectivity

Introduction

The preceding chapter defined patriarchy as a pre-capitalist social formation in which individuals are allotted specific roles based upon their age, gender, and social position, and these roles are connected in a hierarchical extended family network. According to Valentine Moghadam, a "predisposition to male dominance" relegates women to specific, domestic social roles in which "childbearing is the central female labor activity."[93] This chapter examines the ways in which Aljohani writes against the specific domestic roles which are considered women's proper sphere. The question of female subjectivity as it is depicted in *Days of Ignorance* and *As I Have Grown* focuses on those characteristics over which her characters or she can demonstrate conscious control. In this thesis, "subjectivity" refers to those characteristics which originate from a woman's own self as opposed to her socially-ordained role. Modes of being, methods of self-understanding, patterns of behavior, and personal preferences all indicate the subject. The opinions which prompt a female individual to accept, reject, or reconcile herself with the prescribed role to which she has been relegated can be a meaningful demonstration of her acting according to her conscious will and thus an example of her subjectivity. In contrast, agency is the ability to act on the conscious will. Even if her opinions do not assert her agency, they can be demonstrative of her subjectivity. Even silent feelings about or against the roles prescribed to her necessarily indicate subjectivity. The gap between a subject's feelings or desires and her ability to act on them demonstrate her agency.

The protagonists Aljohani creates in her writing demonstrate robust senses-of-self. The central, female protagonists exude the social-emotional complexity of real people. The primary

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[93] Moghadam, "Patriarchy in Transition," *144.*

foci of this chapter will be the character Leen from *Days of Ignorance* and Aljohani as she appears in the autobiographical work *As I Have Grown*. They elucidate female subjectivity because they are so complex, fleshed-out, and opinionated. In juxtaposition to these protagonists, Leen's mother Umm Hashem and the "other women" of *As I Have Grown* tease out parallels and offer the backdrop against which the protagonists distinguish themselves. Leen and Aljohani reject the notion of domesticity as the central female form of labor, but they do so in a way which is presented as compatible with morality and Islam. This rejection of domesticity is posed in an all-female discourse, in which the particular women who accept domesticity, rather than the broader establishment which propagates those values, find themselves the target of attack. The first section of this chapter describes Leen and Aljohani's rejections of domesticity. The second explains their demonstrations of agency, especially through writing. The final section investigates a path of reconciliation between women, agency, and patriarchal norms: aging. Through aging, a woman merits a position of higher social distinction, so it is unsurprising that both Leen and Aljohani cite aging as an important goal to be fulfilled. Aging is a method of acquiring social power compatible with classic patriarchy.

In the first section of this chapter on Subjectivity, titled "Subjectivity Through Resistance against Social Expectations," a hefty portion is dedicated to the question of motherhood. The narrator, Aljohani herself, considers and rejects motherhood. With the question of motherhood in view, the central theme of this section willbe how her understanding of motherhood offers insight into her rhetorical strategies. She argues that those women who think that every child represents a good deed under Islam misunderstand the idea of good deeds. This offers insight into the way that women influence and transmit social norms about women. The rejection of motherhood is an act of her conscious will, which is her subjectivity.

The second section of this chapter, titled "Self-Actualization through Actions of the Conscious Will," describes the fleshed-out personal preferences of the two protagonists. The crux of this argument is that the actions women take in accordance with their will substantiate, verify, or otherwise make real their subjectivity. This section will draw heavily from Anishchenkova's book *Autobiographical Identities in Contemporary Arab Culture*, arguing her framework about selfhood and expression is evident in Aljohani's work. In contrast to the first section, this section investigates how the protagonists actualize and assert themselves through decision making. There is nothing in this which is incompatible with traditional, religious values. The range of decisions they can make about themselves expands with age.

The third section of this chapter, titled "Subjectivity through Aging and Faith, focuses on aging as the reconciliation of the problem of frustrated subjectivity. This analysis is compatible with Moghadam's definition of classic patriarchy. Leen explains that in her youth she anticipated that by the age of thirty she would have surmounted all the obstacles in her life. The essential subject of *As I Have Grown* is the wisdom acquired through aging. The chapter ends with a reflection on the relationship between aging, agency, and faith, which brings the feminine subjects back within the socially appropriate context of a classically patriarchal system.

This chapter investigates the subjectivity of Leen in Aljohani's novel, and that of Aljohani herself in her autobiography. Both examples imply a woman's subjectivity by rejecting the role of motherhood. She can exercise her agency by making her own decisions. The progression of rejection, action, and reconciliation constitutes the essential relationship explored in the pages to come: that between the cultural fabric and the sense-of-self of the female characters in the two central works.

Subjectivity Through Resistance to Social Expectations

The third chapter of *As I Have Grown* explains why Aljohani did not want children. In the first sentence of the third chapter, Aljohani plainly states, "As I have grown older, I reached the age of forty without children, and with that my name will not be eradicated as the women around me think, and my life will not lead to emptiness."[94] The women around her think that her legacy will not live on because she has not had children, but her diction cleverly alludes to the Arab custom of referring to a woman as the mother of a firstborn son, literally eradicating her name. The use of the verb "to be eradicated", *yanmaḥī,* offers a negative characterization of this custom. Her name is a symbol of her identity, and her name would be eradicated if she had children: her identity would be eroded if she had children. The choice not to have children preserves her identity. Furthermore, the last clause "and my life will not lead to emptiness" anticipates criticism. It is not until the third sentence that the author phrases this sentiment as "my life is full." The difference between those two phrasings is delicate but important. The negative phrasing allows the reader to situate her stance in a contentious discourse. Through a single verb choice and one negative phrasing, Aljohani draws the reader into a conflict between herself and the social expectation with which she grapples. The author further claims:

> I had been preoccupied for a while with justifying to these women the reason for my aversion to bearing children, but eventually I came to understand that I was swimming in cold water, striving with almighty effort to reach uncertain shores, for these women and those who think like they do are not aware of themselves as I am aware of myself, and they do not see the world from my perspective, so I decided to simply smile, and to try to understand how these women believe* that giving birth is a serious matter, yet then they deal with [giving birth] so lightly?[95]

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[94] Aljohani, *As I Have Grown*, 9-10: Ānanī akbur, w'ablugh arbaʿīnī dūn ṭifl, wa-maʿ dhalik fa'n ismī lan yunmaḥī kamā taẓunnu niswa kathīra ḥawlī.

[95] Aljohani, *As I Have Grown*, 9-10. The word translated as "believe" has the same root as the words "aware" Full Arabic in Appendix.

This passage is bold and even accusatory. The people against whom Aljohani is fighting are not named. They exist as ghostly figures. There are many of them. They express the view with which Aljohani disagrees. They are female. On account of the ambiguity of the identity of the people who express this view—the ambiguous "they"—a reader can infer that the "they" voice is a perceived normative expectation. However, *hunna* in Arabic, "they" (fem.), is substantially less ambiguous than it is in English. The verbs in which the women engage are numbered plural and gendered female, so who thinks what is apparent. However, these women are not named. By using this "they," Aljohani creates a female choir to chant normative expectations about childbirth. But why is this "they" feminized? Have no men expressed to the author the sentiment that she should have children? Or is there something significant about posing this question in an all-female space?

Perhaps feminizing the "they" reflects actual women with whom Aljohani has conversed and reflects her own experience. Perhaps feminizing the "they" is a reflection of her own inner-dialogue. Or, perhaps feminizing the "they" circumnavigates the apparatus of male power in the Saudi Kingdom, drawing distance between her writing and the *fatwas* of the *'ulama*. Regardless of the way the author intended the work to be read, feminizing the "they" ultimately does deflect her critique and prevents it from clearly targeting the male legal religious establishment. However, to say that circumnavigating male power structures is the full motivation for feminizing the "they" would be to undermine the complexity of the transmission of cultural values about women through women. By describing the conversation about women through women, she empowers them. The choice to feminize the "they" might protect the rhetorician and empower the stakeholders in the discourse.

Furthermore, the strongest words operate in the metaphors and symbolism, not in the discourse. The author "strives with almighty effort" to "reach uncertain shores" when in metaphor, but she "justifies" to the woman her "reasons" on the level of the actual discourse. The word "justifies" can be read as judicious and impartial. The word "reasons" is broad. Aljohani uses dry, controlled language when addressing her audience, primarily composed of Saudi readers. The passionate "striving with almighty effort," is reserved for the metaphors. Passionate language illustrates what the experience of addressing the women with whom Aljohani disagrees felt like. But Aljohani does not assert that she strove with almighty effort against the women. Why is this so? Is it just that passionate language is reserved for relating the experience of her inner life? Or is the language "almighty effort" too strong to designate a voice which represents a normative expectation?

To further this point, the final question "[How can] they believe giving birth is such a good thing, then deal with birth with such lightness?" in the passage above offers a wide range of levels of condemnation. Sometimes lightness is good, as in jolly or jovial. The word lightness in this context, *khiffa*, is a common way to express that someone has a good sense of humor in Arabic, especially when someone is considered "light of blood."[96] However, this word probably means something deeply negative, as in negligently or obliviously. How can these women deal with giving birth so negligently? The wide range of meanings of the word "*khiffa"* reduces the intensity of her criticism of those women.

Aljohani presents a series of arguments to justify her decision not to have children. Toward the beginning of her chapter, she asserts that she "does not want to inflict life upon a fetus

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[96] Kristen Brustad, Mahmoud Al-Batal, and Abbas Al-Tonsi. *Al-Kitaab: Textbook for Intermediate Arabic with Website* 3rd Edition (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 191.

who does not wish it."[97] Is this compassionate? There are instances when a woman might save her children from life, such as in the instance of severe slavery which the book *Beloved* by Toni Morrison explores.[98] But in *Beloved* the protagonist's decision to sacrifice her children is tied to a deeply abusive circumstance involving American plantation slavery and an unhinged, sadistic master. From what unbearable circumstance does Aljohani wish to save her unborn children? Life. Why? In life, there is sorrow. But what sorrow for Aljohani would encourage childlessness? The reader is left to wonder, because she leaves her example as existential sorrow. Is referencing abstinence from sex or abortion? Is she trying to save her fetus from the material circumstances of her life? These questions do not seem to be answered. But the author does use the word "fetus," *janīn*, instead of baby. A straightforward interpretation might be that the author has an aversion to imposing life on someone else out of humility, because in a sense creating life is playing the role of God. She contradicts those women who think that bearing every child is a pious deed which they accrue to enter heaven.[99] This interpretation places her aversion to birth under a religious ethos. But the ambiguity charges the sentiment with many possible meanings. It also parallels a sentiment voiced in *Days of Ignorance* when Malek's suicidal younger brother screams at his mother, "Why did you have me, anyway? So that I could live in torment?"[100] However, unlike Aljohani's existential reflections, the feelings of Malek's younger brother are very obviously referring to the racism which he has experienced.

