

Marriageability, Narration, and Counter-Discourse in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*: a Feminist and Positive Discourse Analysis of a Serial Email Novel

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how a woman's marriageability is shaped by the social norms and expectations that define her as "timely," "desirable," "respectable," and "suitable" for marriage in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*. The study used bilingual close readings of the Arabic original and the English translation of the novel along with Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), and Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA). Through FCDA the study examined how names are given to individuals, predicates are attached to them, their agency is represented, modalities are expressed, and evaluations are made to define a woman's marital status as a measure of her social worth. The study also examined the linguistic and narrative techniques that allow the narrator and the four female protagonists to accept, reject or transform the evaluations they have been subjected to. Marriageability was defined by five major themes: The temporally disciplined lives of women; Success in life measured by a woman's marriage; Socially distributed mechanisms for surveillance; Unequal moral assessments of the intimacy of relationships and divorces; And the transition from being an evaluated object to becoming a self-identified subject. All of these themes reveal how marriageability is maintained through social time, hierarchical evaluations, diffuse sources of authority, and the inequality of agency. These counter-narratives were found through reattribution, solidarity, different assessments, and continuing to tell stories.

Keywords: *Girls of Riyadh*; Saudi women; marriageability; feminist critical discourse analysis; positive discourse analysis; Arabic fiction; narrative form.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage in Saudi Arabia represents much more than a simple marital contract. It also serves as a marker of a woman's femininity, her adulthood, her respectability, her family's success and her future potential. Therefore, a woman's marital status influences perceptions regarding her attractiveness, virtue, maturity and accomplishments, despite the fact that the decision to marry is often based upon numerous factors beyond a woman's control such as family, societal, financial, legal and personal considerations. Labels like unmarried, divorced, or "late marrying" do more than indicate marital status; they also place women on a social timeline, confer value, and imply a specific life path. These evaluations now hold increased significance because of the swift advancement of institutions in Saudi Arabia. As part of the Vision 2030 project there has been a growing level of awareness among the public of women participating in the economy and being present publicly along with additional reforms dealing with women's rights to travel, work and be free from guardianship restrictions. Nevertheless, many academics have cautioned against believing that formal changes at the institutional level will directly result in a reduction of long-standing gender-based values and informal means of regulating women (Saleh & Malibari, 2021; Wheeler, 2020). Consequently, the notion of marriageability continues to represent an important contemporary issue of discussion because high numbers of educated, employed and mobile women continue to exist side-by-side with continued expectations of marriage, family approval, sexual modesty, age and appropriate forms of femininity. Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (Arabic Original Title: *Alsanea*, 2005; English Translation: *Alsanea*, 2007) provides a valuable site of literary investigation into the tension between idealized marriage and its imperfect reality. Through an anonymous narrator who sends weekly e-mails detailing the lives of four young women (Gamrah, Sadeem, Lamees and Michelle), the novel highlights the differences between idealized marriage and the actual disparate realities that surround it. *Girls of Riyadh* has been received by critics as social exposure, scandalous writing, a feminist critique and/or simply a commercial way to view aspects of a previously unseen culture. While each term accurately describes different dimensions of the novel's reception, each runs the risk of reducing the novel to nothing more than a reportage on Saudi Arabian culture. In contrast, this paper views the novel as an authored narrative where language selection, cited voices, serial composition, authorial anonymity and evaluative frame contribute to both constructing and questioning socially-gendered value.

There exists a significant lacuna in current research on the concept of marriageability. Prior research has identified key elements relevant to the understanding of gender, religion, cultural conflict, cyber-space, translations and female agency in *Girls of Riyadh*; yet less attention has focused on repeated ways in which women are assessed as timely or untimely; desirable or undesirable; respectable or disreputable; successful or unsuccessful in terms of their relation to marriage. This study addresses this lacuna by applying FCDA and PDA to analyze the recurrent ways in which women are evaluated in *Girls of Riyadh* within a bilingual literary framework. Unlike previous

studies that treat domination and resistance as distinct stages, this study analyzes how one paragraph can reinforce a gendered standard while simultaneously revealing, limiting or reformulating it.

This paper answers three questions:

RQ1. What linguistic and narrative devices construct marriageability in *Girls of Riyadh*, specifically through naming, predication, agency, modality and evaluation?

RQ2. To what extent do the narrator and the four protagonists acknowledge, limit, reject or reframe these categories; and what discursively constructive resources do they use?

RQ3. How does the serial e-mail format (i.e., anonymous narrator and imagined readership) affect both the opportunities and risks associated with challenging marriageability?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Marriageability as a Gendered Social Value

In this article, marriageability refers to the social process through which a woman is considered suitable, desirable, respectable and appropriate for marrying at the right time. Marriageability is seen as not being inherent to the individual woman herself but is derived from various judgments made by others as to her "social standing" based upon age, beauty/appearance, behavior, family history/connections, sect affiliation, social status/class, level of education, work experience/employment, sexual/reputation history, emotional conduct/personality and conformity to expected feminine roles/behavior. There is a large body of research that studies how the State of Saudi Arabia's gender policies impact families and marriages. Historically, family and marriage have been influenced by religious interpretations, institutionalized forms of state control, administrative practices and social norms (Al-Rasheed, 2013). The ethnographical research conducted by Le Renard (2014) on young women living in Riyadh provides additional insight into how their educational experiences, urban environments, changing consumerism patterns and reform efforts contribute to shaping the young women's transition into adulthood as well as develop socially acceptable identities for themselves while still adhering to traditional gender-based expectations.

