LOVE, MATRIMONY AND SEXUALITY: SAUDI SENSIBILITIES AND MUSLIM WOMEN’S FICTION

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Abstract

All those desires, discriminations, success stories, and confrontations that otherwise might not have seeped into mainstream discourses are subtly said through the stories that mirror Arab women’s lives. *Girls of Riyadh* is a postmodern cyber-fiction that delineates subjects we usually do not get to hear much about, i.e. the quest of heterosexual love and matrimony of young Arab women from the less women-friendly geography of Saudi Arabia. Though in the last two decades the scholarship on alternative discourses produced by Muslim women have been multitudinous, there is a scarcity of critical investigations dealing with creative constructions of postfeminist, empowered Muslim woman, not battling with patriarchal power structures, but negotiating aspects that matter most in real life: human associations and familial formations. This paper engages with the categories of love, marriage, and sexuality, drawing upon the lives of four educated, successful, ‘velvet class’ Saudi women. The significance of this study is linked with carefully challenging some of the stereotypes about Arab women as victims of forced marriages and their commonly perceived discomfort with love at large. The study reveals that it is men who need to “man up” against cultural conventions since women are increasingly expressive in their choices and brave enough to face the consequences audaciously.

Keywords

Saudi women, Anglophone fiction, love, marriage, sexuality
Introduction

Love before marriage or after? Acceding to Salafis' in some Islamic states, love is scandalized, lovers are demonized, and their associations banned. In soft Sufi Islam, love both spiritual and physical, is the essence of existence. Ibn Arabi, a great Sufi mystic, preached that there is hardly any difference between love of a woman and love of the divine; both are connected (Mernissi 2001). Ibn Arabi's writings have vivid descriptions of erotic feelings for his beloved Nizam. He considered love as a 'cosmic mystery' that has a 'slippery nature of attraction' towards the 'other'. In Sufism, sensuality is taken as a source of energy. Ibn-e-Hzam, a philosopher and politician, in his eleventh-century book on the mysteries of emotions, said that, “to be able to enter into the world of emotions and sexual attraction without looking silly or becoming embarrassed, one has to make pleasure a sacred priority and allocate time for it, just as one would with religious festivals” (Mernissi 2001, 127). Be it the story of Zulekha in the Quran, or of Muslim princesses—Gahlia, Shirin, Scheherzade, Nur Jehan—in folktales, art, and oral traditions, Muslim women have been expressive in their sexuality, and they are aggressive followers of love. They drove horses, crossed seas and battled all the odds to hunt for their loves (ibid).

The only permissible way to physically actualize romantic love, without defying limits set by Islam as a faith position, is to confine it in a married relationship. In Islamic sharia sex is a regulated act. Any sexual relationship outside marriage is considered zina, illicit sex. Zina is crossing the boundary set by Islam, hadd, which is a punishable offense. According to Qur'anic teachings, believers should marry to avoid transgressing the boundaries: "Marry off the single among you and those of your male and female slaves who are fit for marriage. If they are poor, God will provide for them from His bounty: God’s bounty is infinite, and He is all knowing" (Qur’an 24:32). In hadith, (i.e. the Prophet’s sayings) too, we find emphasis laid on marriage: “Whoever marries safeguards half of this faith; let him fear God the second half” (Farah 1984, 49). Though it is a disputed concept in Islamic shariah, yet to steer clear from zina, some couples also arrange zawaj mut’a (Muta marriage), a marriage that is time barred and much more relaxed regarding its implications on divorce, and inheritance, than conventional Islamic nikah. Marriage in Muslim ideology is a religious obligation that one is bound to follow, so it becomes a sacred sanctity rather than merely companionship for bodily pleasure or planning a family.