Shortly before the conclusion of her chapter which refutes the domestic duty of motherhood, the argument shifts from defensive to compassionate. Aljohani offers compassion by

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[97] Aljohani, As I Have Grown, 10.
[98] *Beloved* is a novel by Toni Morrison set in the era of the Civil war. After attempting to run and being caught, the protagonist kills her young daughter in order to save her from an abusive slave owner.
[99] The Holy Quran. 3:172. www.quran.com
[100] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 144.

ceding that motherhood is fragile, claiming "indeed, motherhood is a brittle paradise. Disobedient children can render [the paradise] remorse, sick children can induce torment, and the death of child can turn it into hell, and that is on top of the sleeplessness, anxiety and exhaustion of soul and body."[101] Motherhood is hard. Aljohani comprehends that and offers compassion and empathy to the woman making the sacrifice to raise children. To describe motherhood as a "paradise" constitutes a concession on Aljohani's part about the joys of motherhood. To extend compassion in a refutation is to understand the complexity of being a mother. Perhaps Aljohani is responding to the idealization and veneration of motherhood as the proper role of women in Saudi Arabia when she claims, "yes, motherhood is beautiful. But there are also many horrible, painful sacrifices a mother must make and there are serious risks she incurs." Aljohani offers a way to avoid these painful sacrifices: by not becoming a mother. She respects the trials of motherhood and politely declines. Aljohani empowers herself and her readers to understand the capacity of her choice. This argument softens her vehement rejection of unthinking motherhood. She extends compassion to the mothers.

Finally, Aljohani claims that the women lack her degree of self-awareness. When she uses the word which in the passage is translated as "believe," *taʿī*, she actually uses the cognate of the word *wāʿī*, "aware", in its verbal form, *yaʿīna*. The women are conscious that giving birth is a good thing. Or, their mode of consciousness stipulates that giving birth is a good thing. This diction implies that different people have different sorts of consciousnesses, different ways of thinking about life and themselves. Aljohani claims that her life is for her, not for children. However, she mentions that sometimes she doubt and reproaches herself for her way of thinking and calls herself selfish. She does not shy away from that criticism, and in fact imposes it on

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[101] Aljohani, *As I Have Grown*, 10.

herself. She finally concludes, “It no longer concerns me that anyone understand my difference or even accept it, not out of despair, but rather because I realized that the understanding that I seek is refractory, at least now, in this moment. As long as it is refractory, it is not good for me to drain my energy in trying to attain it, because most people only understand what they know and anything different confuses them.”[102] The word translated as “refractory,” *ʿaṣī*, could have meant “rebel”. It is a cognate of the word *ʿaṣā,* “to disobey, resist”. Refractory means unbendable or, in this case, stubborn. She is stubborn in her thinking. This might evoke the image of rebels. As the vowels are not written, there may have been a double meaning. In this, she wills her stance in contradistinction to a cultural fabric, and stands strong—or “rebels”—against those who criticize her for being closed-minded.

To summarize, Aljohani decided against becoming a mother, and she recognizes the personal and political significance of this decision. She believes that her life is fulfilling without children. She plays out a dialogue between herself and a figurative group of women who criticize her decision. She cites not wanting to inflict life on any potential child as a reason not to have one, which is a thoughtful perspective presented in contrast to those women who think every child represents a pious deed. This echoes Badran’s definition of centering arguments of empowerment around the Quran. However, Aljohani also says that she does not want to be a parent because parenting is hard and frustrating, which is a compassionate argument towards mothers. She lays out a coherent argument for her decision, posing it as a dialogue between herself and other women, and insisting on her dissent, but also recognizes women’s choices.

Days of Ignorance presents a similar dichotomy between the protagonist and an unthinking woman—Leen’s mother, Umm Hashem. The contentious relationship between Leen

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[102] Aljohani, *As I Have Grown*, 11.

and her mother illustrates two ways of living female subjectivity—expressing the divide above through writing. Leen develops a sense of self through books. Her mother develops a sense of self through her son, whom she spoils and who grows up to be violent. Leen's perspective about her mother is evident from the following quotations.

> If [Hashem] died, his mother would die too. She'd made him the pillar of her life, and the minute the pillar snapped, the sky would fall on her head. She did not know yet what he'd done [which is nearly kill a person]. But even if she found out, she'd understand why he'd done it, and she'd forgive him.[103]

And

> Once Hashem appeared in her mother's world, her life came to rest on three foundations: his health, his demands and his mood. The minute any of these three was shaken, her universe would turn upside down and the sky would change its color…and God in His heaven was no longer merciful as she thought Him to be.[104]

These passages illustrate a character whose sense of self is inextricably linked to her son. For Umm Hashem, her daughter could never be her fulfillment because she is a daughter. A daughter cannot perform the function which a son can because of the social roles prescribed to them. Her son was Umm Hashem's only fulfillment. This is why she is called Umm Hashem—the same critique in the first line of *As I Have Grown*; she used to be Selma, but now her name is "mother of Hashem." Her son was the key to "opening a woman's paradise." Is paradise separate for a woman? Yes. A woman's paradise is having a son, so that she can live with him and through him. Her paradise is void of her own accomplishments. His moods impact hers. His health affected hers. If he died, she would die too. She would even take his side in a murder trial and forgive him for committing murder. There is a serious codependency between the mother and her

[103] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 4.
[104] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 77.

son. The comment about forgiving him for committing murder is particularly pertinent because it encroaches on the category of the religiously sinful. She is willfully ignoring Islamic directives in favor of protecting, agreeing with, and following him.

Umm Hashem embodies those characteristics that are criticized in the third chapter of *As I Have Grown* because she validates her person by becoming the mother of a son and because she thinks it is a terrible, sorrowful thing not to perform the function of being a mother. Umm Hashem is a negative caricature. She is unthinking. Also, there is a deep irony in her failure to bring up a happy, healthy, respectable man. Her son turns out to be pitiful, spoiled, and violent. He nearly beats to death another Muslim man because he has an inkling that he had a premarital affair with his sister. A reader might be inclined to blame the mother, but that would compromise or excuse the severity of Hashem's personal choices. Umm Hashem just follows him. On this account, Umm Hashem, like her son, is *jāhil*—ignorant—as though she does not know Islam. Umm Hashem operates as a caricature, with exaggerated features, who functions to voice the same attitudes as the feminized "they" in *As I Have Grown*. To reject Umm Hashem or to view her character as lacking is to reject a social expectation. As Aljohani guides the reader to dislike Umm Hashem, she offers the reader the opportunity to reject the attitudes she represents. When Aljohani states her protests in the third chapter of *As I Have Grown*, she invokes the reader, too.

Some women accept child-bearing as their central labor activity. It might strike a Western reader as bold and rather accusatory to target the women who accept domesticity instead of the larger establishment which propagates these values. However, regardless of the target, the social commentary is obvious. The commentary, while scathing, considers itself as morally superior in accordance with traditional, religious values. Aljohani refutes a woman's primary domestic obligation by arguing that a proper understanding of Islam does not directly connect children with

pious deeds. Aljohani frames the worship of male children as heresy. Her arguments are framed around a culturally accepted standard of proper morals and yet propose empowering critiques. Unlike the domestic women who form the background antagonism of their respective works, Leen and Aljohani find fulfillment in themselves: through writing.

Self-Actualization through Action of the Conscious Will

In contrast to Umm Hashem, Leen derives her sense-of-self from her mind and from reading. Leen finds herself through her work. In the first quotation below, Hashem expresses his deep, latent kris of his sister because she is fulfilled. Hashem reflects on why she appears to be happy. This quotation precisely captures a mechanism which initiates a larger discussion of self-actualization through action.

> When [Hashem] compared his life to his sister's, he felt himself being stabbed by something small and hot. Her life was certainly not to his liking. But it had meaning- or so it seemed to him – since she had something to do, something to look forward to, something to dream of. It did not seem to him that she enjoyed her life away from her books and her work. However, she did not seem dissatisfied. Sometimes he suspected that [Leen] was never bored. When he saw her engrossed in her papers or books, writing or reading, or sitting at her computer screen reviewing something she'd written, he'd envied her, since he realized that she did what she did out of pure enjoyment. There was nothing in his life that he enjoyed that much.[105]

Leen derives meaning because she has "something to do, something to look forward to, something to dream of." This immediately recalls the idea of self-becoming through labor. Leen is fulfilled through her labor. Her writing is a product and exercise of her *self*. She is able to claim the products of her labor, her writing, as *hers*. The labor of Umm Hashem can never be *hers*. Her labor is her preoccupation with her son, who is an independent person, so the product of her labor

[105] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 29.

is an independent *he*. Not only can Umm Hashem never claim the product of her labor, but also she has subordinated her self to the product of her labor. Leen, in contrast, can fully claim her labor in a way that Umm Hashem never can. Leen is fulfilled through her life activity.

With regard to the unique subjectivity described in this passage, it is significant that Hashem admits that he would not find her labor fulfilling. The point is not that Leen derives a sense of fulfillment from a labor which is ubiquitously fulfilling. Leen derives fulfillment because of the connection between her labor, writing, and her exceptional self, the Leen who writes. Hashem could never do what she does. Her enjoyment is specific to her because of the unique characteristics of her being. And Hashem is incapable of finding his own fulfilling labor, which contributes to his feeling of being lost. In addition to enjoying what she does, there is a temporal aspect to Leen's fulfillment. Leen anticipates and dreams. The inferred subject of her anticipation is greater self-mastery through a deeper perfection of her writing, her love, her relationships, and her discovery of answers—although that is cut short when her younger brother nearly kills the man she loves. The temporal aspect of this definition concerns aging, so it will be discussed further below, in the final section about aging.

The process of self-actualization through action, and specifically through writing, is evident in chapter 15 of *As I Have Grown*, in the passage in which Aljohani seems to be talking to the man whom she married.[106]

> I have grown older, and you with me. I say to you in haste, "I feel empty"
> and you say with tranquility, "write!"[107]

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[106] I have not yet been able to confirm if this writer is married, but the verb tense would indicate that she is addressing her husband.
[107] Aljohani, *As I Have Grown,* 35.

Anishchenkova considers autobiography like *As I Have Grown* to be a "primarily cultural text" because "autobiographical production by Arab authors offers a personalized insight into the cardinal changes which have occurred in Arab sociocultural zones in the last one hundred years."[108] The manner in which a biographer describes who he or she is reflects the cultural narratives and manner of discussing the concept of self available to him or her in a greater context. Therefore, the manner in which Aljohani describes herself allows the reader to access the relationship between her self and her context. In this quotation, it seems that her husband is soothing her as she ruminates about her existential problem. This quotation demonstrates that she has a supportive husband and a loving marriage. It also prescribes action as a solution for emotional fulfillment. "Feeling empty" connotes a depressive episode or existential crisis, and, for the author, writing presents itself as a remedy to such situations. But the term "feeling empty" literally refers to a void in the interior of a person. The solution, filling that void, is writing, which brings with it all of the points made above about fulfillment through labor. This draws a strong parallel between Aljohani and Leen. Both are women who actualize themselves through writing.

Leen's subjectivity can also be demonstrated in her relationships. Leen reflects on why she loves Malek. While Malek is in the hospital after Hashem's attack, Leen rereads the love letters Malek wrote, which demonstrate his respect for her:

> She began reading [Malek's] letters and underlining the places where he had communicated respect for her difference, her mind, her ability to understand.
> [the letter said] I refused to get involved with women before I met you because I wanted a woman who was different: <u>a woman who would enthrall me with her mind</u>… They say that Muhammed 'Abd al-Jawwad is the most accomplished left-back in the history of Saudi soccer. They always like to use superlatives: the best, the most beautiful, etc.! They're free to do as they like, and I'm free to do as I like. So I say: <u>to me you're the most amazing woman</u>…a prostitute phoned me yesterday. She claimed

108 Valerie Anishchenkova, *Autobiographical Identities in Contemporary Arab Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 1-3.