There are several theoretical frameworks that describe how such assessments of marriageability become socially powerful. Symbolic Violence (Bourdieu, 2001) explains how an inequality exists when there is classification that appears natural, legitimate and obvious rather than overtly oppressive. Gender Performativity (Butler, 2006) describes how gender identity is created through repeating norms rather than expressing them from a previously established core identity. Respectability (Skeggs, 1997) provides a basis for understanding how social values can exist unequally in society through physical/moral standards that create respectability. When combined together these theories demonstrate how marriageability is continually constructed through a performance of appropriate femininity and ongoing assessments from family/social contexts. However, each theory will be applied carefully so as not to apply them as rigid models imposed uniformly onto the entirety of Saudi Society. Mohanty's (2003) critique of homogenous representations of non-western women was taken into consideration during this analysis. Therefore, the analysis did not evaluate the protagonist(s) based upon a universal model of liberation but rather examined power/resistance within the novel's own intersectionalities of family/religion/class/reputation/intimate relationships. Additionally, Saudi empirical research has supported the relevance of marriageability as a multi-dimensional social phenomenon. Al-Khayyat and Shehab El-Din (2022) analyzed factors related to delay in marrying among Saudi women such as employment/income/social customs/family reputation and lineage/involvement of family in selecting spouse/beliefs regarding the ideal age for marriage. Although these findings were utilized as part of providing social context of the interaction between age/family background/employment/marriage timing; they were not utilized as evidence directly supporting the fictional character(s).

Marriageability also possesses a temporal aspect. Terms such as *late*, *delayed*, *waiting*, or *missed* place women on a social timeline shaped by family questions, wedding comparisons, fertility concerns, jokes, and public commentary. Ahmed's (2010) description of happiness scripts is applicable here because communities can guide individuals toward established goals and life sequences as indications of a properly directed life. While marriage may be genuinely desired, the analytical issue arises when it becomes the primary criterion through which adulthood, femininity, respectability, and the completion of a woman's life are evaluated.

It is necessary to differentiate between social assessment and Islamic legal-religious categorizations. *Nikāḥ* refers to marriage as a legally recognized religious contract; *walī* refers to the marital guardian; and *kafā'a* concerns suitability or compatibility between prospective spouses. Tijani (2019a) demonstrated in his analysis of *Girls of Riyadh*, specifically in regards to the relationship between Sadeem/Waleed, why religious norms should not be viewed as one monolithic form of cultural patriarchy. Contemporary Saudi legal codification further illustrates this distinction: the 2022 Personal Status Law defines marriage as a contract, requires the consent of both prospective spouses, specifies the role of the *walī*, and addresses *kafā'a* in relation to religion and recognized custom (Saudi Arabia, 2022, Arts. 6-20). Since the law post-dates the novel, it is not used to establish the legal

context under which the events depicted in the novel occurred in 2005. Rather, it is used only to establish the distinction between legal-religious terminology and the broader social discourse surrounding marriageability.

Table 1. Key Arabic Marriage-Related Terms Used in the Analysis

Arabic term	Transliteration	Working meaning	Analytical relevance
نكاح	<i>nikāḥ</i>	Marriage as a legal-religious contract	Distinguishes formal marriage from the wider discourse of marriageability
ولي	<i>walī</i>	Marital guardian	Relevant to consent, family authority, and the mediation of marriage
كفاءة	<i>kafā'a</i>	Compatibility or suitability	Connects marriage to religion, status, family background, and recognized suitability
عدة	<i>'idda</i>	Prescribed waiting period after specified forms of dissolution or widowhood	Distinguishes legal waiting from informal social expectations about women's marital timing
طلاق	<i>ṭalāq</i>	Divorce or repudiation	Distinguishes formal dissolution from the social stigma attached to divorced women
خلع	<i>khul'</i>	A form of marital dissolution initiated by the wife under specified conditions	Prevents distinct forms of dissolution from being treated as socially or legally identical

In the wider social conversation, personal experiences can serve as types of moral proof. Staying single, going through a divorce, or focusing on education and work might be seen as signs of a woman's attractiveness, status, or femininity. The idealized woman eligible for marriage can thus be seen as a person who adheres to a social timeline, upholds a respectable image, gains family endorsement, and aligns with recognized standards of female conduct. Consequently, she is anticipated to hold conflicting roles: knowledgeable yet not threatening, progressive yet not disruptive, expressive yet reserved, and discerning yet not overly demanding. Bourdieu, Butler, Skeggs, and Ahmed are significant for illustrating how these classifications gain social power via repetition, recognition, embodiment, and social timing, instead of relying on a distinct authority.