Matrimony is a mystery that haunts Muslim minds in a myriad of ways: When to marry? Whom one should marry? What is the best age to marry? Love or arranged marriage? Socio-economic status and appearances or righteousness and piety? Monogyny or polygyny? Islam bestows on women a great deal of socio-religious freedom, though, unfortunately, that is not prevalent in the cultural practices of some Muslim societies where patriarchy is unjustly justified by religious orthodoxy. Freedom of choice in marital
affairs entirely rests with women as independent individuals; parents can provide counsel, but they cannot impose their preferences. In Islamic law, the willingness of male and female is the most basic element of nikah.\(^2\) Even after marriage, if a woman finds mental, moral, or behavioural mismatch with her husband, she has the right to get separated.

Shereen El Feki (2013) describes three phases of marriage in Arab culture: *shoufa*,\(^3\) the meeting of two people interested in marriage, *katb al-kitab*, writing of the marriage contract, and *farah*, public celebrations of a wedding. To look for potential matches, the services of *khatba*, the professional matchmakers, are hired, or familial acquaintances are relied upon. Marriage ceremonies of friends and family also serve as a hunting ground for mothers-in-law to hook a prospective wife for their sons, and knowingly, young women attend such events enthusiastically.\(^4\) With the evolution of social structures and growing usage of the internet, young people are increasingly meeting online too, but the rest of the formalities stay intact. In Islamic cultures, ironically, it is not women, but men who are facing pressure to manage marriage modalities as they include providing *mahr*, the money to be given to the bride: *shabka*, the golden jewellery given by the groom: and *mu’akhir*, the contract to provide a certain amount of money to the bride if they get divorced. Moreover, men are responsible for providing a living for women in a married relationship.

*Girls of Riyadh* (*GoR*) reflects progressive womanhood in a Saudi context where women are presented as seamlessly synchronising with normative human behaviour of attraction towards opposite gender and a fearless expression of desirability. The anti-prototype portrayal of narrowing the chasm between men and women, men submitting to traditional sociocultural constraints, and women defeating all barriers in protecting their love lives is shrewdly presented by Raja Alsanea in this chick-lit\(^5\) cyber-fiction. *GoR* is a story of four young girls, Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle, and Lamees, who break away with the stereotypes of ‘caged virgins’\(^6\) associated with Muslim women. They emerge as empowered, independent, and successful women who, out of their own free-will, *shikar* men as is characteristic of postfeminist\(^7\) womanhood. The appealing aspect of this entire search for love and matrimony is not betraying indigenous religious and cultural norms, but instead subtly negotiating with them in a sense of victory rather than victimhood. There are no visible win-win situations; these girls fight their way through all the challenges that Saudi society has to offer in the form of gender expectations, religious obligations, and longstanding traditions. The conflict in successful actualisation of love in the form of marriage arises when men succumb to social pressures in selecting life partners. Contrarily, the female characters throughout the plot remain true to their love and stand by it. The ‘techno-rhetoric’ (al-Ghadeer 2006), the pattern of revealing the story in cyberspace in the form of emails, further substantiates the urge in Arab women to create alternative spaces and media for themselves to express and resist. The chatty, tongue-in-cheek style of the
‘enarrator’ (ibid) highlights the point that these girls are living their lives fully, also tapping into taboo spheres\(^8\) like female drinking, driving, and travelling alone.

The stories of all four girls are stimulating in how they meet their partners, the complexities of married lives and their spirited post-divorce living. Gamrah studied history at university and was married in an arranged fashion to Rashid, who was doing his PhD in Electrical Engineering from Chicago. Rashid was apparently a suitable match as he was a decent looking educated man from a respectable family. Gamrah believed in the power of love and romanticized her marriage as an outlet of love. “Love and tenderness and emotion-like feelings stirred her heart” (Alsanea 2005, 30),\(^9\) but, unfortunately, her husband did not express any intimate feelings towards her after their first night mishap. Gamrah’s mother had given her primitive advice of not being easy for her husband\(^{10}\) in bed to fully ignite the spark in him. Her elder sister, Gamrah’s mother boasted, delayed the first sex till the fourth night. This sex advice backfired, and Rashid did not touch her for seven nights, not even when they were in Italy for their honeymoon. Um-Gamrah considered it an act of the devil and then started advising her daughter about how to turn on Rashid. Strangely, “Gamrah got immersion training in the art of seduction from the same women who had ripped pages out of the romance novels Gamrah used to borrow from her friends at school” (13).

