

Constructing New Female Subjectivities under Saudi Vision 2030: A Study of Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* as a Counter-Narrative

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Abstract

Saudi society has undergone many social and cultural changes over the past decade that have influenced the way people think about crucial issues related to gender roles, relationships, female agency, and women's mobility and visibility. Rajaa Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh* (2005) is narrated in the form of a series of anonymous emails that trace the private lived experiences of four young Saudi women -Gamarah, Sadeem, Lamees, and Michelle- surrounding love, marriage, and their struggle to construct new identities while transcending the many constraints imposed by a patriarchal system. Alsanea offers nuanced insights into, and aspirations for change amid the intersecting social, economic, and cultural forces that are crucial to shaping women's lives. Within the theoretical framework of feminism, and through a qualitative thematic textual analysis supported by narratological character analysis, this paper examines *Girls of Riyadh* as a Counter-Narrative that challenges the dominant narratives in portraying young Saudi women. Contrary to dominant narratives, Alsanea presents the four protagonists as agents of rebellion and defiance against entrenched traditional norms, as they attempt to construct new identities by transcending all social and cultural constraints. The paper seeks to address the following questions: How far does Alsanea succeed in adopting Counter-Narrative as a narrative form to convey her vision of the predicament of the Saudi woman? In what way can *Girls of Riyadh* be read as a counter-narrative? How far do the protagonists' diverse experiences subvert the conventional portrayal of women in mainstream Saudi narratives? To what extent can the novel be considered a visionary novel that creates considerable space for social and cultural change and reform embodied in Vision 2030?

Keywords: feminism, visionary, the 2030 Saudi vision, subjectivity, counter-narrative, construct

1. Introduction

Not long ago, Saudi women were not allowed equal access to public life, job opportunities, nor were they allowed to have their own business or work where men were around, and many other limitations were placed on their mobility both inside and outside their houses. They lived under an oppressive system that was dictated by a traditionally conservative mindset. In education, the Saudi educational system did not give women equal educational rights; they were not allowed to be admitted to certain colleges. It was in Saudi Arabia that any contact or relationship between a man and a woman beyond marriage was taboo and, consequently, doomed. They were left caged inside houses with no outlet for expressing their suppressed feelings. They were also denied access to the mainstream life outside their houses. When Rajaa Alsanea (1981-) wrote *Girls of Riyadh* in 2005, Saudi women's voices were suppressed and silenced in public discourse. She wanted to break this silence by giving herself a stage to dramatize the lives of four upper-class women: Sadeem, Lamees, Gamarah, and Michelle. In this study, *Girls of Riyadh* is examined as a Counter-Narrative that challenges the dominant narratives in portraying Saudi women. The paper adopts Feminism as its umbrella theoretical framework. Contrary to the dominant narratives, Alsanea presents the four protagonists as agents of rebellion and defiance against the entrenched traditional norms while attempting to construct new identities through transcending all constraints. The study seeks to address the following questions: How far does Alsanea succeed in adopting Counter-Narrative as a narrative form to convey her vision of the predicament of the Saudi woman? In what way can *Girls of Riyadh* be read as a counter-narrative? How far do the protagonists' diverse experiences subvert the conventional portrayal of women in mainstream Saudi narratives? To what extent can the novel be considered a visionary novel that creates considerable space for social and cultural change and reform embodied in Vision 2030?

2. Objectives of the Paper

- To investigate Rajaa Alsanea's employment of digital media as a counter-narrative strategy that challenges dominant gender norms and how this contributes to the construction of alternative female identities and anticipates cultural, social, and economic transformations later embodied within Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.
- To examine the representation of the protagonists as agents of change whose experiences of love, marriage, and autonomy disrupt patriarchal expectations and subvert traditional models of Saudi womanhood.
- To employ Daniel Solórzano and Tara Yosso's Counter-Narrative theory within a feminist methodological framework in order to examine how the four protagonists negotiate and defy gender expectations in a way that subverts the stereotypical presentation of Saudi women as subdued, passive, and socially constrained.

3. Significance of the Topic

The significance of this paper lies in situating *Girls of Riyadh* within the rapid social and cultural changes that culminated in the launch of Saudi Vision 2030. It illustrates how the novel anticipates changes in gender roles and women's agency in contemporary Saudi society. By using Counter-Narrative to analyze the novel in question, the paper highlights the early role of digital media in challenging traditional norms and giving voice to women's experiences. The paper contributes to literary and cultural scholarship by demonstrating how the novel presents new models of Saudi women capable of constructing new identities. Such models subvert the gender roles of female characters in mainstream narratives while voicing their aspirations under Vision 2030 in the process of social and cultural transformation. Thus, by situating *Girls of Riyadh* within the context of national transformation, Rajaa Alsanea's novel participates in the socio-cultural process of contemporary modernization that was later endorsed by Saudi Vision 2030. The intersection of digital humanities practices and feminist literary criticism offers an approach to examining how Counter-Narrative, through character portrayal, plays an instrumental role in constructing new female agency. After all, *Girls of Riyadh* can be considered a major work within the so-called visionary cultural texts that reflect the current situation and underscore the ongoing debates regarding gender roles, reform, and the role that can be played by women in modern Saudi society.