2.2 Reading *Girls of Riyadh*

Girls of Riyadh is an example of the expanding body of literature by Saudi and Gulf women authors focusing on family dynamics, gender roles and interactions, religion, sex, societal image, and the development of identity by women in rapidly changing social environments. As stated by Kanie (2017), Alsanea is a representative of an emerging group of younger Saudi female writers developing increasingly overt criticism of patriarchal gender arrangements and social/religious authorities. Additionally, Tijani (2019b) demonstrates that women's writings in the Arabian Gulf have historically demonstrated gendered dominance through narrative as well as contributed to increasing levels of feminist awareness. Therefore, the uniqueness of *Girls of Riyadh* lies in combining domestic relationships, elite urban lifestyle, consumer modernity, family and religious discourse, and digital technology into a clearly identifiable and visible account of young women's experiences.

In terms of critical reactions to the novel, there have been numerous and varying opinions expressed. Gwynne (2013) focused upon the role of cyber-space in empowering women, while Tijani (2019a) explored the inter-relationship of religion, culture, gender, and Islamic-feminist interpretation. In addition to this, scholars conducting research in Arabic languages have found underlying structural components including authority, surveillance, hierarchical-gender systems, and resistance within the novel (Al-Salmi, 2018). Furthermore, Al-

Tamimi et al. (2022) position *Girls of Riyadh* in context to Saudi women's narrative and explore cultural/social meaning developed throughout the novels' representations of current-day female experiences. Lastly, Booth (2010) discusses the translation process and asserts that the English language version of *Girls of Riyadh* cannot be viewed as a direct replication of the Arabic version due to translation/editorial interventions that affect the linguistic texture/cultural specifics/gender-politics of the novel. Collectively, these studies show that the debate surrounding *Girls of Riyadh* concerns not only the accuracy of its representation of Saudi society but also competing interpretations of the relationships among gender, religion, culture, modernity, translation, and female agency.

Additionally, Ismail Mousa and Okleh Alhwamdeh (2020) demonstrate that dialectical expressions used in Saudi Arabia can either be formalized in the form of standardized English usage, omitted from the English version entirely, or rendered communicatively in English; all resulting in effects to both cultural climate and pragmatics. Moreover, translation will also be significant to the analysis of marriageability due to names/expression/humor/evaluation/shifting in style that do not possess equal force when translated from Arabic to English.

The novel's serialized email format is also significant. Through weekly anonymous emails, the narrator anticipates backlash, engages with readers, and claims authority over narratives that might otherwise remain socially restricted. This structure resembles aspects of Fraser's (1990) concept of the counterpublic, in which marginalized groups circulate interpretations that challenge dominant narratives. The fictional mailing list is not an empirically documented social movement, so *Girls of Riyadh* should not simply be labeled a counterpublic. Rather, it displays counterpublic qualities through alternative circulation, contested visibility, collective expression, and the transformation of private experiences into publicly intelligible narratives. Each of the four protagonists occupies different positions in relation to these processes. Gamrah/Sadeem/Michelle/Lamees experience different combinations of marriage/romance/family acceptance/intimacy/separation/education/friendships/career ambitions. Each differing combination represents an analytical significance regarding preventing marriageability from being described/reduced to singular models of oppression/resistance. Therefore, this study asks not whether *Girls of Riyadh* is simply traditional or modern, conservative or feminist, but how social value is produced and how women in different social positions negotiate it.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

CDA focuses on the connection between textual decisions and larger structures of social power in terms of how language is used to reinforce dominance and representational significance of society (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993). FCDA builds on this base and applies a feminist lens toward understanding how everyday categories, assumptions, and communication practices create legitimacy for gendered power (Lazar, 2007). Naming involves the terminology and classifications used to represent social actors, whereas predication concerns the attributes or evaluations assigned to them (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Agency examines who is represented as acting, deciding, authorizing, withdrawing, judging, or experiencing the consequences of an action. Modality concerns linguistic expressions of obligation, possibility, probability, permission, necessity, and certainty (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Evaluation addresses expressions of affect and judgment, including approval or disapproval, normality, desirability, and comparison (Martin & White, 2005). Together, these elements make it possible to examine how small-scale linguistic choices contribute to broader social values and gendered meanings constructed through discourse

Table 2. Operationalization of the FCDA Categories

Feature	Main indicators	Analytical question	Relevance to marriageability
Naming	Labels, kinship terms, marital-status categories, collective designations	How is the actor categorized?	Identifies categories such as unmarried, divorced, respectable, difficult, or unsuitable
Predication	Adjectives, descriptions, metaphors, character judgments	What qualities are attached to the category?	Reveals how desirability, morality, maturity, or deficiency are assigned
Agency	Transitivity, active/passive structures, actor-goal relations, omitted agents	Who acts, decides, judges, withdraws, or receives consequences?	Exposes unequal distributions of responsibility and decision-making power

Modality	Obligation, necessity, probability, permission, certainty	What is represented as required, natural, inevitable, or possible?	Identifies the normative force behind marriage and family expectations
Evaluation	Affect, judgment, approval/disapproval, comparison	What persons, actions, and outcomes are valued or devalued?	Shows how marriage and other life choices are ranked as success, failure, respectability, or shame