The eccentric sexual behaviours of the Arab world are ridiculed here. In most Arab houses young men and women are exposed to sex as only a sinful act that they must refrain from. This unease with sex is not Islamic, but cultural.

The exercise of sexuality was a prayer, a gift to oneself, an act of charity... to discover the meaning of sexuality is to rediscover the meaning of God and conversely... this open sexuality practiced in joy with a view to fulfilment of being, gradually gave way to a closed morose, repressed sexuality... furtive, secretive hypocritical behaviour assumed an ever more exorbitant place...All freshness, all spontaneity were eventually crushed as if by some steamroller (Bouhdiba 2012, 231).

Feki (2003), in an ethnographic study on sexuality in Egypt, also reiterates the mass discomfort of Arabs with sex education. There is a greater need for “sexuality education that conveys accurate information, encourages personal responsibility, teaches reciprocity, promotes equality, respects diversity and rewards the free expression of ideas” (152). Referring to a sex expert in her study, she further suggests that “sex includes practice and dialogue, so in the first day of marriage, do not expect that you will be so happy, because you need experience, which will happen after spending more time” (146).
Gamrah’s inactive post-marital sex life was not only because of her initial withholding strategy, but also because of Rashid’s extra-marital relation with a Japanese girl. When Rashid and Gamrah moved to the US, their relationship grew into a compromising husband-wife bond. Rashid provided her enough money to run the house and bear her personal expenses; in return she took care of cooking and laundry. Islamic feminists assert that domesticity\textsuperscript{11} is wrongly attributed as a female-only sphere; men are equally responsible for performing domestic duties. According to Kecia Ali (2006), the homemaker-provider division is mutually negotiable between husband and wife; the roles can be shared or switched when required. All of Gamrah’s needs were met, except bodily desires. Her quest to find reasons for Rashid’s lack of interest in her took a new turn when she found pictures of Rashid with a girl.

Gamrah bravely traced all the links and figured out who that girl was. The girl, Kari, was Rashid’s past and present; he was having a sexual relationship with her even before marrying Gamrah. The circumstances got even worse when Gamrah, upon meeting Kari, abused her in public for having a relationship with her husband. All during this fiasco, Gamrah had made herself pregnant with Rashid by not using contraceptives, although he did not want a child yet. This ploy was an effort on her part to keep their marriage intact. So, having a child is portrayed as a connective element that could help the marriage continue. However, deception is a questionable act. Should a child be brought in the world when two people are on the verge of separation? Is that fair to the child who would come into this world?

Despite all Gamrah’s efforts, her marriage failed, and Rashid divorced her. Quranic teachings emphasize resolving issues between spouses to avert separation or dissolution of the matrimonial contract, but if there is no possible solution both should amicably part ways.\textsuperscript{12} “God did not make lawful anything more repugnant to Him than divorce” (\textit{Sunan Abi Dawud}).\textsuperscript{13} It is not only men’s prerogative, women can demand divorce too, but they must have recourse to a judge. Women can even put certain clauses for divorce to automatically happen, for example, a clause about the end of marriage if the husband takes a second wife.\textsuperscript{14} Gamrah moved back to her mother’s house and started raising her child as a single mother and a business woman. She was not majorly grief-stricken about her unsuccessful marriage though she occasionally expressed her love for Rashid even after divorce. Gamrah started chatting with boys in online chat rooms, but considering the shallowness of the boys online, never got seriously involved with any of them. Till the end of the story, she remained open to the idea of re-marrying, but despised all attempts at a compromised marriage. Overall, her character is a reflection of the resilience, love, and sincerity of Saudi women.
Sadeem was a beautiful young girl, the prettiest of the four, whose mother died when she was very young. Due to her feminine body, her girlfriends used to joke with her by saying that you have got the ‘talents’, referring to her curvaceous body, so your marriage is not going to be a problem at all. This observation stands true, since in most cultures female beauty is as an important factor in marriage prospects. When Sadeem and Waleed meet for shoufa, lawful viewing, both feet the click and showed willingness to proceed to nikah. During milkah, the period between nikah and final departure of the girl from her parent’s house, Waleed started visiting Sadeem’s house. Sadeem was a firm believer in love and felt physical attraction towards delightful Waleed. “She was convinced that he wouldn’t be satisfied unless she offered him a little more of her ‘femininity’, and she was willing to do anything to please him, the love of her life” (37). But, strangely, after their intimate connection, Waleed distanced himself from Sadeem and eventually divorced her. Divorce with Waleed psychologically hurt her more than emotionally. Sadeem’s intimacy and sexual comfort with Waleed made him feel as if she were easy or already had sexual experience—a regressive Arab male mentality.