4. Theoretical and Scholarly Context

Many researchers have approached Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2007) from multiple critical angles, particularly within feminist, socio-cultural, and linguistic studies of contemporary Saudi literature. Existing research has examined the representation of women, narrative strategies, and themes on women's rights, agency, and empowerment as well as the novel's linguistic representation of gendered power. Collectively, this scholarship establishes *Girls of Riyadh* as a significant socio-cultural document that interrogates the realities experienced by Saudi women in a rapidly changing male-dominated society.

Al-Wadhaf (2025) offers a critical reading of Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* as a literary representation of the upper-class women known as the "velvet class". Al-Wadhaf wants to underscore that, despite their economic privilege, such women face many constraints in a rapidly transforming cultural and social society. She wants to highlight the paradox between social restrictions and material comfort, and how this contributes to the shaping of a new female identity. Al-Qahtani's (2025) research is another study that examines Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* through a linguistic lens, using Fairclough's CDA as a theoretical framework. Al-Qahtani explores how the novel's language encodes power over governing women's mobility, behavior, social expectations, and moral conduct. Through his analysis, the narrative reveals the subtle mechanisms through which patriarchal ideology is normalized in everyday discourse. This linguistic study demonstrates how language and narrative form can function as tools for ideological reproduction. Al-Qahtani argues that patriarchal ideology can be normalized through everyday discourse to reinforce gender hierarchies and masks them as cultural or moral essentials. Another study by Abdullah & Rasheed (2024) explores the role of the internet in creating space that empowers women within Saudi society. It explores how the internet offers a powerful platform for women in conservative societies to express their thoughts, reveal their suppressed emotions and their aspirations. The study proposes that this virtual space empowers women to redefine their roles and resist or negotiate social and cultural constraints. The findings of this study are relevant to *Girls of Riyadh* as a novel narrated through a series of anonymous emails that function not only as a narrative technique but also as an unconventional space of resistance and self-expression. Added to this research, comparative feminist studies have also been conducted on Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*. Salem (2024) situates the novel within feminist tradition through exploring its deconstruction of patriarchal myths of the Cinderella complex under different forms of oppression wreaked upon women in a system that believes in double standards of patriarchy.

Thus, the already conducted research has offered valuable insights into feminist critique of Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* and examined issues associated with digital empowerment, class structure and linguistic discourse but has not synthesized them in a unifying framework for a more profound understanding of the novel in question as an untraditional novel that challenges dominant cultural narratives in the context of Saudi society. In other words, the previous studies have approached these dimensions but in isolation and this has uncovered the need for a new study that would address this gap by employing a new narrative mode; that is Counter-Narrative which examines *Girls of Riyadh* as a story that challenges dominant stories that address women's endeavor to reconstruct new female identity, and reclaim agency and authority.

From a critical feminist lens, Counter-Narrative functions as both a literary trend and a theoretical framework that is concerned with challenging dominant narratives. It centers around giving voice to marginalized, oppressed or silenced groups. Solórzano and Yosso

(2002) define counter narratives as “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told or denied the freedom to revolt against imposed constraints. It is a way of questioning an already established ideology or a certain power structure”. As a theoretical framework, Counter-Narrative offers a lens for deconstructing dominant narratives by questioning normative frameworks and adopting counter modes of storytelling that resist mainstream narratives. Bamberg and Andrews (2004) conceptualize Counter-Narrative as a narrative mode or form of storytelling that challenges, resists, or disrupts dominant narratives of marginalized groups whose experiences are constrained or misrepresented within hegemonic socio-cultural frameworks. It gives them a voice to reveal those experiences despite such constraints. Hence, Counter-narratives function as acts of ideological resistance. The Saudi society is one that has been male-dominant, where patriarchal norms have shaped women’s representation and self-expression. As such, Counter-Narrative offers a powerful lens and strategy for rereading female narrative. (Delgado 1989) emphasizes the communal dimension of counter-storytelling. He explains that counter-storytelling aims to foster community reconstruction among minorities by providing venues that remind them that they are not alone. Counter-narratives offer alternative perspectives on lived reality and give such groups opportunities to explore lives other than the ones already constructed for them. (Delgado 1989) also suggests that combining elements from current reality would help construct a new world by creating space for free self-expression.

Therefore, within this theoretical and scholarly context, *Girls of Riyadh* can be examined as a feminist counter-discourse that destabilizes dominant patriarchal narratives and challenges gender structural hierarchies through offering alternative modes of storytelling. By narrating women’s experiences through unconventional narrative strategies, Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* challenges the existing social realities of the women's community. It reshapes such realities by presenting these women as active agents in constructing their female identity and agency. By integrating insights from previous scholarship within the Counter -Narrative framework, the present study will offer a deeper understanding of the novel’s social, cultural, and feminist significance in contemporary Saudi society.