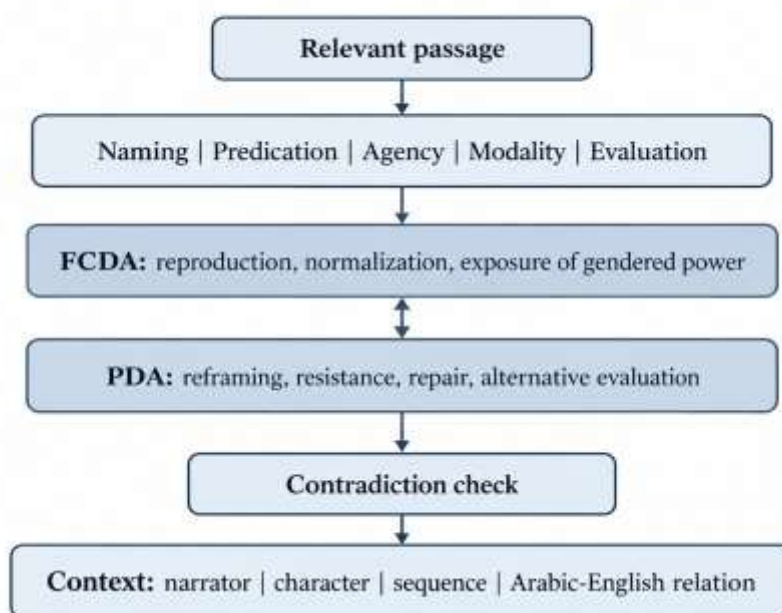
3.2 Positive Discourse Analysis

Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) extends critique by examining forms of discourse that support solidarity, alternatives, repair, resistance, and socially transformative meanings (Martin, 2004). Rather, PDA asks how discourse can move beyond the reproduction of dominance by creating resources for alternative interpretations and forms of social action. It also examines how dominant representations may be reformulated and how alternative meanings become socially recognizable. Bartlett's (2012) work is also useful because PDA draws attention to hybrid forms of constraint and change, offering an alternative to treating domination and liberation as simple opposites. In this study, PDA is used to examine how women develop identities beyond marital status, interpret delayed marriage in relation to their own choices, view divorce as survival or recovery rather than failure, and use humor or irony to resist intrusive social judgments. PDA is used with caution. The assumption is not made that resistance will occur in each passage, nor that the mere presence of a woman's ability to make her own choices indicates that she has overcome the barriers of gendered structural inequalities.

3.3 Integrated FCDA-PDA Analytical Framework

FCDA and PDA operate as complementary analytical perspectives on the same passages. FCDA examines how discourse constructs gendered values, presents them as natural, and contributes to their reproduction. PDA focuses on where and how those values are contested, modified, redistributed, or replaced by alternative meanings. A single passage may therefore reproduce anxiety about the timing of marriage while also challenging the judgment that produces that anxiety. Likewise, a woman may resist a negative label while still valuing marriage, and criticism of family authority does not necessarily imply rejection of family belonging. Each relevant passage is examined in terms of naming, predication, agency, modality, and evaluation. The analysis then asks two further questions: How does the discourse reproduce existing structures of social evaluation and power? and How does it create alternative interpretations or possibilities for meaning?

Figure 1. Integrated FCDA-PDA Analytical Model



3.4 Corpus and Analytical Procedure

The study employs qualitative bilingual close reading of the complete Arabic edition of *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* (Alsanea, 2005) alongside the published English translation, *Girls of Riyadh* (Alsanea, 2007). The Arabic text is given

priority when interpretation depends on culturally specific forms of naming, reputation, marital status, family judgment, intimacy, humor, or evaluative force. The English version is read comparatively rather than treated as a direct substitute for the Arabic because the translation is itself a mediated textual form (Booth, 2010).

The study adopts an explicitly feminist-critical interpretive position. FCDA and PDA are not treated as neutral classification tools; rather, they direct attention to the normalization of gendered power and to the discursive resources through which unequal meanings may be challenged. The analysis therefore avoids treating Saudi culture or Saudi women as homogeneous categories and limits its claims to the discourse and narrative organization of the novel. For textual analysis, marriageability is operationalized through four overlapping dimensions. The temporal dimension concerns age, sequence, waiting, and judgments about the appropriate time to marry. The corporeal dimension concerns appearance, dress, bodily comportment, and embodied desirability. The genealogical-social dimension concerns family background, kinship, sect, class, education, employment, and the social standing of a prospective match. The moral-relational dimension concerns sexual reputation, emotional behavior, family approval, obedience, selectiveness, intimacy, divorce, and the attribution of responsibility for relational outcomes.

The unit of analysis is the contextually complete passage, ranging from a clause or exchange to a longer narratorial sequence when context is necessary to interpret evaluation or agency. Passages enter the analytic set when they concern one or more dimensions of marriageability. Analysis proceeds iteratively. Relevant passages are identified and contextualized; each is examined for the five FCDA features; the same material is then read through PDA for reframing, solidarity, counter-naming, recovery, humor, or alternative evaluation. Negative or contradictory cases are retained rather than forced into an oppression-resistance binary. Recurrent relationships are then consolidated into the five themes reported below.