> she was from Riyadh. I almost weakened and went to her. But I only remembered you. So I did not give in … Would it surprise you if I told you that your love has taught me to swear off racism?...[109]

The underlining is reproduced from the original text. Aljohani has purposely, boldly emphasized those sentences in which Leen's lover "had communicated respect for her difference, her mind, her ability to understand." This quotation asserts that she is something other than her body. Her self is that part of her over which she can exercise control. She wants to be loved for those aspects of herself which constitute her subjectivity. While these actions do not seem to invoke traditional values or Islam, they do not contradict them, either. In addition to that, one might emphasize the points when Leen prompted Malek to resist a prostitute and swear off racism. The comment about prostitution seems to be merely about Leen's moral influence. Leen is such an immaculate woman that Malek does not want anyone else. The comment about racism refers to the main tension of the *Days of Ignorance*: that Malek would never be accepted because he is not a Saudi citizen and, even worse, is of African-Muslim heritage. With Malek as the object of racist attacks, Leen's love affirms his worth as a person. Her love helped him get over the racism which he had internalized, while at the same time dissuading him from engaging in bad behavior. Leen helped Malek come to peace with his difference. It also affirms Leen's moral influence. Malek's difference is his race *and* his willingness to love a woman who is different. What is Leen's difference? Leen asks the same question in the quotation cited in the preceding chapter:

> Was she different because, if she wanted to, she could drive a car without her father objecting?
> Was she different because she'd managed to get her own ID card?
> Was she different because she traveled without an escort?

[109] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 91.

> Was she different because her cell phone and most of her other belongings were registered in her own name rather than that of her father or her brother?"
> … Now belatedly she knew her true size, and she knew what she had to be. She knew the boundary she wasn't to cross and that she would not allow others to cross.[110]

This list is powerful because it combines the respectable authority of the father figure with freedom for women, allowing women's rights to operate in a patriarchal, Islamic framework. First, the text was published in 2007, ten years prior to the declaration of King Salman recognizing the right of women to drive, and eleven years prior to the policy taking action.[111] Therefore, to list driving as the first difference is a rather bold taunt against the male legal religious establishment. However, the statement is softened by being presented as the father's opinion, not the dissident action of the woman. She is different because her father believes she can drive—or at least he would not mind if she did. This passage is an incredible example of subversion and a political statement embedded in creative writing. A fictional character, discussing her identity based on what she had been able to do and what her father would allow her to do, verges on agreeing with the guardianship system and the desire to end the ban on driving. Just as the opinions of Hashem are associated with antagonist, the opinions of Leen and her father are associated with sympathetic, respectable characters, and therefore imbued with positive connotations. The father and Leen believe in progressive measures. Through a character, Aljohani was able to weigh in on severe political controversies of the time.

The list does not stop there. Leen "managed to get" her own ID card. An ID card asserts the officially recognized existence of the self.. Leen navigated obstacles in order to acquire an

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[110] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 81.
[111] Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia Says Women Can Travel Without Male Guardians," *New York Times*, August 1, 2019.

object which asserts her being in the eyes of the state and society. Through these actions, she asserts her agency. Her *action* defends her *self*. Leen acts by and through the bureaucratic process. Leen asserts her existence and independence within the governed state through its own mechanisms. Leen is not a revolutionary who might disregard governmental procedures. She acknowledges and convinces the system of power to grant her an object which reflects and affirms her *self*. She appeals to authority to get what she wants. This process can be characterized as subversive. The anecdotes about the car and travelling assert free movement at her will which is the action of her subjectivity. Up until August of 2019, Saudi women were required to have a male escort to leave the country to undergo certain medical procedures to obtain a passport, or to work. To travel without an escort at the time of publication was illegal.[112] In this list, Aljohani's empathetic protagonist suggested partaking in illegal actions, but the book still found success and evaded censorship in Saudi Arabia. Perhaps this was accepted because the work is a fictional novel? But also, perhaps the influence of this fictional novel contributed to the decree last summer lifting the guardianship ban.

Finally, Leen owns property in her own name and asserts that this differentiates her from other women. This was unexpected, because the Quran endorses women owning property. In fact, the Prophet's first wife, who was the first convert to Islam, owned a business during the founding of the Muslim community and supported her husband as he preached.[113] It is also noteworthy that the Quran explicitly sets aside a portion of inheritance for the daughters of a deceased man, although that portion is one half that of sons. There is a very long history in the *ummah*, the Muslim world-community, of women owning property. It is therefore very significant that Saudi custom has made owning property in a woman's name difficult. Perhaps it is not the fact that

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[112] Hubbard, "Saudi Arabia Says Women Can Travel Without Male Guardians," *New York Times.*
[113] Montgomery W. Watt, "Khadija", *Encyclopedia of Islam of Brill*, 2.

Leen owned property which distinguishes her, but rather that *most* of her property is in her name. Perhaps it is particularly unusual to have a cell phone registered in a woman's name. I anticipate that this is because of the anxiety which accompanies the possibility of premarital or extramarital affairs and a cellphone's potential role towards facilitating that.[114] However, Leen's father trusts her to own her own possessions, including a cell phone, and to attend to the responsibilities of ownership herself.

The four differences of Leen all demonstrate agency. Having the capacity to drive, although bridled, owning her own ID card, traveling without an escort, and owning most of her property in her own name are all extremely progressive, provocative assertion in the context of Saudi Arabia in 2007. These assertions demonstrate or allude to action. The action is a manifestation of her will. Actions taken on part of her individual will indicate agency. The individual will constitutes subjectivity. However, they way they are framed did not cause any political controversy. For one, they're framed as questions. For another, the patriarch of Leen agrees with them. Also, this list is offered in the context of Leen having been punished and broken for her difference by Hashem when he nearly kills her lover. The narrative frame situates the message to posit many interpretations. Even so, the particular quotation demonstrates a list of demands predicated on *action* for *self*.

This section began with the definition "something to do, something to look forward to, something to dream of" and meditated about the connection between labor and validation. This initiated the assertion that both Leen and Aljohani can claim the products of their labor by

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[114] Bagader, Heinrichsdorff, and Akers, *Voices of Change,* 131. The story "I Never Lied" in the "Voices of Change" anthology illustrates the anxiety associated with a cell phone. A man on his wedding day asks his new wife if she's ever cheated or had an affair. She flashes back to when she once called a man as a prank call with her friends, fully anxious that that might constitute cheating. She decides it doesn't, though, and the story is named after the final phrase, "I did not lie."

knowing their writing is theirs. In the latter, writing is posed as the solution to feeling empty. Malek's letter to Leen asserted respect for the female self who wants to be loved for those things about her that she can control and also love. Finally, this section of the chapter ends with a list of characteristics which Leen cites as potentially demarcating her as different. This analysis investigated the process of self-actualization which stems from the exercise of the will through action. This either did not contradict the Saudi Arabian national Islamic identity, as Saudi Arabia has recognized the right of women to be educated since public schools, or it was appeased by the corroboration of the male patriarch in Leen's family. Actions of the conscious will were portrayed as being compatible with religious and traditional values.

Subjectivity through Aging and Faith

Age merits respect in a patriarchal system. Through accruing years, all people, but for the purposes of this chapter women in particular, are able to attain positions of greater social influence than those which were available to them in their childhood and youth. In certain relationships, the most obvious examples being those between sons and mothers, the male-over-female paradigm is subordinated to the necessity to respect elders. Sons must respect, heed, and treat well their mothers and older female relatives. Although subjectivity at the beginning of this chapter was defined as those characteristics over which a person can exercise conscious will, the characteristic of age affords a much greater opportunity to exercise conscious will. It is fully compatible with the patriarchal hierarchy. Given this situation, it is unsurprising that both Aljohani and Leen emphasize aging as an important factor in enabling them to fulfill their dreams. Leen explains what turning thirty means to her in the following quotation:

> She was about to turn thirty- her old dream. She'd begun to explore whether it was possible for a woman to reach the age of thirty without a husband or young child in a country where a woman's existence was only validated by having a husband or a son. She'd been waiting anxiously for her thirtieth birthday. Never once had she met a woman in these desert sands who was waiting for her thirtieth birthday or even thinking about waiting for it. But turning thirty was her unique obsession. During her teen years she'd thought it must be a magical event for somebody – anybody- to become thirty years old. So she'd started waiting for it, and what a long wait it had seemed to be…As for the sorrowful, they're the mature ones. The sorrowful are the children of life. She'd thought about all this. Still all she'd been waiting for was her thirtieth birthday. She had believed- thought she did not know why- that by the time she turned thirty she would have surmounted the obstacles in her life. And she thought she would reach that age with a heart that was still tender and glowing, a spirit that hadn't been broken, and wisdom that was still intact. *God, Leen! Where were you going to get wisdom thinking like that?*[115]

Turning thirty is Leen's unique obsession, because she believes that she will have surmounted the obstacles in her life by the time she reaches that age. What obstacles does she mean? A reader might infer from the passage that she means the predicament of only being validated through a husband or son. Turning thirty would, for Leen, be a passage from the naiveté and passions of youth to the age of wisdom, but not just wisdom. There is also a promise of agency in years. Accruing years in order to be able to surmount obstacles represents an accepted avenue by which women can obtain and wield social power. Leen had internalized this, but she did not anticipate the growing pains. Real maturity always comes with pain. Leen learns this when she realizes that she can never and could never be with her love.

However, Leen did not realize that accruing wisdom is a sorrowful process, so she berates herself for her own naiveté. The power to influence comes with maturity, and, as the quotation implies, maturity is cultivated by becoming inured to that which cannot be controlled. Namely, an adult has earned the right to make decisions because she has witnessed for long enough the good

[115] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 96-97.

and bad which comes from the decisions which were made outside of her control but affect them. Leen will be able to control her daughter's marriage, but not her own. The sorrowful are mature because they succumb to the will of the world—surrendered, like the word *aslama* or *istaslama* in Islam. This seems to be a contradiction, but it is not. The passage suggests that people only really understand the value of the establishment once they have lived long enough to find a good position in it. The paragraph distinguishes the propensity to feel strongly, act rashly, and be imprudent from a real, substantiated, and mature call for action. In youth one does not accept what one perceives as incorrect. In maturity, there is a silent resignation called sorrow. Leen must realize that waiting to enact what her will was at the age of twenty, with her tender and glowing heart, could never be, because the will changes with life experience. The passage explains that as one grows older, there is a positive correlation between the ability to influence standards and the acceptance of them.

The book *As I Have Grown* centers itself on the threshold of the age when a person is recognized as experienced: the age of forty. It also meditates for pages about the silent resignation which demarcates a mature voice. The literal title of *As I Have Grown* in Arabic is *40 on the Meaning I Have Grown Older* but, as stated in the introduction, I have dropped the number at the beginning because an English reader would not immediately perceive the significance of the age of forty. Crossing this threshold is a milestone of becoming wise, experienced, and respectable.