5. Methodology

The study employs a qualitative thematic textual analysis which is supported by narratological character analysis. This analysis is interpreted through a feminist Counter-Narrative framework that focuses on issues of gender, power and discourse. It is an approach that explores how Rajaa Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* (2007) breaks the deadlock by writing this bold novel. Writing this novel marks a significant turning point in storytelling about women within the context of a male-dominated Saudi society. In this paper, Counter-Narrative elements are identified through a theory-based coding scheme that includes reclamation of female voice, assertion of female agency, resistance to patriarchal norms, subversion of gender roles and patriarchal structures and processes of identity reconstruction. Excerpts from the text that meet one or more of these criteria are analyzed and systematically coded to examine how the novel constructs an alternative feminist meaning. Such textual excerpts are selected through a sampling process that is theory-oriented. They are identified and coded based on their relevance to Counter-Narrative aspects, analytical richness and relevance to the experiences of the four protagonists in a way that ensures a balanced qualitative analysis. Adopting Counter-Narrative as one strand of Feminist Theory, this textual analysis focuses on identity construction through character development. Therefore, characterization is employed as a tool in this analysis. The paper explores various old traditions that act as counterforces that conspire against women when each of the four main characters decides to lead a life of nonconformity to the prevailing social and cultural norms. In clearer terms, the paper seeks to pinpoint a new feminist vision of the dilemma experienced by the female characters in *Girls of Riyadh* on account of resisting or negotiating the prevailing cultural and social norms. Here, the character of each of the four protagonists will be examined through her interactions with her male counterparts-husbands and lovers- to highlight the Counter-Narrative aspects pertaining to each one of them.

6. Feminism as a Theoretical Framework

As a theoretical framework, Counter-Narrative has its roots in Feminism. Feminism is a widely acknowledged literary approach concerned with analyzing literary works that portray female characters or are produced by female writers. In her influential book *Using Critical Theory: How to Read and Write about Literature* (2015), Lois Tyson illustrates that Feminism seeks to understand how women are socially, psychologically, economically, and politically oppressed by patriarchal ideology, while working to reduce its impact through various means. Tyson defines Patriarchal ideology as the patriarchal system of beliefs and assumptions that privilege men while marginalizing women. Another crucial concept in Feminism, according to Tyson, is sexism, which is the basis of patriarchy, and it can be viewed as the belief that women are “innately inferior to men: less intelligent, less rational and less courageous. He also explains that Feminism is confined not only to studying female representations in literary works but also to investigating how gender, power, and ideology intersect to shape human experiences. In short, Feminism is a school of thought that seeks not only to expose systems of inequality against women but also to challenge and transform them.

Feminist critics use counter-stories to challenge stereotypes, traditional gender roles, the suppression of women’s voices, and the marginalization of their experiences. They employ such stories to challenge male representations of women in literature by subverting dominant forms of storytelling. Mehrpouyan and Zakeri (2025) point out how women can act as agents of resistance within narrative structure and characterization. He also points out that gender representation in world literature reflects how feminist narratology helps disrupt hegemonic storylines that have historically marginalized women writers and characters. One key concept of Counter-Narrative is that these stories are used to undermine the way power is exercised in mainstream stories by offering alternative subversive narratives that provide considerable space for female free expression to challenge power structures embedded in traditional narratives. Such stories play an instrumental role in identity construction by helping marginalized groups reclaim new identities through negotiating or challenging dominant traditional norms. Nelson (2001) remarks, “Counter-narratives enable individuals and communities to reconstruct identity by

offering alternative meanings that oppose stereotypical or imposed representations.”

7. Aspects of Counter-Narrative:

7.1 *Rajaa Alsanea as a Revolutionary Storyteller*

Raja Abdullah Alsanea is a Saudi novelist who is best known for her novel *Girls of Riyadh*. Alsanea was not at all happy with the status of women as they were subdued, submissive, and restricted for expressing personal and emotional agency within the context of a conservative male-dominant society. She was against both the social and cultural conventions that have stripped women of their right to live a free, dignified kind of life like other women in the world. Alsanea makes it her mission to awaken the female community to rise against established norms. In this due light, AL-Ariqi contends:

The Arab women have revolted against oppression and inequality prescribed in the name of religion and social conventions. They struggle to unfetter themselves from social and cultural constraints. So, it is not surprising to find Arab female writers inspiring for the feminist uprising and calling for the emancipation of women to catch up with their Western counterparts. (Al-Areji 2017).

Alsanea is aware of the predicament of Saudi women, as they have lived a life characterized by rigid conservative traditions. She wants to give young women a voice to express their indignation and contempt toward the established system. She calls for social justice grounded in freedom and equality for all members of society. It is a call for change by presenting new models of young women capable of resisting traditional social and cultural norms. Alsanea seeks to open a gateway for possible changes by writing an alternative narrative to subvert traditional gender roles. She urges Saudi women to rise against the different forms of subjugation they face. It is a call for protest against the deteriorating status of the young female community in the context of a society that believes in patriarchal values.