Arabic-English comparison is selective and analytically motivated rather than a line-by-line evaluation of the complete translation. A source-target pair is compared when the argument depends on lexical choice, modality, cultural reference, evaluation, naming, humor, or another feature whose discursive effect may change in translation. The comparison treats translation as contextualized linguistic and cultural mediation rather than simple lexical substitution, consistent with the documented translation history of the novel and research on its dialectal rendering (Booth, 2010; Ismail Mousa & Okleh Alhwamdeh, 2020). The aim is not to score translation quality but to determine whether a translation choice affects the discourse-analytic interpretation. Researcher reflexivity is addressed by grounding interpretations in observable textual features, surrounding context, recurring patterns, alternative readings, and contradictory examples

4. RESULTS: THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The analysis identifies five main ways in which marriageability is constructed and contested: temporal regulation, the evaluation of feminine achievement, distributed social surveillance, unequal moral judgment, and the movement from evaluated object to narrating subject. Table 3 summarizes the main discursive processes associated with each theme.

Table 3. Marriageability Themes and Their Discursive Operations

Theme	Dominant operation	Main FCDA focus	Main PDA counter-strategy
Temporal disciplining	Marriage organizes socially legitimate time	Naming, modality, evaluation	Counter-temporality and narrative continuation
Marriage as feminine success	Marital status hierarchizes other achievements	Predication, modality, evaluation	Pluralization of value
Distributed surveillance	Judgment circulates through family, community, and generalized voices	Naming, agency, modality	Re-attribution, solidarity, counter-evaluation

Unequal moral evaluation	Women bear disproportionate reputational consequences for intimacy and divorce	Agency, predication, evaluation	Renaming responsibility and causal restoration
Evaluated object to narrating subject	Narrative authority shifts toward women interpreting the judgments imposed on them	Naming, agency, modality, evaluation	Counter-naming and narrative self-definition

4.1 The Temporal Disciplining of Women

Social interpretation defines late marriage (i.e. marriage at an older age) as delay, diminished prospects or a problem unto itself. In addition to determining whether or not a woman will marry, her success is determined by when marriage occurs and if it fits the expected order. Gamrah has successfully married but the stability associated with successful marriage was not achieved. When Gamrah completed the expected transition into marriage, she did so without achieving the social value of stability which is provided by a successful marriage. Sadeem's anticipated transition from courtship to marriage failed, and the breakdown of that relationship resulted in consequences extending beyond the actual event. Michelle experienced a type of limbo due to the fact that emotional attachments do not always result in marriage once family approvals and social acceptance have been denied.

Lamees approached timing from a strategic perspective. She demonstrated that the socially accepted timeline can be manipulated instead of being forced upon individuals.

In addition to naming, all five FCDA categories are present in this temporal structure. Predication applies qualities (e.g. ready vs. unready) to women. Agency shows that the timing of women's transitions is often shaped by others, including family members and prospective spouses. Modality illustrates that there is a strong sense of obligation to adhere to social norms. Evaluation provides a positive valuation on adherence to those social norms and a negative valuation on non-adherence. Additionally, it is also important to identify social and legal temporality as two distinct areas of study. Legal temporality refers to the formal recognition of periods and procedures related to marriage and divorce (i.e., 'idda, ṭalāq, and khul'). Social temporality (as illustrated by PDA) refers to the broad expectation of what constitutes "on-time" social life. A woman can be socially viewed as "behind" in terms of her social progress and timing without violating any formal rules or regulations regarding the appropriate timing for marriage.

Therefore, PDA illustrates a counter-temporality in regards to these concepts. Instead of marking the end of their lives, divorce, disappointment and delayed marriage become continuations of their lives. Gamrah continued in the story following marital separation. Sadeem's life continued post-rejection. Michelle's identity extended beyond a single relationship. Lamees showed that professional growth could occur simultaneously with romantic growth. Additionally, the novel's email format further reinforces this counter-temporality. While society expects closure regarding relationships in a timely manner, each week introduces new material and delays the ultimate conclusion/evaluation of each character. Therefore, narrative continuity became a method for delaying societal closure on the characters' lives.

4.2 Marriage as a Measure of Feminine Success

The novel doesn't degrade marriage. All the characters in the novel want love, companionship, a family and successful marriages. However, the novel disputes how society transforms an important relationship (marriage) to a central means by which women are judged for their worth. A woman may obtain education, she may be intelligent, physically attractive, ambitious professionally, socially skilled etc. but ultimately, her value will always be determined based on whether or not she is married.

Gamrah's story disrupts this social hierarchy since as soon as one achieves the socially valued status of "wife" (or loses it), there is no longer that feeling of safety associated with being married. Sadeem presents the opposite problem: since marriage did not occur, other qualities (such as beauty, brains, etc.) cannot completely insulate her from a discursive system where romantic failure diminishes her social worth. Michelle shows that education, global identity, and emotional connection are not enough to prevent a woman from questioning whether she belongs or needs to obtain family approval. Lamees provides a better example of balance because both professional development and marriage are presented as areas needing coordination (not mutually exclusive).