Divorce did not end Sadeem’s strong-willed life. She went to London and started working there to detach herself from the past. In London, Sadeem met Firas, her second love, which strengthened further on their return to Saudia. Firas was a progressive man who did not care about the fact that Sadeem was a divorcée. They stayed connected for four years, but finally Firas failed. “All men were the same. It was like God had given them different faces just so that women would be able to tell them apart” (233). He married a girl of his family’s choice. Once again, Sadeem was not mortified at this breakup, but mystified as to how a resourceful man like Firas could fail to convince his family concerning his love. Although Waleed tried to come back to Sadeem after marriage, and she initially allowed him too, out of sheer lover for him, she did not compromise her self-respect. “There were no tears, no hunger strike, no sad songs—not this time” (282).

Later, Firas divorced his wife and begged to recouple with Sadeem, but she refused. Sadeem, at the end of the story, married her cousin who was madly in ‘love’ with her. Her choice in marriage insinuates that a girl should marry the person who loves her rather than the one she loves. Further, the story suggests that to be able to get the person you love is not always the ultimate form of love; it also embodies a complex condition of love and marriage as spheres with separate foci. Unexpectedly, in a conservative society like Saudia, it is women who appear to be valiantly consolidating their love, whereas men are failing women in their love lives by following the conventions of practical materiality in the selection of their life partners.

The third girl of the gang, Michelle, had Najdi beauty and an American personality, the most liberal amongst them. Michelle met Faisal, when the girls were
roaming in Riyadh, masquerading as men at Gamrah’s hen-do. Michelle took the initiative and called Faisal for a meet up. Faisal showed her around his university and father’s business place to win her trust. Later, occasionally, they met in private at Um-Nuwayyir’s house too, a divorcee who facilitated the lovebirds. They shared romantic moments together as valentines, but at no point did there develop a physical relationship of any sort between the two. Like Firas with Sadeem, despite all the goodness and nicety, Faisal’s love for Michelle could not give him power to argue against his mother’s standards of marriage based on valuing the family lineage. He married the girl of his mother’s choice who was the least good looking by any beauty standards.

The following words of Michelle reflect/mock the helplessness of Saudi men: “Poor miserable Faisal! He cried, too, poor Little Faisal under the feet of his cherished mother. He loved no one in the universe more than his mother” (108). Like her friend Sadeem, Michelle was baffled as to how an educated, open-minded man like Faisal could helplessly marry an ordinary girl, just because she belonged to her mother’s social circle. Another moment of female triumph surfaced again when Michelle stated that "she was lucky, because she was not from the kind of family he was from. Her life was simpler and clearer, and her decisions were her own, not those of the ‘tribe’” (126). The loss of Faisal did not scar her for life, and she met Hamdan, a colleague at her workplace in UAE. Hamdan and Michelle spent much time together, which developed an affinity between them. But this time around, Sadeem was not willing to settle for anything less than perfect and till then she decided to stay single.