> I have grown, and this writing of mine is not counting my years nor a calculation of them. I have realized—not too late, apparently—that the value of my time lies in what I knew and know and will know [have found out, am finding out, will find out] about myself and about the world around me. My preoccupation with the years racking up will deprive me of the opportunity to know new things, and everything that I live now is the voracity* to know.
> Chapter 1, *As I Have Grown*

This is the opening to her autobiographical work. It introduces the major themes of the text. The value of her time is defended in the accumulation of her years. Her preoccupation with the years racking up will grant her the opportunity to know again. All that she knew, knows, and will know about herself and the world around her can only be understood through the experience of life. Therefore, she keeps living and learning. However, her writing is not merely an accumulation of her life lessons, nor are her life lessons unusual or unique. Her writing requires deep observation about what she has learned and relearned over many years. Aljohani emulates a reflective elder because she invokes her long experience to justify the value of the observations and reflections present in her prose. Her preoccupation with the years accruing allow her to reflect deeply.

As a woman ages, she is able to attain a position of greater social influence. Because of this, in both *Days of Ignorance* and *As I Have Grown* the protagonists cite aging as a necessary step to fulfilling their dreams. In *Days of Ignorance* Leen cites thirty as the age by which she expected that she would have surmounted obstacles. Of course, this is not true; as the novel explains, wisdom comes from becoming inured to the ways of the world—a distance akin to total submission to the world. The text strives to explain the ironic notion that as an individual's ability to command or to change standards increases, her acceptance of those standards increases as well. The development and acceptance of sorrow operates as a major theme in *As I Have Grown*, because its essential focus is the wisdom acquired through aging. Aljohani demonstrates her wisdom by her critical thinking about the significance of the accumulation of her years. This reconciles the original tension between agency and patriarchy, finding age to be a solution with is compatible with both systems.

Conclusion

Aljohani uses strong female characters to advocate for themselves, find a sense of meaning through writing, and reject the idea that domesticity is their proper sphere. The rejection of maternity is a particularly charged subject because of the dominant expectation in Saudi Arabia that woman's place is in the home, implying that she should have children and cook. Aljohani does not address the expectation that woman should stay in the home directly, but she does reject the idea that women should be expected to have children, and she does not portray herself or her female protagonist cooking or completing domestic chores. In fact, both women write in the house. This subverts the idea that women should be relegated to the proper sphere, as women these women technically are in their domestic sphere, but ignoring the duties associated with domesticity in favor of writing, where they can assert their autonomous self.

Aljohani also, just as she invoked Islam to refute patriarch, refutes the women who think she should have children by asserting that they misunderstand what constitutes a pious deed, implying that they are not correctly interpreting Islam. A similar message can be derived from the character of Umm Hashem, who is presented as an extreme caricature who worships her son to the extent that she enacts on unintellectual, immoral behavoir. Aljohani associates improper adherence to Islam with those views against which she fights. She invokes the Islamic moral imperative by associating a misunderstanding of Islam with a blind acceptance of male authority and domestic duties.

She also acknowledges that a woman gains more respect through aging. She offers a solution to the problem of accepting maternity as the proper sphere: to find a different labor activity. Aging offers a woman greater decision-making power. It reconciles what would otherwise be a tension between the social roles of these characters and their agency. Both of these

solutions operate within a traditional framework, well within the bounds of the Saudi Islamic moral imperative. However, for both Aljohani and the character Leen, there is a sense of dissatisfaction with this resolution.

The investigation of the feminine sense-of-self shows a subversion of the idea that woman's place is in the home by having the characters find self-fulfilling labor activities in their domestic sphere. Furthermore, a common thread of allowing reverence for Islam, or a discourse about the proper interpretation of a theme of Islam, guides the feminist arguments. The feminist arguments operate within the bounds of the Saudi Islamic moral imperative. Even when the relationship between age and agency was acknowledged, it left the readers and characters unsatisfied. This constitutes a response to imposed expectations about gender, but in a way which imbues these feminist arguments with a reverence for Islam.

Chapter 4: Violence

Introduction

The previous chapters analyzed Aljohani's representations of patriarchy and female subjectivity in Saudi culture. The intention of the previous chapters was to elucidate Aljohani's critique of her own culture through her writings. This chapter will focus on her critiques of issues which are not specific to Saudi Arabia, like racism, war, and international conflict. These disparate elements can be viewed as aspects of violence, another significant theme in Aljohani's work. The alFaisal online review of *Days of Ignorance*, mentioned in the introduction, written by Halfawi, explains how gender is a potent but not central aspect of Aljohani's first book. Halfawi states, "As is the case with many of the current Saudi literary productions, this narrative deals with issues and problems of human relations within society, where the debate on the status of women is emerging on a large scale, but it is not considered the main topic addressed, The main theme is [that of] racism."[116] This is corroborated in Valerie Anishchenkova's review of *Days of Ignorance*, which was published in *Review of Middle East Studies* in English. Anishchenkova agrees that "perhaps the most important contribution of the novel is a frank and nuanced discussion of racism and racial discourses."[117] Clearly, the cultural status of women is of concern in *Days of Ignorance*, but it is not the novel's primary focus.

The central theme of *Days of Ignorance* is racism. Similarly, the central theme in *As I Have Grown* is the process of growing up amid a cultural milieu of war and international conflict. Both are forms of cultural violence that shape the narratives of the books. Just as political commentary is embedded in the perspectives of the characters in *Days of Ignorance,* as well as in

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[116] Halfawi, "Jaḥilīa Layla Aljohani banyāt alẖakī wa-ʾanmāṭ al-sard," *www.alfaisalmag.com.*
[117] Anishchenkova, "Review of Days of Ignorance by Laila Aljohani and Nancy Roberts."

the news clips, the narrator in *As I Have Grown* embeds her commentary on war in descriptions of how those experiences affected her as a person. The play of major and minor themes impels the scholar to address those social messages about violence in war and racism within an explicit framework.

The title of *Days of Ignorance*, *Jāhiliyya* in Arabic, is the Islamic term referring to the time period before Islam. It brings forth an unequivocally condemnatory tone. It could be argued that it is condemnatory of every salient aspect of the text: patriarchy, male subjectivity, female subjectivity, women's ignorance, violence, militancy, war, racism, United States' foreign policy, and broader international affairs. The title suggests that these contemporary social issues are violations of the core tenets of Islam. It follows, then, that a return to the core teachings of Islam would end these contemptuous contemporary "days of ignorance." The first section of the chapter, *Age of Ignorance*, will extensively investigate the title and dating of *Days of Ignorance*, and tie the inferences which can be made back to explicit commentary in *As I Have Grown*. The second section, *War and The United States*, addresses the news clips at the beginning of every chapter of *Days of Ignorance* about the American invasion of Iraq, which parallel commentary offered in the autobiographical *As I Have Grown*. In fact, Aljohani explicitly describes how different epochs of violence shaped her in the disparate stages of her life. The explicit quotations from *As I Have Grown* have direct parallels in *Days of Ignorance*. The last section, *Racism and the Martyrdom of Malek*, illuminates how that pivotal event in *Days of Ignorance* unites racism, violence, and xenophobia: all important aspects of *Jāhiliyya*. These are the elements of cultural violence in the texts, and Aljohani's fight against violence is intertwined with a sense of a return to true religious values.

Age of Ignorance

As presented in the introduction, the Arabic title *Jāhiliyya* imbues the novel with negative overtones. It is not without irony that a Saudi Arabian author chooses to set a novel titled after the pre-Islamic epoch in contemporary Mecca, the epicenter of world Islam. The severe connotations of the word *Jāhiliyya* are lost in the less charged English translation *Days of Ignorance*, but are central to understanding the force of this text. The word *jāhil* means "ignorance." When the article *al-* is placed in front of this word and the ending -iyya, like English -ism, changes the noun to a situation, it specifically refers to the epoch before Islam. *Jāhiliya* as it appears in the book's title, sans the article, might be better conveyed as "barbarism" in the fact that it refers to ignorance in terms of an endemic, negative social formation.[118] *The Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World* emphasizes that the word *jāhiliyya* appears in the Quran multiple times to refer to the customs of people whose religion "was primarily animistic" and in particular those in Mecca who worshipped the female Goddess idols al-'Uzza, al-Lat, and Manat.[119] In a more modern context, *jāhiliyya* functions as a general negative characterization of non-Muslim attitudes. A notable example of this use is in the writings of the extreme Egyptian political activist and Islamist writer Sayyid Qutb who insisted that in the 20th century the world "consisted of but two cultures: Islam and Jāhiliyya, which included both the west and the atheistic communist world."[120] Some other Arabic words derived from the root are: *tajhīl* meaning "stultification" or "dulling" and *majhal* meaning "an unknown territory." The range of meanings this root has adopted reveal the complexity of its connotations, but all of them are negative.

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[118] R Faizer, "Jahiliyya. In R. C. Martin (Ed.)", *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World* (2016).
[119] R Faizer, "Jahiliyya".
[120] R Faizer, "Jahiliyya".

Even before reading *Days of Ignorance,* upon seeing this title, an Arabic reader would probably anticipate condemnation or critique in the text. Anishchenkova's review explains that the lack of the article *al-* "hints to the possibility of recurring and potentially endless 'Days/Eras of Ignorance'."[121] It is for this reason that I suggest an Arabic-speaking reader would likely recognize the subversive connotations rather than expect an encyclopedia entry denoted to Pre-Islamic Arabia. *Al-jāhiliyya* is a proper noun. *Jāhiliyya* refers to endemic, ignorant customs and practices. This form of the word, along with the dating of every chapter with the pre-Islamic months, and the fact that Operation Desert Storm serves as year zero "points to the First Iraq War as the beginning of the current identity crisis in the Arab world and to the role that American interventions play in it."[122]

The novel takes place in contemporary Mecca in Saudi Arabia in the year 2002. The modern world pervades the most holy city in the Islamic world with its "un-Islamic barbarism"? The title therefore has a bold implication. Who is barbaric? The whole city? The Saudis? The Americans? Lovers? Brothers? Does the title suggest that modern Saudis misunderstand or do not rightly practice Islam? How can the author get away with titling her book with such a charged word? The reader must assume responsibility for creating meaning by assigning *jāhiliyya* to particular aspects of the text. There are many characters, perspectives, and layers. Although the book strongly hints that Hashem is the antagonist, as was specified two chapters ago, that is still an interpretative inference to be made on the part of the reader. The book does not explicitly state "Hashem is Ignorant," but the situation is dubbed "An Age of Ignorance." The word "Ignorance" lifts the guilt from any one person and applies it to the entire contemporary culture that allows such actions and situations. It transfers blame from a single antagonist to the entire society, or at

[121] Anishchenkova, "Review of Days of Ignorance by Laila Aljohani and Nancy Roberts", 262.
[122] Anishchenkova, "Review of Days of Ignorance by Laila Aljohani and Nancy Roberts", 262.

least to a large swath of society, which has lost its way and has become so un-Islamic that it has fallen into *jāhiliyya*. There is no resolution to the story. There is simply a situation and condemnation. This begs the readers to interpret the meaning for themselves.