The emergence of communication technology has been accompanied by many changes in the means of communication available to all members of society. Some Arab women writers employ this technology, exemplified by the internet, as a personal arena to indirectly express their contempt for and indignation at the societal and cultural constraints that confine their freedom of expression. It is through this digital platform that they want to address the public opinion through adopting new modes of self-expression contrary to the dominant conventional ones. Rajaa Alsanea is one of the Arab women writers who deviates from the conventional ways of writing about the predicament of women in her society. Her *Girls of Riyadh* is an iconic novel in which she has marked a significant shift in the expression of female agency and social commentary by adopting an unconventional narrative mode. She adopts Counter-Narrative as a narrative form to create an unconventional space for self-expression. Taking the internet as a platform, she creates that virtual space where she writes an oppositional story to criticize Saudi society because of its double moral standards, patriarchy, and tribal mentality that undermine basic human rights. El-Hadji Kandji points out:

Alsanea breaks down structural normativity and develops an aesthetic paradigm that absolutely deconstructs those classical canons...She resorts to internet forums or chat rooms; in doing so, she introduces the reader to a contemporary living fictional work by giving voice to a woman who adopts a narrative method that echoes the subversion of sociocultural norms in Saudi Arabia. (Kandji 2021)

7.2 *Girls of Riyadh as a Groundbreaking Novel*

Girls of Riyadh is the story of four young girlfriends from the velvet class- Gamarah, Michelle, Sadeem, and Lamees- whose lives are characterized by individual struggle to maintain their subjectivity in a society that is male-dominant. They start their relationships as students during and after high school. The story traces their growth, love, and marriage experiences both inside and outside the Kingdom. *Girls of Riyadh* can be seen as a taboo-breaking narrative that traces the transition of Saudi society from restrictions, limitations and confinement to freedom and liberty. As Jael Gwynne points out, “The experience of agency of young women with transitional space is inseparable from what they provide to be the prescriptions of local cultural traditions and relative freedom enacted by globalization.” (Gwynne 2013) As a subversive narrative, *Girls of Riyadh* ignites the first spark for change. It has unveiled the reality of the many bad social and cultural aspects associated with the situation of Saudi women. The novel has been banned from publication for two years, and Alsanea has been accused of marring the reputation of the Saudi woman as a result. “Men have written to me saying: who authorized you to speak for the girls of Najid? You are nothing but the image of women in Saudi society” (Alsanea 2007). In *Girls of Riyadh*, she launches a vociferous attack on prevailing conventions of masculinity and femininity while highlighting the need for changes to reconstruct a new female identity. In response to the lots of repercussions, Alsanea states:

Everyone condemns my bold writing, and perhaps my boldness in writing at all. Everyone is blaming me for the fury I have stirred up around “taboo” topics that in society we have never been accustomed to discussing so frankly, especially when this opening comes from a young woman like me. But isn’t there a starting point for every drastic social change. (Alsanea 2007)

Thus, in the context of a society riddled with contradictory social and cultural standards that impose many curbs on female freedom of expression and mobility, Alsanea finds in writing a digitally based counter-story a way-out to achieve her mission. She constitutes a virtual community with virtual entities. Alsanea writes, “To everyone who has enough courage to read the naked truth that is laid out on the WWW and is ready to accept this truth to stay with me through this insane adventure” (Alsanea 2007).

8. Discussion and Findings

8.1 *Gamarah's Experience: From Humiliation to Self-assertion*

Arranged marriage is one aspect of women's subjugation that is inherent in the social texture of Saudi society. It strips both men and women of their freedom to choose their future spouses. Gamarah is the first of the four friends to get married, and she has to suffer. Rashid is never a loving husband. He asks her to take contraceptive pills to avoid pregnancy. Despite his high level of education and despite living away from Saudi Arabia, he is still guided by that conventional tribal mentality inherent in his masculine entity as a husband. He always finds a pretext to abuse Gamarah both physically and verbally. As the narrator tells, "This young wife took upon her arms to defend her marriage and struggle for the sake of its survival" (Alsanea 2007). As Al-Natour points out, "He has the same perceptions that confine her with a monolithic definition of a hegemonic male superiority while crediting her as a woman of her own." (Al-Natour 2024) Rashid displays contradictory desires that perplex Gamarah. He asks her to be dressed like other women there. To her, he says, "It's as if you are trying to embarrass me in front of my friends with the thing you wear! And then you wonder why I don't join you!" (Alsanea 2007) Gamarah goes to comply with his desire, yet he says, "Taking them off doesn't make you look any better." (Alsanea 2007) Thus, Rashid represents patriarchal hegemony by oppressing his wife in many ways. Gamarah becomes pregnant on account of her mother's advice to stop taking contraceptives. Rashid sees this pregnancy as challenging to his manhood. He says, "What pregnancy? You mean pregnant? How did it happen? Who gave you permission? You think you can twist my arms with these filthy tricks?" (Alsanea 2007) From a narrative-theoretical perspective, "Gamarah's narrative operates not as deviation but as critique" (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004). Her experience as a faithful wife disrupts the culturally dominant narrative of the "ideal wife". It demonstrates how her attempts of compliance to protect her marriage fail to secure stability for this marriage personal nor dignity. Her marriage experience with Rashid disrupts the coherence of patriarchal ideology by revealing internal contradictions.