Lamees, a medical student with a tall gym toned body, was the only success story in securing the man she loved. She was briefly attracted towards Ali, the brother of her classmate, who was their senior in the same college. In Saudi Arabia unmarried couples are not allowed to be together in public places. The religious police caught Ali and Lamees in a café and involved their parents in the affair and that sadly ended their relationship. The other guy Lamees found was also a medical graduate, whom she met during her medical training. Nizar was a gentleman with a good personality and nice manners. When Lamees met Nizar, she had a feeling that he was the right guy to settle with. Lamees strategized an approach to trap Nizar with her love by not responding to Nizar’s advances for nearly three months. This ploy could have backfired as did Garmrah’s delaying tactics; however, Lamees had learned from the experience of her friends that allowing men to develop an amicable relationship before marriage, in a Saudi context, lessens their resolution to marry that woman. Eventually, she won the battle of nerves with Nizar. "Fate didn’t disappoint her. In fact, the plan she was intending to cut short succeeded. He came to her father to officially ask for her hand. Three entire weeks before her absolute drop-dead deadline!" (241).
The post-marriage change in Lamees draws our attention to the stability that women experience once they get married. She started wearing hijab. “Lamees felt that she had all the freedom she wanted before her marriage and during her honeymoon. Now it was time to pay her dues to God, especially after He had granted her such a wonderful husband” (274). The desire to keep looking for better, though, is a human instinct; it minimizes our chances to achieve the real bliss of married life. We get to know the concept of a perfect marriage through the married life of Lamees and Nizar. Nizar is always tender and kind to his wife. They complemented each other in this relationship. For example, Lamees is sensitive and Nizar is temperamentally very cool. Nizar is extravagant while Lamees is judicious in spending. Lamees and Nizar collectively run the household. He always lends a hand to do the chores. Lamees also has a wonderful relationship with her mother-in-law that further solidified her bond with Nizar. He often brings her roses and posts love letters on the fridge to express his love for Lamees. All her friends envied their married life.

Akin to marriage, the issue of divorce gets a fair space in the novel. Two divorces take place in the novel, and both relate to the sexual activity of the couples. In one, Gamrah’s, sexual sedentariness was the cause of divorce, and in the other, Sadeem’s, presumed over-involvement resulted in separation. These male-driven divorces are in no way justifiable; in the novel, however, they allude to the value of sexual satiation in married life. In Islam, there are sayings and doings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) that extol the pleasure of sex among married couples. “Let none of you come upon his wife like an animal, and let there be emissary between them, the Prophet is reported to have said. What is emissary, O messenger of God? A clueless believer asked. The kiss and words, he replied” (Farah 1984, 106). According to Bukhari’s hadith quoted by Ali: “If a man invites his wife to sleep with him and she refuses to come to him then angels send curse on her till morning” (Ali, 2006, p. 11). Heba Kotb, the Arab world’s famous sex therapist advises women to be active sex partners in a married relationship and understand men’s needs rather than passively receiving sex (2004).

Polygyny is also hinted at in the novel. Elite women exposed to Western notions of freedom of choice and liberty might be changing the way they approach their love lives and marriage, but this change is not representative of the entire Saudi society yet. Some of the educated girls in Riyadh were even willing to find second wives for their husbands. These polygyny-favouring girls, naïvely, argued that by making their husbands busy with other wives, they would have time for themselves and their children. And if the second wife is from an economically lower strata of society, then chores will be hers too. These women associated polygyny with Sunnah. Those against polygyny, consider it unjust for women and argue that all the wives of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) were divorcees except Aisha (R. A.). So, before quoting the example of the Prophet’s life, we need to
understand the conditions under which he married those women. Further, a man has no right to have more than one wife, if he fails to demonstrate the ability to keep justice between wives and their children. “There has not been a coherent alternative to the classic understanding of marriage as a fundamentally gender differentiated institution which presumes, at least at some level, male authority and control” (Ali, 2006, p. 22).