The word *jāhiliyya,* as opposed to another condemnatory title, is specifically charged with reverence for Islam. As veneration of Islam engages Saudi religious nationalism, it might be that that the work's interpretative ambiguity, combined with its religious overtones, allows for such a scathing title to be acceptable in the social context. Aljohani's critique operates *from* a religious perspective, not *against* the religious perspective. If the accusation of *jāhil* only meant "ignorant" in the English sense, then the title would have no redeeming qualities in the eyes of governmental censorship. Instead, the condemnation of j*āhiliyya* means fallen-from-Islam. The terrible, un-Islamic behaviors exhibited by the characters are worthy of being condemned precisely because they are un-Islamic. The positive reception of *Jāhiliyya* leaves scholars to reconcile the progressive or negative messages with the conservative social fabric. But it might be offered as an interpretation that as the Saudi Arabian government developed a national identity through the strict interpretation of Islam, an accusation like *jāhiliyya* might actually bolster Muslim religious identity, which constitutes Saudi national identity. An invitation to adopt proper Islamic practices fits nicely into the development of the Saudi nation.

To continue to bolster the idea that there is something deeply wrong with the situation being presented, the chapters and subsections are dated with the pre-Islamic calendar months. Saudi Arabia normally uses Hijri calendar, the standard Islamic calendar, for which the focal point of time is the flight of the Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD. The motns of the Hijri calendar are: al-Muḥarram, Ṣafar, Rabīʿ al-ʾAwwal, Rabīʿ ath-Thānī, Jumādā al-ʾAwwal, Jumādā ath-Thāniyah, Rajab, Shaʿbān, Ramaḍān, Shawwāl, Dhū al-Qaʿdah, and Dhū

al-Ḥijjah. These months, the normal Islamic calendar, are not used. Instead, the pre-Islamic months are used in *Days of Ignorance*. They are: Muʾtamir, Nājir, Khawwān, Wabṣān, Hanīn, Rubbā, Munṣil al-ʾAsinnah or al-Muḥarram, ʿĀdhil, Nātiq, Waʿil, Warnah, Burak or Maymūn. By abandoning the Hijri calendar, she claims that the focal point has been distorted. This is emphasized by the fact that underneath the pre-Islamic dates in every chapter title lies the phrase "12 years after Desert Storm." The world has descended into an age of ignorance with the American invasion as its focal point. The dating persistently imbues the events of the novel, which take place in the contemporary era, with a negative, un-Islamic undertone. The event which demarcated the coming Age of Ignorance is the war in Iraq.

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War and the United States

Days of Ignorance censures the United States government for invading Iraq, but in a subtle, sophisticated manner. Before every chapter begins, a paragraph-long news clip chronicles a development leading up to the invasion of Iraq, culminating in the invasion, at which point Leen goes mad. These paragraphs sit between the dates and the main body of text. These news clips do not relate to the main narrative. Nor does the author offer any explicit interpretation—not even through the pathetic fallacy, as in commentary on an emotional state by description of weather, or other tropes of literature which would insinuate mood. The only explicit information the news clips offer is a factual chronicle of what happened. However, the narrative arc of the story depicts deep injustice.

The news reports chronicle the historical political events leading up to the invasion. In the first, the White House announces that Iraq violated United Nations weapons policies. The clip does not claim that Iraq actually violated any such policies. It just chronicles the fact that the

United States government issued this claim, foreshadowing a dishonest *casus belli*. In the next clip, the Pentagon relocates troops from Turkey to northern Iraq but denies having taken any action. The scene affirms that troops—many troops—have situated themselves in strategic locations and offered funds to tribal leaders to distance themselves from President Saddam Hussein. These are acts of war taken under the pretense of peace. These are dishonest actions. In the next report, the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei, professes, "There is nothing to indicate that Iraq possesses any banned weapons". Nevertheless, he assures the public there will be a thorough investigation. Following that, at the beginning of chapter 5, the scene cuts to U.S. university students protesting the war. However, "some observers believe that the students who are apathetic about the issues still outnumber the activists who are losing sleep over the possible outbreak of this conflict."[123] This phrasing suggests a disappointment at the circumstance that more students are not rising up. In the next report, Iraq challenges the United States' claims, offering a huge file of documents which corroborate that their weapons policies are "up-to-date, precise, comprehensive, truthful,"[124] and compatible with United Nations' regulations. The advisor who is speaking "hopes" that the declaration "will meet with the approval of the United States." Nearing the end, the news clip describes a "virtual war" breaking out in Qatar in preparation for the U.S. military strikes in Iraq. Finally, just before the last chapter of the novel, a news story reports that US and British forces launch several devastating raids on Baghdad with warning sirens, rockets, and pillars of smoke. There is no resolution. There is just the chronicle of what is portrayed as a dishonest and truly unjust attack.

[123] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 95.
[124] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 105.

These news clips present the United States as the first example of ignorance, which solicits a relatively simple interpretation. The United States, for this author, is a pronounced example of a nation which is *jāhil.* In this, her view is in accord with those of many other inhabitants of the region, as shown by sources which document anti-American sentiments through the investigation of social media accounts and interviews.[125] These studies demonstrate that resentment against these scholarly sources is pervasive . In this sense, positioning the United States as the first example of *jāhiliya* seems predictable. It might even function as a rhetorical starting point which sparks interest in the reader. However, Saudi Arabia has a uniquely functional relationship with the United States, though her work does not depict that. It is likely that the political message Aljohani intended was to associate ignorance with the United States' decision to invade Iraq, and to suggest that association with the United States in general. It would thus align with the political opinions of Saudi religious scholars, most of whom reject Western customs in favor of Islamic ones. Resentment against the United States, especially in the context of the invasion of Iraq, might not be radical. However, the United States' invasion of Iraq did render obsolete a perceived dangerous power in the region, which would have been beneficial to the government of Saudi Arabia. If this is so, then Aljohani criticizes this perspective by portraying the story as unjust.

However, one should not reduce the profundity of these news clips by labeling them simply as "anti-Western." They only directly address the United States insofar as it launches the war in Iraq. The claim that they are broadly "anti-West" is an interpretation on the part of the

[125] Amany Jamal, Robert O. Keohane, David Romney, and Dustin Tingley, "Anti-Americanism and Anti-Interventionism in Arabic Twitter Discourses," *Perspectives on Politics*13.1 (2015), 55–73.
[125] Lisa Blaydes and Drew A. Linzer, "Elite Competition, Religiosity, and Anti-Americanism in the Islamic World." American Political Science Review106.2 (2012), 225–43.

reader, who must decide what aspects of the scene are *jāhil*. Is only the action of invading Iraq *jāhil*? Or is all of the United States society and culture *jāhil*? Secondly, these clips illustrate violence in an engaging way. They urge readers to reflect on war and the impact of military violence on people indirectly. The narrative arc of the clips spirals down like the story arc of the novel, as both culminate in an unresolved feeling of deep injustice. Also, a literary parallel exists between the *casus bell* which the United States cites to invade Iraq and the *casus belli* which Hashem cites to attack Malek.

These news clips sit outside the main narrative and do not pertain to the internal lives of Leen, Malek, or Hashem until the second-to-last page of the novel, when Leen reflects to herself:

> She'd lived through two wars without Malek. She did not know whether this was a good sign or a bad one. However, she believed it was a sign. Then it dawned on her—with painful slowness—that everything had been clear from the beginning…[so] she took a sheet of paper that had come out of the printer and stuck it with a colored thumbtack onto the Styrofoam bulletin board over her desk. She stood there contemplating it. For a few moments she saw the days and months removing their masks before her very eyes revealing their old faces. She saw Shiyar shedding its Sabt. Awwal shedding is Ahad…When she saw [the months shedding their Islamic masks] happening, she though everything had finally been straightened out.[126]

The conclusion of *Days of Ignorance* is that Leen is living in the *Days of Ignorance*. All her pain made sense when she realized that she is not living in a truly Islamic, that is, an ideal world. This quotation is the only passage in the entire novel in which wars are mentioned. Leen reminds herself that she has already lived through two wars, probably referring to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the United States' invasion of Iraq, in an effort to bolster her strength. As she has grown up in the context of these wars, even though she did not personally experience the violence, Leen believes this experience has equipped her to handle her lover nearly being

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[126] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 159.

murdered by her younger brother. Her life experience has taught her strength. Even though she has not personally interacted with the violence of the wars she lived through, her social milieu is hot with tension and violence. This social milieu is the real *jāhiliyya*. When she realizes that it is an ignorant, unjust world, she understands that the world only makes sense when you accept its madness.

The trajectory of the narrative of the news clips parallels the central narrative with Leen, Malek, and Hashem in the sense that both arcs do not resolve positively but spiral downwards to chaos: to war and to madness. The United States' actions in Iraq are paired with the pre-Islamic calendar dating at the beginning of every chapter, which offers the United States' foreign policy as the first example of *jāhiliyya.* By implying that the United States' influence in breaking tribal leaders' loyalty from Saddam Hussein's a form of cultural violence, this element of the narrative provokes questions about various forms of violence and acts of war. In fact, it is corroborated through the autobiography that Aljohani proposes a radically broad definition of violence. She reflects on the state of the contemporary world:

> Despicable world is my world. An unbelievable world, a misunderstood world in what seems an instant, for why has it continued or ended! And why has violence which is not rightly allowed colored it vulgar? The violence which fills the houses and streets and schools and playgrounds? Violence which takes the form of words, or knives, or revolvers, or pesticides (or destructive assemblies?), or shackles, or cutting off Bluetooth, or subterfuge, or a bomb, or petroleum fields, or the large military instrument (a tank?) which pulverize humans with no power or strength to fight back*? What is the value of life facing this violence? What is its (life's) value and violence which laughs night and day? And from the jaws of violence flows lives which were ending that its path interrupts for one moment and after another?[127]

Violence manifests itself in many forms in both narratives. This passage radically expands the definition of violence. The introduction of the passage frames the message which in a broader

[127] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 20-21.

discussion of the fact that the author is unable to comprehend the world, even as she has grown older. She had believed the world would become clear as she gained age and wisdom, but that is not true. Violence is incomprehensible. The list of forms of violence in this passage also provokes reflection on the meaning of life in times of violence and the meaning of violence in life. The theme of the radical expansion of violence allows her to critique obliquely a wide range of political and international developments without ever mentioning them directly. But first, I must address important information about translation.