Consequently, Gamarah is sent back to the Kingdom, and she is officially a divorcee to start another cycle of suffering as a divorced woman. She is considered an outcast and is not allowed to go out in public without a male guardian. Furthermore, staying at home never spares her from having her conduct curbed. Will Gamarah remain submissive? What stance is she going to take to demonstrate her rejection of such oppression? After a very painful marriage experience, Gamarah starts to settle down with her family in the company of her son to whom she devotes her entire life. She starts up a new business to help her overcome her predicament and to support her son. The business grows up and, gradually, flourishes, and she becomes self-employed. Together with her three friends, they form a social network to connect comfortably and freely. It is through this virtual space that Gamarah can survive, return to life and break conventions without facing public reprimand. In this due light, Jael Gwynne explains, "Young women's experiences of agency within transitional space are inseparable from what they perceive to be the prescriptions of local cultural traditions and the relative freedom enacted by globalization" (Gwynne 2013). Here, Gamarah's trajectory disrupts dominant cultural narratives that characterize female virtue with endurance, silence, and submission. According to Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) conception of counter-storytelling, Gamarah's story challenges the patriarchal marital structures normalized within Saudi society. Her sufferings do not reinforce the morality of endurance; rather, they reveal the structural violence embedded in gendered expectations of sacrifice and compliance.

Defying the stereotypical image of the Saudi woman, Gamarah begins to develop self-assertion by cultivating self-dependence. She wants to construct a new identity and, contrary to what Saudi divorced women used to do, she develops self-wholeness while holding responsibility toward her son. In the newly available cyberspace, she starts writing blogs and connecting with both men and women in chatrooms. She initiates an online relationship with Sultan, an unknown man to her. Gamarah's story ends with a note of defiance and resistance upon her refusal to meet him. She does not want to be victimized by society's ancient norms anymore. She succeeds in constructing a new female identity. Finally, Gamarah's varied experiences embody the epitome of female dialectical resistance and adaptation in Saudi society as she shifts from submissiveness to self-assertion and autonomy. Her experiences foreground patriarchal restrictions and demonstrate how women can construct their subjectivity and negotiate their agency through defying the prevailing norms. Taken as a whole, within a feminist framework, Gamarah's role presents a counter-discourse model that transforms personal injury into a critique of patriarchal narrative tradition. In her portrayal of Gamarah as a feminist counter-narrative character, Alsanea anticipates the evolution of reform as envisioned in Saudi Vision 2030.

8.2 *From Subjugation to Self-Authority: Michelle and the Formation of a Global Identity*

In the context of Saudi society, women are not allowed to be alone in public places nor are they allowed to be in the company of a man not from the same family. As the story tells, "A girl can't wander in a shopping mall without being checked out thoroughly by everyone from her Abbayah to the covering over her head, to the way she walks, the bag she carries, and in what direction she looks." (Alsanea 2007) Michelle is one of the four girlfriends who was born to a Saudi father and an American mother. Therefore, she is discriminated against by her father's extended family. They do not see her as one of them. "The greatest tragedy of it all was that her highly civilized father was persuaded by these ridiculous, stupid arguments." (Alsanea 2007) Michelle has lost her mother, and she has to stay for several years in the Kingdom to adapt to the mainstream life there. As she grows up as a teenager, Michelle never feels at ease with the prevailing constraints placed on young women. As a young woman who has growing needs to satisfy, Michelle meets and falls in love with Faisal. They develop a romantic relationship and reciprocate their feelings despite the many constraints imposed on it. It is through emails, chatrooms, and phone calls that they find space to freely reciprocate romantic feelings. As the story tells:

The telephone lines in Saudi Arabia are surely thicker and more abundant than elsewhere since they must bear the heavy weight of all the

whispered groanings that lovers have to exchange and all their sighs and moans and kisses that they cannot, in real life, enact or that they do not want to enact due to restrictions of customs and religion, that some of them truly respect and value. (Alsanea 2007)

Furthermore, being influenced by the romantic practices prevailing in Western countries, Michelle celebrates Valentine's Day by dressing herself in red and carrying a red handbag. "Michelle put on a red shirt and carried a matching handbag, and a large number of other female students did the same so that the whole campus looked bright red, by means of clothes, flowers, and stuffed animals" (Alsanea 2007). The celebration of Valentine's Day is unprecedented, and it is anticipated that such practices can find a way to Saudi Arabia. According to Delgado's (1989) framework of storytelling, Michelle's conduct challenges the tradition of dominant cultural narratives through reclaiming her experience of social marginalization as a form of resistance and transforming emotional openness into a feminist critique of social belonging.