GoR, in its folklore appeal, intrigues us with stories that evoke the joy of partial female success and angst at clinkers of men. Religion, no doubt, supervises the trajectories of their affectionate selves; however, the blurring of boundaries of religion and culture is unmistakable. The sexual undertones of the book do not undermine Islamic insights, with no extra or premarital relationships, but nevertheless, it gives us an inkling of how embracing sexuality can better married lives. Surah 2, verse 187 of the Quran says husband and wife are garments for one another. Islam does not at all forbid to teaching young people about sex, its pleasure, morality and hygiene. There is a need to develop a relationship of trust instead of censoring all the content that may be suspected of having some sexual tinge. Culturally acceptable ways of meeting the would-be life partner through arranged dates provide decent opportunities of finding a match.

In this novel, it was saddening to see the conduct of the educated, apparently ‘mature’ male characters towards love and married lives. Rashid and Waleed portray, although not universal, a disappointing face of Arab masculinities. They ended their marriages without having any solid reasons to indulge in the heinous act of divorce. Firas and Faisal, two timid men, did not have enough resilience to stay firm and advocate for their romantic affiliations. It is important here to highlight that at no point do we get textual evidence that these guys deceived their girls or were fooling around without intentions to marry them. They just proved to be mommy’s boys. Contrarily, Nizar emerges as a progressive Islamic male. Here, the impact of the narrative is more important than its representativeness.

There is a need to critically look at what the Arab world is doing in this regard. Women need role models that are relatable with their social reality (Maza and DeShell 1995). The postfeminist women in GoR have the autonomy to love or not to love, marry or not to marry, bursting the foggy corridors of old traditions. They are marrying the partners of their choice, willingly accepting separation if marriage does not work well, remarrying, or simply postponing marriage out of their own free will. GoR is not about women’s rights in Islam or the fight against patriarchy, but is rather a genteel depiction of an insider about the evolving love and marriage scene. Such writings from Muslim females in the Arab world resist stereotypes, challenge taboos, and create spaces for increased pleasurable living in these parts of the world.
Endnotes

1 Ultra conservative sect of Islam which originated in 18th century Saudi Arabia

2 Nikah (Islamic marriage contract) that connects two people and brings a shared set of responsibilities to them. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) devised a balanced familial system for the followers of Islam where a woman in wedlock feels social, economic and spiritual ease and comfort. A man is answerable for providing safety, and ensuring the wellbeing of his wife with respect and dignity.

3 Shou'a is an arranged meeting that provides a man and a woman an opportunity to develop further familiarity with the intention of getting married.

4 In Arab cultures marriage ceremonies are strictly gender-segregated events.

5 According to Imelda Whelehan, chick-lit taps into tensions, contradictions, and realities of young women’s lives that till very recently remained unattended to Whelehan 2005.

6 For more on the concept see A. H. Ali 2008.

7 For basic understanding of the concept of postfeminism, see Gamble 2006

8 Discussion on such matters of freedom is out of the scope of the current study

9 Subsequent references to the text will consist of page numbers in citations.

10 According to Kecia Ali, “For the Muslim jurists, sex is a husband’s right and support is a wife’s right. Many things about marriage flow from this simple exchange” K. Ali 2010, 94.

11 Whereas in a postfeminist tradition, Walter 91995) argues that domesticity and motherhood are in fashion again because of the feminist backlash.

12 Divorce/Talaq can be raj‘i that is revocable or ba‘in, irrevocable. In revocable talaq, the husband can go back to his wife after idda, the waiting period of three menstrual cycles. The source for this quotation is Kecia Ali 2006.

13 To be a second wife is generally not considered a bad thing by Arab women, as it provides them benefits of married life as well as shared relief from household responsibilities and care of their husband.

14 On body politics see (Wolf 1990); (Badran 2009).

15 To read more on the episteme of hijab and Muslim women, see (Ahmad 2011); Abdelal 2017.

16 This shift in Lamees and the concept of perfect marriage portrayed here can be expanded further by reflecting on its congruence with some of the concepts of Islamic feminism. For more on dialectics of Islamic feminism and Muslim women’s fiction, see (Abdullah 2017).

17 In Islamic fiqh, polygamy is supported under certain conditions, in fact preferred. For more on the subject, see Ali 2006.
Bibliography


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