"The cutting off of Bluetooth" is ambiguous. Does she mean censorship? The word *maqṭaʿ*, means 'section'. However, placing the phrase "section of Bluetooth" as a form of violence between shackles and subterfuge did not make much sense. So the cutting-off of Bluetooth was inferred, and I chose to translate this in the gerund. She is likely using this as an example which refers to censorship or any situation in which access to information is denied by the government. Finally, and this is by far the most important point, the phrase "large military instruments" is accompanied by an Islamic phrase which leaves out the ending "except for God." "Large military instruments which pulverize people with no power or strength" uses the words *lā ḥawla walā quwwata* with the same syntax as the *Ḥawqala.*[128] The *Ḥawqala* designates a frequently used religious phrase that translates to "There is no power or strength except through God," and is used to mean, roughly, "God help us!" Aljohani says, "people with no power or strength" and ends the sentence there. She omits the end of the phrase *illā bīllā*,"except through God," as a resolution. To cut off the end of this phrase in the middle of such a common idiom might symbolize a withdrawal from or abandonment of God—suggesting "How could You, God, let this happen?" Since the *Ḥawqala* is such a common phrase that it has its own proper

[128] Wagner Ewald. Moshe Piamenta, "Islam in Everyday Arabic Speech"(Leiden: Brill, 1979), 155.

noun, she intentionally invoked this prayer. The omission “except for God” was intentional. This means they, the people, have no power, It might also express anger or abandonment from God. It might also have been chosen simply for its sonorous qualities. While the meaning might vary, it can be asserted that, on the level of syntax, the people are not saved by God: hence, these times are a period of *jāhiliyya.*

So, this extensive list radically expands the definition of violence. Violence is not just what Hashem did to Malek, but also words, pesticides, knives, and large military instruments which pulverize people who, on the level of syntax, have caused the abandonment of, and have been abandoned by, God. An especially important point is “words.” When the United States bribed tribal leaders to distance themselves from Saddam Hussein, that constituted an act of violence. It was an act of violence via communication and payment. What happened to Malek when he was a child in elementary school and “subjected to racial injustice,” in the words of Anishchenkova, also constituted an act of violence. The radical expansion of what constitutes violence allows her writing to resonate with a wide range of negative behaviors.

The relationship between speech and violence imbues Aljohani’s philosophical reflections about silence with a new meaning. When she is enthralled in doubt, existential doubt, she wrote that in her autobiography that she is “bewildered and makes do with silence.” The primary chapter on silence is Chapter 7, but she also weaves doubt and silence together at the end of Chapter 23, when she writes, “we are born of silence and return to silence.”[129] When she sees injustice, she resorts to silence. It is also notable that a highlighted and repeated facet of the character Hashem is that he cannot stand silence or reflections on death, which suggests that he tries to run from existential facets of existence. If silence is the absence of speech, and speech can

[129] Aljohani, *As I Have Grown*, 18-19.

be violence, then it seems that silence can be a pacifist act. Silence is not just a concession, but can be an active stance to invoke peace. If "silence anchors the wings of creation in which God made Adam and Eve," then silence is deeply spiritual. When speech is violence, surrendering to silence is not just passivity; it invokes something higher.

So, what is the value of life in a world of violence? These questions spur us further toward existential questions than a mere condemnation of violence would. They imply that violence serves a function in life in the world, as evidenced by its omnipresence throughout history. "Violence laughs in the day and night," like Aljohani said, because neither can quell it. This quotation does not end in a simple condemnation of violence as evil, but it urges the reader to think beyond it towards the existential value of violence. On the one hand, Aljohani's question is rhetorical. On the other, it provokes thought about why a phenomenon as omnipresent as violence exists and what we learn by facing it. This sentiment will begin to introduce themes in the discussion on martyrdom to come, when the question of virtue arises.

Before the end of this section, it should be noted that there is an arguable parallel between the United States and Hashem. The United States invades Iraq under the pretense of purging weapons of mass destruction, but the United States itself owns and has used weapons of mass destruction. Hashem nearly kills Malek under the pretense of avenging his family's lost honor, when Hashem already lost that honor when he engaged in many premarital affairs. Iraq had no weapons of mass destruction to begin with, as Aljohani depicts it. Leen and Malek did not have a premarital affair, as Aljohani depicts it. The United States' reason for war was hypocritical and false. Hashem's reason for beating up Malek was hypocritical and false. Both actors in the text which wage war have done the exact thing that they cite as their justification. Both victims of war, Iraq and Malek, are innocent, according to Aljohani's depiction. Both perpetrators attack the

innocent for a crime they have not committed. This leads Aljohani to question how she understands violence.

Aljohani describes how her experience of war has affected her internally:

> I grew up in the injustice of war and ruins have demarcated all the decades of my life with a path I could not avoid seeing. I lived through three wars not the world around me that changed the world around me and took place close to me, on the banks of the Gulf: the first between Iraq and Iran, second following the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq, and third when the United States invaded Iraq. During the first, I was a child, the most I remember is the broadcaster of news reporting from Saudi Television, refraining from relating details of the war circles between the Muslim countries. In the second I was a youth crying on the night of the 17th of January of 1991, without understanding what was happening? Why is it happening now? In the last I was a woman in monastic habits*, alone and afflicted, thinking that the blessing of God has kept it away from me, and this woman does not know how she would spend the rest of the years, but she hopes that she would continue living with fewer casualties. Losses which carves away the soul like drops of salted water which continuously drip for years on small rocks, shaping it not as it must, but just as it happens.[130]

Like Leen, AlJohani grew up witnessing the injustice of war. She cannot avoid seeing ruins. She lived through three wars in three stages of life: childhood, teenage years, and adulthood. These wars affected her social milieu. She remembers the newscaster withholding details in order to downplay the conflicts between Muslim nations, which means that the Saudi news program was attempting to depict a unified Muslim world. This is anthropologically significant for a Western reader because it pertains to political narratives in the Middle East. It is significant for the Saudi reader because she questions the legitimacy of that news source. She acknowledged that an official program would withhold details in order to relate a more idealized narrative. The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq caused Aljohani to weep as a teenager. For the United States' invasion of Iraq, she adopted monastic habits, according to the passage above, becoming alone and afflicted with doubt and internal pain from the violence which surrounded her. How

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[130] Aljohani, *As I Have Grown*, 14-15.

would she spend the rest of her years having been afflicted by this violence? This question ties back to the previous question about the value of violence in life.

To answer this, she uses the metaphor of a small stone which has been shaped by salt water. As the salt water continuously drips, the rock becomes smooth. The salty water, which is corrosive and toxic to humans, represents violence, and comes to the rock and forces it to change. The rock stays true to its nature, but also adopts a new shape. If the rock represents the author, then violence has shaped and refined her. The challenges she faced by living in an era of violence enabled her to better herself. The metaphor of the rock allows for a broad existential perspective. Through torment, she attains purification.

The novel *Days of Ignorance* and the autobiography *As I Have Grown* condemn violence. They condemn it in the form of wars, political machinations, physical assertions of power, and words. In *Days of Ignorance,* a chronicle of the invasion of Iraq by the United States illustrates injustice and political games. The plot about the invasion is never cited directly until Leen admits to herself, before going mad, that "she had lived two wars without Malek," implying that the wars have taught her emotional resistance. *As I Have Grown* also depicts wars shaping the internal life of Aljohani, who, like a rock worn away by corrosive salt water, was inured to the reality of violence and smoothed. The narrative very obviously censures the United States for invading Iraq, but it manages to do so without a single adjective which would imply a value judgment. The actions, and the way those actions emotionally affect the sympathetic protagonist, sufficiently impel the reader to pass judgment. She denounces war in a subtle and sophisticated manner which encourages the reader to develop his or her own opinion. But there is a purpose to this cultural violence. Injustice and torment purify her.

Chapter Progression and the Martyrdom of Malek

The direct relationship between torment and purity, is nowhere seen more clearly than in the martyrdom of Malek. Malek is mistreated his whole life because of racism against him, is nearly killed by Hashem, and then, while he is in between life and death, is mourned by Leen. Her mourning affirms his value as a human. As Judith Butler asserts in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, a cross-cultural trend is that people only mourn those whom they recognized as human, especially in the context of war rhetoric. Fallen soldiers are venerated, but dominant cultural ideologies lead people not to mourn the people whom the soldiers kill. Butler argues that this pattern reveals whom the society accepts as a full human subject. When people are mourned, they are retroactively understood as people whose lives meant something. Malek, during his life, was not given the status of agency: citizenship. Where he is from is not specified. When Malek discusses citizenship, he uses the word "absolution", which is extensively discussed in the Nancy Roberts translation. So Malek's being mourned forces the reader to recognize his humanity and to confront the injustice which filled his life. Malek's death invokes a yearning for social change.

The chapters of *Days of Ignorance* which focus on Malek's perspective accentuate what happened to him, as opposed to what he thinks, feels, or does. There is a notable lack of action taken by Malek. As Anishchenkova observes, Malek is a victim. He functions as a victim in the text.[131] He is a flat character. But his life is being mourned, so there must have been something valuable to it. The fact that a victim of racism is being mourned, as Butler points out, retroactively indicates that the cause for which he died is sympathetic, which means that the force which caused him to die, racism, is awful. In this section, it will be argued that the martyr can be

[131] Anishchenkova, "Review of Days of Ignorance by Laila Aljohani and Nancy Roberts."

understood as a feminized role in the context of other Saudi literature which uses this trope, such as the examples listed below. In these stories, when the empathetic protagonist suffers and dies, it is an example of martyrdom because the reader gains a feeling of indignation or empathy for the suffering character. It is also important to understand that the racism directed at the character Malek, as a black Muslim, seems to sidestep the primary ethnically charged underclass in Saudi Arabia, which is comprised of primarily south and southeast Asian workers, especially Filipino, Pakistani, and Bengali workers.[132] What is the significance, then, of depicting a black, Muslim male facing citizenship problems? This final section will discuss martyrdom as a feminized role and the breach between Malek's racism and the current ethnic underclass in the Gulf region.

In order to understand the trope of the feminized martyr, one must establish how the reader can accurately infer that a fictional character is a martyr. One indication is that the character himself or herself dies for a cause and, that, subsequently, other characters venerate him, which basically happens to Malek—although the reader does not know if he died. However, given his positivity in the story, and the scenes of mourning, he functions as a character who is dead. Another more subtle indication is a pattern of plot progression which leaves the reader feeling that the suffering of the sympathetic protagonist is deeply unjust, which also happens to Malek. *Days of Ignorance* begins with an identified perpetrator committing an explicit act of violence. Then the story travels through effects, perspectives, and circumstances of why that occurred. The story ends with Leen going mad in her mourning. This progression reads like the opposite of a detective story! To begin a novel with who-did it, then to explain why he did it, but end with the pain, suffering, and loss which came from his actions provides explicit social critique intended to incite anger in the reader. This is the development of a martyr. To corroborate this point, I will cite the

[132] May Al-Dabbagh and Ghalia Gargani, "Arab Family Studies: Critical Reviews Book," 275–294.

Voices of Change anthology, in which many, many short stories since the 1960s written by Saudi women present their narrative arc in this pattern. Many begin with injustice and end with the pain of those who were affected by the injustice.