FCDA helps explain how this evaluative system is constructed. Classifying women within marital categories can obscure other aspects of their identity. Predication assigns positive or negative qualities to these categories, while

agency becomes uneven when women are held responsible for turning personal attributes into a successful marriage, even though outcomes also depend on prospective husbands, families, kinship expectations, and social compatibility. Modality appears in assumptions about what a woman should desire, pursue, or compromise, while evaluation places marriage near the top of the hierarchy through which feminine achievement is assessed. Class complicates the structure of the process. Even though the protagonists live in privilege-rich urban spaces of education/consumption/mobility/transnational culture that provide social capital, marriage remains embedded within the economy of feminine value. Class privileges only alter the negotiating terms;

education/cosmopolitanism/professional ambition can heighten distinction but ultimately require reconciling with family reputation and finding an acceptable match. PDA represents an alternative evaluative grammar of pluralization vs. substitution. Marriage is neither replaced by obligatory independent singlehood nor made mandatory. Rather than replacing marriage with independence, friendships, educations, employment, emotional awareness/recovery from betrayals/humor/faith/the ability to reassess experiences provide additional measures of value. Therefore, Sadeem can desire partnership without defining herself solely by rejection; Gamrah can experience divorce without defining herself solely by divorce; Michelle can find love while acknowledging the societal constructs limiting her choices; and Lamees can seek marriage while continuing to develop professionally. Ultimately resistance comes from broadening the standards by which a woman's life is considered to be worthwhile.

4.3 Family Surveillance and the Distributed Voice of Society

Social pressure in *Girls of Riyadh* often does not come from a single identifiable source. It circulates through family members, prospective partners, social networks, wedding conversations, concerns about reputation, and the protagonists' anticipation of how others may respond. This distributed form of power is especially effective because its source is difficult to locate. Reported speech frequently attributes judgment to families, relatives, people in general, or what society is assumed to think. In this way, the novel constructs a social voice that seems to be everywhere without belonging to any single speaker.

Three forms of authority can be identified: personal authority associated with a particular individual, collective authority located in the family or community, and abstract authority represented by commonly accepted beliefs about what people or society expect. The movement toward less identifiable forms of authority strengthen ideological power because a particular speaker can be challenged, whereas an apparently shared consensus can appear natural or self-evident.

The five FCDA categories help explain how this process operates. Naming identifies the groups authorized to evaluate; predication attaches moral and social qualities to the women being judged; agency becomes obscured when judgments circulate without a clearly identifiable source; modality presents expectations as necessary or unavoidable; and evaluation turns collective judgments into standards through which women anticipate and regulate their own behavior. Both women and men may reproduce or communicate these judgments, so the novel does not depend on a single patriarchal antagonist. Power instead operates relationally and can be reproduced through everyday social interaction.

The narrator's lack of social identity makes an important structural comparison. As a member of the general public, she writes for a public audience but has no socially identifiable body that can be evaluated by readers, whom she also constantly considers in making judgment about herself. Her decision to withhold this information makes it difficult for them to direct their evaluations towards her as a person, and allows the "I" of the narrator to provide a unifying voice for the experiences of many women.

Thus, anonymity is both protective (it protects the narrator from certain kinds of evaluations), and productive (it provides her with a degree of autonomy to move, interpret, and connect individualized experiences that may have been separate and private).

4.4 Unequal Moral Evaluation of Intimacy and Divorce

One of the clearest feminist dimensions of the novel lies in the unequal moral consequences attached to intimacy and its breakdown. Sadeem's experience shows how intimacy within a relationship expected to lead to marriage can later be used against the woman, while men may retain greater freedom to withdraw. Gamrah's divorce reveals a similar imbalance: although her husband's betrayal contributes to the breakdown of the marriage, she becomes socially marked as a "divorced woman," whereas his identity is not defined in the same lasting way.

Modality regulates the forms of intimacy considered acceptable for women through expectations that they must protect their reputations. Evaluation then determines whether similar relational behavior is interpreted as male choice, female impropriety, betrayal, failure, or social damage.

Sadeem's story shows how the collapse of a romantic relationship affects self-perception within wider expectations of appropriate feminine behavior. A similar process appears in Gamrah's experience of divorce. Attention shifts from what the husband has done to what kind of woman she is now considered to be. Divorce is therefore transformed from an event in her life into a social status that reshapes reputation and judgment. Legal-

religious terminology must, however, be treated carefully. *Talāq*, *khul'*, *'idda*, and prohibited sexual conduct are distinct categories and should not be collapsed into a general language of shame. Social stigma may also extend well beyond formal legal definitions, while English translations of terms related to honor, modesty, betrayal, respectability, or gender-appropriate conduct may preserve basic meaning without carrying the same social force. The PDA uses naming and the assignment of responsibility to deal with the asymmetrical nature of the experience. Betrayal is not reinterpreted as evidence of a wife's inadequacy, and divorce is not treated as a permanent identity of damage. She may define it as a period of loss, transition, survival, or recovery. Most importantly the narratives are able to give her agency without requiring that she has eliminated all pain. *Gamrah* continues to suffer, while *Sadeem*'s vulnerability remains evident. Therefore, recovery does not result in transforming the injury from which she suffered into a simplistic narrative of empowerment.