Faisal's affection for her is so great; nevertheless, he cannot marry her because his family wants him to marry a woman of their choice to conform to the norms of their tribal community. He is helpless to say "No". "The minute Om Faisal heard the English name Michelle, one hundred devils swarmed into her head..... As soon as she heard that the girl's mother was American, she decided to bang the door shut for no good on the fruitless dialogue around this utterly ridiculous topic" (Alsanea 2007). Michelle goes to express her indignation toward the community as a whole, saying, "Everyone considers me a bad girl just because my mother is American. How can I live in such an unjust society? Tell me how, Faisal?" (Alsanea 2007). Michelle decides to leave him with no regret. She wants to maintain her subjectivity and self-respect. In this due light, (Shihada, 2013) points out, "Michelle's decisions are only her own, and she has her own individuality and not those of the tribe. She was better off without him and his family." She decides to leave a country where "Women were governed or herded like animals" (Alsanea 2007). In America she resumes her studies. She has a firm belief that "It was her life, only hers, and she was going to live it the way she wanted for herself and herself only." (Alsanea, 2007) Commenting on Michelle's desire to leave, Jael Gwynne (2013) remarks, "The desire to flee Saudi culture is predicated on the girl's awareness that her homeland is hostile to the gender liberating possibility enacted and through the process of globalization." Thus, according to Bamberg and Andrews (2004), "Michelle's persistent oscillation between hope and rejection constitutes an emotional rupture that transforms her personal longing into a critique of social norms that privilege lineage over emotional authenticity. Her narrative refuses redemptive resolution, thereby unsettling the moral coherence of patriarchal romance."

After all, Michelle's experiences in Saudi Arabia with Faisal present her as a new model of a Counter-Narrative character. In light of the narrative-theoretical perspective proposed by Bamberg and Andrews (2004), Michelle's story challenges the dominant narrative that considers marriage as the epitome of feminine success and social validation. Despite her emotional openness and desire for belonging, her experiences reveal the limits of adaptation and the persistence of exclusion. To conclude, considering Michelle's story, *Girls of Riyadh* can be interpreted as a feminist rearticulation that seeks to raise awareness of a generation of women about the limitations of dominant social norms to foreground possibilities for resistance.

8.3 Sadeem as a Model of Defiance and Resilience

Sadeem is the third girlfriend who represents a unique model of Saudi women in her struggle against conventional societal norms and her attempts to overcome her predicament by challenging the dominant ones. Sadeem is an extremely beautiful young woman with an impressive personality. She falls in love with a handsome young man named Waleed. They have a very long love story characterized by exchanging profound emotions, romantic feelings, understanding and respect. They keep their relationship strong through dating at restaurants and cafes. Chatrooms and cell phone calls are also instrumental in developing their relationship. As the narrator tells, "He called her dozens of times a day -he called her the minute he woke up in the morning, before going to work, at work, and after work. He always had a long conversation before going to sleep that would continue until dawn" (Alsanea 2007). Waleed is infatuated by Sadeem's beauty and he wants her to be his future wife.

The two lovers are officially engaged, and the wedding date is set. Primarily, Sadeem sees Waleed as a faithful future husband. She goes out of the usual and decides to satisfy Waleed's untamable passion by allowing him access to her body. To Sadeem's shock, Waleed decides to break his engagement with her. Though legally, she is already his wife by virtue of having exchanged legal vows, she is, conventionally, not allowed to sleep with him. "Is she not his legal wife? Did she not press the thumbprint beside his signature on the huge Register Book? Didn't all these men witness that she has become his legal wife without any wedding ceremony?" (Alsanea 2007) The trauma has left an overwhelming impact upon Sadeem's present and future life. She rises against the contradictory codes that govern her society and she takes an unrelenting stance to restore her self-respect and maintain her dignity. As Shihada (2013) puts it, "Sadeem is an assertive woman who never accepts guardianship because she sees it as demeaning to her. She refuses to be merchandise that passes from the ownership of one man to another." (Alsanea 2007) Thus, within Bamberg and Andrews's narrative-theoretical perspective, Sadeem's love experience with Waleed functions as resistance narrative rather than a moral deviation. It destabilizes the dominant narrative of feminine virtue predicated on sexual innocence and emotional restraint by underscoring the hypocrisy of patriarchal moral codes that excuse male transgression while demanding female purity and compliance" (Bamberg & Andrews, 2004).

Sadeem reaches London to recover from her traumatic love experience with Waleed. As the story tells, "London was nothing but gloom Sadeem cried and cried, lamenting that her first love was buried in its infancy before she could feel its pleasure" (Alsanea 2007). In the process of recovery, Sadeem constructs a new identity and adapts to the new locality. "She breathes in air saturated with

moisture and freedom.” (Alsanea 2007) She attends a party where “There wasn’t a single Arab among the guests” (Alsanea 2007). So, she feels free to act as if she were one of them with no constraints on herself. She enjoys the company of a Pakistani colleague who is undertaking the same internship. She feels liberated as she is in a place where “People in all colors and shapes were flowing around.” (Alsanea 2007) She falls in love with Firas, a high-profile young Saudi who works as a diplomat in the UK. The lovers reciprocate romantic feelings, respect and understanding. However, the relationship is doomed once he learns of her divorce.