Some *Voices of Change* stories patterned around martyrdom or the figure of the martyr are: "Had I Been Male" by Najat Khayyat, "The Last Dream" by Muna ad-Dhukayr, "The Game" by Sarah Buhaymid, "The Reflection" by Khayriyyah As-Saqqaf, and "To Celebrate Being a Woman" by Fatimiah Al-Utaybi.[133] In "Had I Been Male," a girl and her mother cannot fight their own poverty. The last line reads, "You're a female...Nothing can be done." It ends with their suffering, and there is no resolution.[134] In "The Last Dream," a woman cannot marry the man she loved, and her "roots of life had died." The story ends with her sorrow. There is no resolution.[135] In "The Game," a woman drops a wedding invitation on the ground in utter despair because the man she loves is getting married to another woman. The story ends with her despair. There is no resolution.[136] In "The Reflection" a young girl is taken out of school, isolated, scorned, ignored, and married off to an old man who smells bad. The story culminates when the young girl collapses in the street under the feet of people walking by. The story ends with her death after suffering. There is no resolution.[137] In "To Celebrate Being a Woman," the woman ironically discusses the burdens of womanhood, citing a poem in which people have no hands. She pleads to drip blood for Palestine, which is classic martyrdom. The story ends with her suffering. There is

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[133] Bagader, Heinrichsdorff, and Akers, *Voices of Change.*
[134] Bagader, Heinrichsdorff, and Akers, *Voices of Change, 19.*
[135] Bagader, Heinrichsdorff, and Akers, *Voices of Change, 119.*
[136] Bagader, Heinrichsdorff, and Akers, *Voices of Change, 127.*
[137] Bagader, Heinrichsdorff, and Akers, *Voices of Change, 87.*

no resolution.[138] The fact so many stories written by Saudi female authors follow this pattern necessitates an investigation and interpretation of the trope of martyrdom.[139]

All these stories follow a pattern in which a female character of nearly immaculate moral purity is subject to injustice. The character suffers deeply from it, and there is no plot resolution. No action is taken by the protagonist, and the perpetrator of injustice is neither thwarted nor punished. “Had I Been Male” draws a direct relationship between being female and powerlessness. All these protagonists have no choice but to accept the circumstances and endure until they die. The plot which depicts martyrs is so prevalent among these Saudi stories that one might consider it a sub-genre. Written by Saudi women and debuted in Saudi magazines, these stories must have enticed their readership somehow. Otherwise, this same type of story would not have been written and published so many times over. So, what function do these stories serve? What social messages do they offer?

This narrative arc compels the reader to mourn the protagonist of these short stories, retroactively affirming the worth of those female characters and invoking social change, without explicitly defining it. For example, when the little girl who is married off too early dies under foot, this cuases the readership to feel a sense of injustice and wish she had not married so early. The women in the *Voices of Change* stories suffer as Malek suffers in *Days of Ignorance*. These women and Malek perform the same function in relation to the narrative arc. Malek’s own voice is not revealed in detail until the seventh chapter of the novel, and even then, Malek simply recalls story after story about what happened to him, as opposed to who he is or what he did. In these stories, people treat him unfairly, but he does not retaliate, signaling moral purity. One of the most striking, problematic stories is that of Malek’s brother, who attempts suicide because of the

[138] Bagader, Heinrichsdorff, and Akers, *Voices of Change, 53.*

burden of being black, and Malek just attempts to save him with a faint understanding of why he did it. Malek does not dispute the decision of the father, who would not let him marry Leen. Malek does not fight back against Hashem. Malek does not fight the highschool principal who tells him that he will amount to nothing. Malek, with the exception of withholding information about his Saudi citizenship, operates with nearly immaculate moral purity. For nothing but existing as God made him, he is subjected to horrible abuse, leaving ambiguous the question of whether he shall rise or succumb to the burden he bears. This is martyrdom.

Malek fulfills the role of a martyr, serving the function that many protagonists in the *Voices of Change* stories do. In a sense, this feminizes him. If there is a direct relationship between femininity and powerlessness, then a powerless character is indeed feminized. Like the women, Malek accepts that the only way to change his circumstance is through appeasing the authority. As is the case with the women's lives, the value of Malek's life is asserted through his death. Waiting for citizenship, which in the text is referred to waiting for his "absolution," as though not having the status of Saudi citizenship were a great moral flaw, necessitates great faith that the authority will hear his suffering and change the policies. Even if the character Malek himself is not feminine, his mode of action is feminized. The invocation of martyrdom might be characterized as a subversive plea, as opposed to a revolutionary one, because the martyr suffers and waits for the authorities to make changes, as opposed to disregarding the authority in order to make the changes himself . If Malek is a martyr who suffers because of racism in the Saudi kingdom, then the story draws significant parallels between the suffering caused by racism and the suffering of women in the Saudi patriarchal culture. The novel challenges the reader to take up the fight against the forces which almost caused Malek to die. Malek serves the role of the martyr,

so a major message of the story, the ultimate social critique in the *plot*, is that racism is *jāhiliyya,* and that it is against the tenets of Islam.

This introduces the second major comment on Malek: there seems to be a mismatch between Malek's character and the actual ethnically particular mistreated underclass of immigrant laborers in Saudi Arabia. Over the past thirty years, scholars have focused attention on issues of citizenship in the Gulf, emphasizing the sociological, economic, and ethical challenges created by importing a large number of workers. For many of the Gulf States, the number of migrant workers exceeds 80% of the total workforce.[140] In the resulting social formation, the Arabs are stratified as a class of owners, whereas the private sector laborers are temporary migrant workers, with Europeans and Arabs from other countries carving a place for themselves in the middle. Among the important scholars investigating this social phenomenon are Fred Arnold, Nasrah Shah, Abu Baker Bagader, Soraya Altorki, Rachel Silvey, Mizanur Rahman, and Amal Tantawi.[141] Rachel Silvey conducted an ethnographic study of Indonesian domestic workers in Saudi Arabia. Mizanur Rahman conducted a similar investigation about Bangladeshi Labor migration in 2011. Arnold and Shah published a paper focusing on Asian migration to the Gulf as early as 1984. Shah continued the research and published more twenty years later.[142] In investigating nationality, class, and racial politics in Saudi Arabia or the broader Gulf context, the overwhelming majority of published study focuses on labor from South and Southeast Asia. 'Abd al-Hadi Khalaf's *Transit States: Labour, Migration, and Citizenship in the Gulf* asserts that "the majority of this migrant workforce originates from countries such as India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Philippines, and their remittances contribute to the survival of millions of people throughout

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[140] Adam Haneih, "Overcoming Methodological Nationalism: Spatial Perspectives on Migration to the Gulf Arab States" *Transit States: Labour, Migration, and Citizenship in the Gulf* (Pluto Press, 2015)
[141] May Al-Dabbagh and Ghalia Gargani, "Saudi Arabia." *Arab Family Studies: Critical Reviews*.
[142] Fred Arnold and Nasra Shah. "Front Matter." *The International Migration Review*, 18.

these areas.[143] If the working underclass is ethnically identified as South and Southeast Asian, then why did Aljohani choose a black Muslim as the character who would be on the receiving end of racism?

It is true that there exists academic documentation of historical racism against Black African Saudis, which is associated with a slave trade which operated in the Islamic Middle East, despite the emancipation of Bilal, the companion of the Prophet, written in scripture, for thousands of years. The *Immigration and Refugee board of Canada* found that black African national Saudis constitute about 10% of the population, and that they "experience discrimination in all areas and are viewed as inferior."[144] According to their "IGA Director, there are no black Saudi TV presenters, university deans, judges, senior government officials or diplomats," and black Saudis experience discrimination in employment and education. This source corroborates the information presented in "The Right to Manumit and British Relations with Ibn Saud and Persia in the 1920s" which emphasis a correlation between the African race and slavery throughout the Middle East and North Africa.[145] Slavery was not outlawed in Saudi Arabia until 1964.[146] Aljazeera ran an op-ed about the pervasiveness of racial jokes on Ramadan television series, and the author commented:

> This language of racism is an enduring legacy of the history of slavery in the region.…Slavery in Arab countries was abolished completely by 1970 (with the exception of Mauritania, which did so in 1981). While not all dark-skinned people in the region are descendants of slaves and not all slaves were black, people with darker skin are stigmatized and, by default, considered to have such background, regardless of how they self-identify.[147]

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[143] May Al-Dabbagh, and Ghalia Gargani, "Saudi Arabia," *Arab Family Studies: Critical Reviews* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2018), 275–294.
[144] Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, "Saudi Arabia: Treatment of racial minorities, particularly black African Saudi nationals, by society and authorities" *(2012-2013)*
[145] Jerzy Zdanowski, "The Right to Manumit and British Relations with Ibn Saud and Persia in the 1920s." *Journal of Contemporary History* 50.4 (2015), 789.
[146] Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, "Saudi Arabia: Treatment of racial minorities, particularly black African Saudi nationals, by society and authorities" *(2012-2013)*
[147] Hana al-Khamri, "The Outrageous Racism that 'Graced' Arab TV Screens in Ramadan" *Aljazeera.com.*

While racism against black people, linked to a history of the slave trade which does exist, and is evident in Aljohani's novel, that does not annul the fact that the overwhelming majority of the migrant workers in Saudi society at the time the book was being written are South Asian, not black. There exists a racial incongruity between Malek and the modern, racialized underclass of workers right now. How pervasive is bias against black Saudis relative to the current predominantly south-Asian underclass? What is the significance of a lover who is specifically racialized as black? And what could be Aljohani's motivations for using the case of a black Muslim as the victim of racism?

Malek is racialized as black because an Islamic argument can be used to refute this racism, in a way that cannot be applied to non-Muslim South Asian workers. A compelling argument can be taken from Islamic literature to refute injustice against a black Muslim, which Aljohani cites line-by-line her novel. Aljohani quotes three different Islamic scholars in the last section of the seventh chapter to refute racism. Malek's ethnicity and religion lend themselves to a particular type of argument, Islamic exegesis, which is particularly powerful in the Saudi context. This hypothesis is confirmed by the fact that Aljohani included scholarly passages of Muslim writers discussing the value and faith of the black believer. Aljohani imbues her fight against racism with reverence for Islam. The first Islamically inspired, historical quotation used to denounce against racism opens the penultimate chapter. An excerpt from Ibn Hisham's *The Life of Muhammed* documents Bilal, a slave who was eventually emancipated by the Caliph Abu Bakr. Aljohani reports that his master would torture him by making him lay with a huge, heavy stone on his chest in the heat of the desert day and threaten that he would stay there until he died or renounced his Islamic faith. Bilal would simply repeat "One, One…"[148], referring to the central Islamic tenet of

[148] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 131.

the unity of God. Aljohani uses the stanza "one, one" throughout the subsequent paragraph for poetic effect. This quotation exemplifies a black believer of the highest moral purity. It is juxtaposed with Malek's recollection of a white actor in blackface. In the next quotation, Malek calls himself a black alien, then refutes this thought with a quotation of poetry by the famous black poet Antarah ibn Shaddād "I loved her by chance despite the enmity between her people and mine."[149] If a poet can love a woman across the feuding ethnic lines, why cannot Malek love Leen? After a flashback of when Malek was called a racial slur by a school teacher, Aljohani cites *Kitab al-Aghani*, a tenth-century book of songs and poems, by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani. This last quotation describes a person and claims that there is no difference in the interior between black and white.[150] Aljohani engages in reverent exegesis of great Islamic poets and historical writers in order to refute racism. Malek's black heritage lends itself to a historical argument which can be made through Islamic or Islamically inspired sources. Aljohani's method of argument could perceptively penetrate her cultural context.