4.5 From Evaluated Object to Narrating Subject

The novel's use of thematic development to develop women who have been continually assessed by husbands, prospective mates, families, acquaintances and fictional readers, develops a new and distinct narrative context where the assessors themselves are subject to scrutiny. The novel doesn't remove social assessment but rather, redirects the interpretive authority.

The anonymous narrator uses her narrative position to accomplish this. This is achieved by using a series of weekly e-mails to select, organize, explain and refer to each of the characters' personal experiences. Experiences that would normally remain private now are subject to public examination and analysis. Names create social categories, but the narratives place those social categories in contexts that reveal their limitations. Predication shows how outside evaluations can be made complex with additional data. Agency is used to bring back individuals/actors involved in creating the actions or events described in simplified explanations of why women failed. Modality also changes from being relatively fixed (what one individual believes to be "necessary" or "normal," can be redefined as only one possible explanation), so evaluation has become reflexive because the narratives evaluate the process of how women are judged.

The structure of the novel also complicates the idea of self-authorship. None of the four protagonists writes an independent autobiography; their experiences are mediated through a narrator who makes their lives visible while also controlling how those experiences are selected and presented. The women therefore gain greater space to exist as more than objects of evaluation, but they do not achieve complete narrative independence. The narrator occupies an intermediate position: she resists external authority while also exercising authority over the representation of other women. Subjectivity in the novel is therefore partial, relational, and formally constructed. As seriality contributed to a shift in meaning, so too could an event initially be viewed as having occurred based upon the evaluation of a husband, family member or community. However, when the writer/narrator revisited the event after a period of time based upon new evidence, the evaluation of the event could potentially be altered. The separation of narrative time from the actual time an event occurs allows for a disconnect between an event occurring and when its meaning will finally be interpreted. Similarly, anonymity was two-sided. On the one hand, it protected the writer/narrator from full exposure to societal, marital and physical forms of evaluation; on the other hand, it demonstrated the limits placed on her public authority. Finally, the conclusion of the novel reinforced the rejection of any singular form of completion. The four protagonists did not arrive at the same relationship to marriage, intimacy, family, or achievement. Rather, all four protagonists followed different paths and thus rejected the notion that narrative closure requires a single form of completion.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Marriageability, Discourse, and the Limits of Social Change

The findings suggest that marriageability is not a stable marital classification, but rather an evolving framework of gendered social value. Women are evaluated according to the timing of their marriage, if their looks and conduct meet societal norms, if their family background favors a proper connection, and if their individual experiences enhance or threaten their moral standing. This expands on Ahmed's (2010) investigation of happiness scripts by demonstrating how language upholds a desirable life trajectory. Marriage is reinforced not solely by attraction but also by influencing perspectives on timing, achievements, maturity, obstacles, and prospective possibilities.

The main characters add complexity to any situation where women only concur or oppose this narrative: they may wish for marriage while pondering its societal implications. The integrated FCDA-PDA framework emphasizes this duality by demonstrating how labeling can be transformed, agency reclaimed, failures reconsidered, and controlled time revisited through narratives. Change can start when a norm stops functioning as an accepted rationale.

This difference is significant to the current transformations in Saudi Arabia. Enhanced mobility, job opportunities, and civic engagement do not inherently disrupt gender norms as rapidly as institutional transformation (Wheeler, 2020; Saleh & Malibari, 2021). Despite being published before numerous reforms, *Girls of Riyadh* continues to

be relevant as it highlights a type of regulation that transcends legal frameworks: the unspoken classifications that make family, reputation, intimacy, and marriage socially significant.

5.2 Girls of Riyadh within Gulf Women's Writing

Gulf Women's Literature contributes to an analysis of *Girls of Riyadh* in terms of its uniqueness. Since early women writers from the Gulf and Saudi Arabia have focused on a wide variety of topics (such as) patriarchal authority, relationships within families, female desire and autonomy, and the struggle between the values of society and the sense of self-identity of women (Tijani, 2019b; Kanie, 2017), *Girls of Riyadh* is significant because it interweaves the concepts of courtship, marriage, intimacy, and divorce in order to determine if the measure of successful marriage will serve as the principal indicator by which all other elements of a woman's life and identity should be evaluated.

Girls of Riyadh presents a further element to the novel's representation of romance and matrimony through the privileged urban position of the four protagonists. With education, travel, consumption, and career opportunities providing women with means for upward mobility, it appears as though women possess new avenues for advancement and opportunity. Nonetheless, these options do not remove the obligation upon women to meet the obligations associated with family approval, social standing, lineage, and marriage. As such, modernity and patriarchal control appear to coexist, and often mutually affect one another.