After coming back to Saudi Arabia, Firas and Sadeem are still in love. They keep in touch through emails, chatrooms and cell phone calls. To Sadeem’s shock, Firas informs her that he has to marry a young woman of the choice of his family. She wonders with a lot of ailments. “Did it make any sense that a man of Firas’ strength and resourcefulness was unable to convince his family that he could marry a divorced woman? Or was it because he could not convince himself of it? Did Sadeem fail to reach the level of perfection to befit a man like Firas.” (Alsanea 2007) Firas’s marriage fails, and he wants to restore his lost relationship with Sadeem. Yet, Sadeem never relents in accepting this relationship to avenge her previous humiliation. Eventually, she agrees to marry her cousin, whom she finds to have been passionate about knowing her consent to marry him. Thus, from Delgado’s (1989) framework of storytelling, “Sadeem’s narrative challenges the legitimacy of patriarchal moral dominance. Her conduct embodies counter discourse practices in its feminist sense. Sadeem’s suffering is not individualized but politicized. It transforms private trauma into a critique of normative gendered moral norms.”

After all, Sadeem’s love experience with Faisal and her endeavor to follow western ideals (celebrating Valentine’s Day) to strengthen her relationship with him, her use of digital means of communication, her adjustment with the people in London, her love for Firas and finally her decision to marry her cousin constitute a counter-story that deconstruct the stereotypical image of the Saudi woman dominant conventional narratives in the context of the Saudi art of storytelling. Sadeem presents a model of the modern conscious woman who can overcome her predicament and construct a new identity by subverting dominant norms, while emphasizing the need for change and reform embodied in Vision 2030.

After all, Sadeem’s various experiences—her romance with Faisal, adoption of certain Western cultural practices associated with romantic relationships (such as celebrating Valentine’s Day), her communication through digital channels, her adaptation to life in the UK, her love with Firas, and, eventually, her decision to marry her cousin—collectively constitute a counter-story that deconstructs conventional representations of Saudi women within dominant Saudi storytelling traditions. Thus, Sadeem represents a model of the modern, assertive and self-aware woman who can negotiate constraints and reconfigures circumstances through subverting the prevailing social and cultural norms. The trajectory she follows reflects the need for reform through change and social transformation that resonates with the socio-cultural framework in alignment with Saudi Vision 2030.

8.4 Lamees’ Success in Subverting both Cultural and Professional Expectations

Lamees, the fourth of the girlfriends, presents a model of the modern Saudi woman who embodies a desire for change and reform through challenging the conventional norms that govern the Saudi female community. She maintains good relationships with her three friends. Alsanea presents her as a model of the sensible, educated friend who serves as a source of guidance and counsel for her peers. While studying at the college of medicine, Lamees falls in love with Ali; a Saudi Shai who is studying at the same college. Though this relationship is forbidden because they belong to different religious sects, their love develops, and they start dating, meeting at cafes and restaurants. Consequently, they are caught by the Police of Moral and Virtue. Lamees is never happy with the social and cultural norms that impose many constraints on the relationship between a man and a woman who love one another. She rebels against such norms and breaks the constraints in her own way. She is dressed in thobe -men wear- to hide her feminine features to meet her lover with minimal risk. In other situations, she poses another challenge to women’s clothing norms by wearing a tight Abayah to display different parts of her body. That is to say, Lamees demonstrates her rejection of the norms in different ways. Furthermore, to break the constraints imposed on her relationship with Ali, she finds a way out on the internet. Generally, she uses the internet to know more about the opposite sex. On chatrooms, she claims different identities with captivating names such as “The Demon Girl”, “Black Pearl”, and “Daddy Sweetheart”. Within Bamberg and Andrews’ (2004) framework of counter-narratives, Lamees’ rejection of shame, coupled with her emotional attachment to the man she loves, challenge the normative expectation that women’s identities must be subordinate in romantic endurance.

Lamees breaks her relationship with Ali. After graduation, she joins a hospital as a medical practitioner. She achieves great progress in her career. She is impressed by Nizar’s character, a medical doctor who works at the same hospital. Together, they have a successful love relationship that develops to a successful marriage. They could achieve noticeable professional success as medical doctors. Generally, although she rebels against the constraints of society, she appears as a role model as a wife, a professional doctor and a friend. Unlike dominant narratives that present women as subjects of sacrifice and endurance, in this novel, Lamees adopts agency through self-awareness, negotiation of social constraints and emotional autonomy. According to Solórzano and Yosso’s (2002) conception of counter-storytelling, Lamees’ story resists hegemonic constructions of femininity by demonstrating how she can resist normativity rather than submit to patriarchal structures. In a word, in sketching the character of Lamees, Alsanea presents her as a new model of the modern Saudi woman who challenges all the conventional norms that put constraints on women’s clothing, education, profession and women’s relationship with men. Lamees’ trajectory is a subversive. Alsanea makes Lamees her own mouthpiece to revolt against such norms in a way that negotiates the established social expectations that demonstrate the need for change and reform that align with the evolving objectives of Saudi Vision 2030.