Invoking a historically Islamic perspective against racism is corroborated by the text when the author explicitly states, from Malek's perspective, that racism is an insult to God.[151] In Malek's reflections, he says, "When they did this they seemed to be saying to God, 'You created a color that is bad.'"[152] This frames racism as blasphemous. No person can purport to submit to the will of God and simultaneously profess that God erred in His creation. Such an audacious statement would constitute insolence to God and be utterly unacceptable, according to Islamic law. That behavior would be *jāhil*. The major critique of the plot is explicitly stated from a religious perspective: to be racist is to blaspheme against God. Malek's race, as opposed to the

[149] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 134.
[150] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 147.
[151] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 139.
[152] Aljohani, *Days of Ignorance*, 147.

other demographics which are more associated with the underclass in contemporary Saudi society, lends itself to a particular type of argument which would be particularly potent in a society which governs through religious interpretation of sacred texts. The social critique Aljohani uses does not disregard the establishment but uses the same methods of logical interpretation of religious doctrine which the *'ulamā'* might use to offer a different conclusion. Malek is a martyr because his life is sacrificed in a call for Islamic reform. As a final piece of evidence that Aljohani uses Islam to denounce racism, she states that Islam denounces any such practice. I asked her "If the main theme of Days of Ignorance is racism, do you think that attitudes against a black Muslim like Malek would be comparable attitudes against South Asian workers?" She answered:

> Really, I don't know, or I can't say for sure that the situation is different. Racism will continue to be racism, whether practiced because of color, race, religion, or even illness, as is happening now to some Chinese because of the COVID-19 virus. I do not know precisely the historical moment in which Muslims emerged from the horizon of their religion, which rejects any racist practice, and came to end it, to a horizon that allows racism, and passes it without embarrassment.

Conclusion

The criticism of *jāhiliyya* implies reverence for Islam. The trope of the Age of Ignorance rallies people to follow a proper version of Islam, not unsimilar to the sentiment that Ibn Saud invoked when he claimed that his conquest would enlighten the tribes he conquered to true Islam. Using Desert Storm as the locus of time implicates the United States in the "identity crisis" of these states in the contemporary era, which is condemned because it is devoid of proper moral values. This is exemplified by the US-Iraq war, which Aljohani is able to denounce without using any negative adjectives. The pervasive violence affected Leen and Aljohani internally inuring them to deep injustice, but it did not make this violence acceptable. Malek also suffers violence.

Even though he is not dead, he functions as a martyr whom the readers mourn. This followed a plot pattern pervasive in many Saudi Arabian short-story fiction pieces. Martyrdom, insofar as it took away his agency, feminized Malek. The racial category of Malek provoked the claim that it is the fact that an Islamic argument for the emancipation of black believers can be substantiated through historically Islamic prose and poetry that allows Aljohani's novel to have the emancipatory thrust which it boasts. As exegesis is the method of argumentation used by the patriarchal governmental establishment, especially the council of religious scholars, the methods of rhetoric used to combat racism in *Days of Ignoranc*e. The methods of rhetoric which Aljohani employs to propagate progressive messages appeal to the national Islamic moral imperative of Saudi Arabia

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Aljohani successfully delivered social messages in her creative writing. She shined a critical light on aspects of Saudi society in a way that did not provoke government censorship. Her writing implicitly associated a negative view of a patriarchal character with fundamentalist views and contrasted it with a positive view of a patriarch characterized by respect for women and Islam. Aljohani successfully embedded commentary about driving and owning property with the Islamically-inspired, respectful father figure in *Days of Ignorance*. She also associated the idea that if a male leader's behavior is not in accordance with Islamic moral code, he will lose his authoritative position in the figure of the metaphorical king. Aljohani combatted outright the expectation that a woman should be a mother in the third chapter of her autobiography. She subverted traditional notions of women's domestic labor by posing the image of women writing at home: women are in the home but are not attending to a traditional standard of female duties there. She denounced the United States' invasion in the US-Iraq war, and she censured the practice of racism in Saudi Arabia through the treatment of the character of Malek, which inspired a sense of allegiance in the reader and invoked Islamic arguments which denounce racism. Even though the progressive messages in this work could have been construed as activism if they had been presented differently, they were, in fact, very well received. Aljohani successfully framed the narrative of these messages in way that makes them compatible with the Islamic moral imperative that permeates Saudi society, and thus acceptable. By successfully furthering ideas that check the guardianship system, advocate for the rights of women, and denounce racism and violence, Aljohani's work exemplifies that creative writing can be a platform for social discourse that circumnavigates Saudi censorship, if done carefully.

The critique of patriarchy in her texts does not denounce the whole social system. Instead, her critique applies the Islamic moral imperative to male authority figures. The contrast between

Hashem and the father is a dichotomy between an illegitimate, disrespectful, violent male figure and a legitimate, respectful, gentle male figure, which allows her critique of patriarchy to operate still under a male authority. The Islamically inspired figure celebrates the birth of his daughter, who wants her to have ownership of her belongings, who would not disapprove of her driving, and who believes her when she says that she did not have a premarital affair. Aljohani ties basic feminist initiatives to the figure of a just patriarch. In addition to this, she rejects the legitimacy of a *makhlū'* king, by asserting in a metaphor that such a figure would lose influence over her "interior." In this, she applies the Islamic moral imperative to the figure of a king, as if to say that if that king does not behave in accordance with good morals and fair judgments, he should not retain power. She suggests that there should be limitations on the extent of a patriarch's authority, that religious behavior should be fair, and that a testament to fair religious behavior is participation in furthering the moderate feminist initiatives listed above.

Similarly, the assertion of female subjectivity does not denounce the entire patriarchal social system, but it does provide a counterpoint to traditional imposed notions such as the idea that women should be mothers. Aljohani explicitly rejects this expectation, but she frames that discourse as exclusively between females, which circumnavigates the male power apparatus. Aljohani explains why she did not want to be a mother. She does not show her characters cooking or cleaning. She, instead, demonstrates that they derive fulfillment through writing as their labor. By writing, the empathetic protagonists are in the home, but exercising freedom and agency. Aljohani offers aging as an avenue for women to gain power, but implies that this avenue may leave a person unsatisfied. By mentioning aging, she invokes that avenue to agency which is already present and available in classic patriarchy. She frames her assertion of female subjectivity within structures that would allow these ideas to be accepted by a Saudi audience: she appeals to

those values which the culture already has, such as a woman's right to tend to her own home as she sees fit, or a woman's capacity to write as a form of domestic labor, or a veneration of elders, in furthering her feminist initiatives.

Aljohani uses arguments which are reverent to Islam to condemn violence and racism. She uses the word *jāhiliyya* to begin the critique of a new age of ignorance, in which the focal point of time is the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. The invasion by the United States is portrayed as barbaric and lacking in Islamic morality, which would appeal to the vast majority of Saudi readers and to the governmental establishment which seeks to preserve a cultural bias against the West. Implicit in this is a broader condemnation of violence, evidenced by excerpts about the manner in which wars have emotionally affected her and, by extension, her empathetic protagonist. Similarly, Aljohani combats racism through Islamic arguments. She uses holy texts and the writings of respected Muslim scholars to denounce racism. This is confirmed in that, as opposed to using a representative of the majority of the underclass currently in Saudi Arabia, her choice of the figure of a black male, which lends itself to a specific, religious argument centered around the figure of Bilal. In her depiction of violence and her critique of wars, especially the US-Iraq war, and in her critique of racism she appeals to the moral framework on which the Saudi Arabian national identity is already based.

Aljohani makes acceptable her social critiques in all three dimensions by appealing to the values in Saudi Arabia which already exist. She ties progressive feminist initiatives to the figure of a patriarch. She offers illegitimate un-Islamic figures. She asserts women's choices in the domestic sphere. She condemns violence with arguments that are reverent to Islam. She does not impose new values on Saudi society. She does not venerate the West—in fact, she emphatically characterizes the actions of the United States government negatively. Instead, she demonstrates

how a moderate patriarchy and respect for women are compatible with the social values which Saudi Arabia already has. As opposed to seeking to overthrow a cultural system, she advances her moderately critical social messages by operating within that system. The medium which allowed her to do this is creative writing.

Transliteration Chart

Transliterated in text	Definition	Arabic word
marfūḍ	Inadmissible things	مرفوض
ḥarām	Religiously inadmissible things	حرام
'ulamā	Council of religious scholars	علماء
Fatwā	Religious verdict issued by the council of religious scholars	فتوى
Nafs	Gender neutral person, personhood, self	نَفْس
makhlū'	Unrestrained, irresponsible, disposed	مخلوع
khala'a	To rip out or extract	خلع
yanmaḥī	Eradicate	ينمحي
Hunna	They feminine	هنّ
Khiffa	Lightly	خفّةٍ
taʿī, yaʿīna	[feminine they] are aware of themselves, she believes	تعي ,يعين
ʿaṣī, ʿaṣa	Refractory, hardened	عصى عصيٌ
ʾislām	surrender, also proper noun for the religion	اسلام
jāhil	Someone who is ignorant/ not Islamic	جاهل
jāhiliyya	Age of ignorance, proper noun of our book title.	جاهلية
Tajhīl	Stultification	تجهيل
majhal	Unknown territory	مجهل
al- jāhiliya	Epoch before Islam	الجاهلية
maqṭaʿ	Cutting off	مقطع

Appendix I

The Arabic of Chapter 23

إنني أكبر، وتكبر معي صداقاتي كذلك. يكبر بعضها كي يبقى، فيما يكبر قليلٌ منها كي يذبل؛ لكن بم أشعر حينما تذبل صداقةٌ أمام عينيّ، دون أن يكون لديّ ما أفعله أو أقوله؟ بم أشعر حينما أراها –الصداقة— وهي تتحلل يوماً بعد يوم، ليس بسبب سوء أحد أو شيٍ، بل لأنها لم تعد تملك ما يبقيها لأمدً أطول؟ لقد كبُرتْ إلى الحدّ الذي بدأت تتغضن معه، واستوت على عرشها إلى الحدّ الذي لم يعد يمكنها معه أن تنحني –ولو قليلاً— كي تمرّ عليها الأيام المليئة بانشغالاتي، ومللي ،وشكيّ، وخيباتي. أحياناً تبدو لعينيّ عندما أتأملها كملكً مخلوعً، يجلس كل يوم على كرسيه، ولا يفكر في شيء سوى أنه الملك، ولا يرى شيئاً سوى أنه الملك؛ رغم أن الحياة –كل الحياة— قد تغيرت، ولم يعد يحكمها –في داخلي على الأقل –ملوكٌ أو حفاة لم يعد يحكمها سوى الشكّ المتواصل، والرغبة الممضة __ التي لا يفهمها إلا قلة— بالناي عن كل شيء والاكتفاء بالصّمت

Arabic of excerpt chapter 3

كنتُ قد انشغلت فقرة ان أبرر لهن لغير هن سبب عزوفي عن الانجاب، ثم أدركت أني كمن يسبح في ماءٍ باردٍ: أبذل مجهودا جباراً كي أبلغ ضفةً غير أكيدة، وأن هؤلاء النسوة ومن يفكر بطريقتهن لا يعين أنفسهن كما أعي نفسى، و لا يرين العالم من زاويتي، فقررت أن أبتسم فحسب، وأن أحاول أن أفهم كيف تعي النسوة أن الانجاب شيء حادّ، ثم يتعاملن معه بخفة؟

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