Finally, *Girls of Riyadh* utilizes an additional dimension in terms of the electronic serial format. This format does not merely pose questions regarding what can be articulated about women; rather it poses questions regarding how private individual female experiences are made public and who possesses the ability to interpret those experiences. Furthermore, the weekly e-mail format transforms issues concerning gender into concerns regarding visibility, dissemination, and interpretive power

5.3 From the Email List to Digital Feminist Publics

The email format connects the novel's gender politics with questions of mediated visibility. Gwynne (2013), for example, identifies cyberspace as an important space for women's agency in the novel. Through the serial structure, personal narratives circulate, individual experiences form recognizable patterns, readers respond, and mediated communication enables women to become visible while still controlling the extent of their exposure. This process also embodies elements of Fraser's (1990) idea of the counterpublic, especially the dissemination of alternative meanings by groups whose experiences are sidelined in mainstream public discourse. It would be incorrect, however, to portray the novel merely as foreseeing social media or as a completely formed counterpublic. The public sphere established via the emails stays quite centralized as one unnamed narrator determines what gets chosen, when it is published, how it is presented, and if audience feedback is incorporated. Networked publics tend to be less centralized than the communicative framework depicted in the novel. Nonetheless, the email format illustrates how mediation allows personal feelings and experiences to be included in shared understanding without in-person interaction. Frustration, humiliation, desire, humor, disappointment, anger, and acknowledgment contribute to a process that renders personal experience socially understandable.

5.4 Implications

The research presents four key implications. Initially, feminist discourse analysis gains from exploring reproduction and resistance simultaneously. A framework that emphasizes solely domination might depict women as merely passive outcomes of discourse, whereas one that prioritizes only resistance may exaggerate autonomy. Thus, contradiction is analytically beneficial.

Arabic Literary Studies will benefit by looking at language use, translation, and narrative form together. While *Girls of Riyadh* has a political aspect through its content or themes, *Girls of Riyadh* has a political component that operates through names, agency, quoted dialogue, anonymity, the format of serialized writing, and differences in both the Arabic and English versions. Booth's (2010) views regarding the role of translation highlight why one should view an English version as a mediated text, not simply a representation of the original Arabic. Fourth, marriageability is also a comparative lens to see past Saudi Arabia. In this way the time-based, bodily/genealogical-social/moral- relational forms of converting marriage from a relationship into a social categorization can help scholars examine how many different societies classify individuals socially through their marital status without assuming that the examples from Saudi Arabia are applicable globally.

5.5 Limitations

The study has various limitations related to its subject matter, approach, and scope of interpretation. *Girls of Riyadh* is a fictional, commercially successful, and contentious book that predominantly centers on wealthy city women. It fails to encompass the full variety of Saudi women's experiences, and because it was published in 2005, it ought not to be regarded as a true reflection of later institutional conditions. The English version is also a

mediated text, so differences between the Arabic and English texts cannot be attributed solely to one translator's ideological impact.

FCDA and PDA signify approaches to analysis. They can identify patterns of categorization, agency, evaluation, resistance, and repair, but they are unable to determine causal effects on readers or assess how widespread certain attitudes are within a population. The framework presents a risk of confirmation bias, which this research addresses by employing both critical and constructive questions on the same areas while maintaining contradictions and negative cases. The bilingual comparison is selectively chosen rather than being a comprehensive assessment of translation quality.

In the end, selecting excerpts, interpreting Arabic phrases, assessing translation effects, and classifying themes all depend on the researcher's discernment. The research consequently claims that this particular novel influences views on marriageability, instead of representing what every Saudi woman thinks or experiences.

6. CONCLUSION

It is important to understand that *Girls of Riyadh* portrays a character of the girl who defines her "marriage-ability" (in this case her status) in relation to time-based expectation, social classification, power difference, moral judgement, and public scrutiny. In addition to this, FCDA illustrates how common linguistic practices create a perception of naturalness about these definitions, whereas PDA illustrates how the narrator and other characters reject these definitions via counter-naming, solidarity, re-attributing identity, use of humor, recovering of original intent, and multiple readings of value.

The larger implications of the study can be seen as an attempt to illustrate that the marriage dynamics within the story cannot be seen as simply tradition versus modernity, oppression versus freedom, and/or marriage versus autonomy. Even though the main characters have a deep respect for love, family, faith and marriage as a whole, they also recognize that the unjust conditions present in society will continue to judge a woman based solely upon whether she has been married. Therefore, resistance is not limited to denying relational existence; rather, it is about resisting the power of others to transform marital status into an absolute measure of one's worth.

Both aspects of bilingualism and formality share equally significant roles. Using both languages simultaneously highlights the cultural and evaluative power related to naming, modality, agency, idiom and ethics, as well as the structure used in emails to convert personal experiences into shared understanding. The narrative not only provides examples of how gendered assessments occur, but also redistributes the power to interpret the implications of such assessments.

The significance of *Girls of Riyadh* is not due to its rejection of marriage or promotion of singleness as a new standard. Rather, the significance of the book is much greater than that. It makes visible the social mechanisms that evaluate women's lives and allows those same mechanisms to be challenged.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS for Future Research

Subsequent studies should determine whether the concept of "marriageability" has relevance for other Saudi and Gulf women writers. Moreover, future studies can assess whether the four aspects (temporal, physical, genealogical-social, and moral-relational) of the concept are similarly present across different literary genres and cultural contexts. In addition, research on Arabic language reception may study if similar categories or concepts arise in critical reviews and audience dialogue. Additional studies might explore the digital existence of the novel and investigate how its serialized narrative techniques connect to subsequent types of mediated feminist expression. These studies would broaden the current analysis without needing the literary text to serve as explicit sociological proof

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