8.5 Convergence and Divergence in the Four Trajectories

Alsanea interweaves the trajectories of the four protagonists to map a collective journey of moving toward liberation through developing self-awareness, resistance and defiance within a social framework riddled with patriarchal restrictions. From a Counter-Narrative perspective, each of them disturbs the dominant norms in her own way. Gamrah's trajectory is shaped by initial compliance with traditional social and cultural expectations, then it changes through a gradual, experiential resistance that develops to self-awareness and defiance after divorce following marital disillusionment. Sadeem embodies emotional defiance through adopting an explicit and emotionally-based resistance to maintain her dignity by rejecting stigma of her failed romance and engagement. Michelle's pursuit is shaped by cultural hybridity that is characterized by resistance and defiance through challenging dominant social conventions associated with cross-cultural relationships. Lamees' trajectory is shaped by personal and professional ambition for autonomy. Thus, Alsanea presents the trajectories in a way that reveals both divergence and convergence in the pursuits of the four protagonists. The narratives of the four friends and their lived experiences of love, marriage, disillusionment and personal aspirations are crucial in constructing new identities in their struggle to achieve autonomy and self-assertion. The difference in trajectories suggests that counter-narrative feminism in the novel is adaptive and intersectional yet distinct. In a word, the trajectories of the four protagonists-though monolithic- are unified by a shared resistance to patriarchal norms that regulate love and marriage. It is a pursuit of self-definition, identity reconstruction and agency while moving from constraint toward autonomy.

After all, the collective synthesis of the four trajectories reinforces the argument such different forms of female resistance can broadly contribute to socio-cultural transformations. The four protagonists move from cultural compliance and social disillusionment to open defiance and negotiation. The combined experiences of the four friends illustrate that change does not occur through individual resistance, rather, it can be achieved only through collective efforts toward autonomy and liberation. This is an anticipatory assumption that strongly resonates and significantly aligns with the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030. Thus, the novel is anticipatory of the cultural shift that is later endorsed by Vision 2030 in the sense that the four narratives seek to empower women through expanding their roles and participation in public and private life in a way that helps legitimize the transformative possibilities that Vision 2030 aims to institutionalize.

9. Conclusion

Rajaa Alsanea is a revolutionary visionary writer whose novel has marked a turning point in the art of Saudi storytelling through adopting Counter-Narrative as a feminist narrative strategy to achieve her vision of the rightful status of the Saudi woman. She presents unconventional models of women and offers alternative modes of female self-representation. In her portrayal of the characters Gamarah, Michelle, Sadeem, and Lamees, Alsanea presents them as models of resilience, resistance, and self-assertion by reconfiguring prevailing discourses on love, marriage, and female agency. She presents women as agents of change who can actively participate in constructing new social and cultural female identities to cope with a modern world. She employs a digital discourse as a new narrative framework to give marginalized voices considerable space to express their experiences of oppression, which are often excluded from mainstream literary and cultural narratives. *Girls of Riyadh* functions both as a socio-cultural document and a literary text, reflecting new forms of female consciousness and uncovering an ardent need for change and reform associated with women's empowerment and agency. It marks a turning point in Saudi storytelling, anticipating social and cultural shifts that resonate with national transformations in women's roles and were later endorsed in Saudi Vision 2030. In a word, Alsanea's Counter-Narrative opens discursive space for new female subjectivities and disrupts dominant patriarchal assumptions grounded in negotiation, resistance, resilience, and agency that underscore the novel's relevance to the ongoing debates in literary and cultural studies.

10. The Study's Contribution

The present study makes a significant contribution to both literary and cultural studies, as it is a crucial step toward understanding contemporary Saudi women's literature through an unconventional lens. The study foregrounds *Girls of Riyadh* as an agent of change, situating the novel within the broader social evolution under Saudi Vision 2030, which contributes greatly to cultural change. The novelty of the present study lies in underscoring new ways of female subjectivity through subversion. The paper contributes to the scholarly discussion by illustrating how counter-storytelling challenges patriarchal restrictions by creating a new space for women's self-expression.

11. Scholarly Impact Statement

The present study considers Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* from a new feminist lens as a rich literary text of theoretical significance that demonstrates how the writer employs storytelling as a means of resistance and identity construction in a way that enriches debates on the aesthetics of counter-storytelling in feminist literary criticism and indigenous literary discourse within contemporary Saudi society. The study offers a methodologically critical reading of narrative strategy from the perspectives of Counter-Narrative of (Delgado, Solórzano, & Yosso) and (Bamberg, Andrews). Such analysis of the text from such theoretical frameworks can contribute to ongoing discussions in both fictional and non-fictional writing in English novels concerning the subversion of dominant socio-cultural discourses through literary form.

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Authors' contributions

Dr. Mohamed F. Khalaf Helaly, first author, was responsible for the study design and revision. Dr. Anny Sherene and Dr. Azeemah Alfifi were responsible for data collection and drafting the manuscript. Dr. Amany Abdullah Eldiasty, last author, participated actively in data interpretation and analytical framework development. She provided significant intellectual input during manuscript drafting and critical revision. Helaly, the first author, was responsible for revising the whole manuscript.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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