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Urban Narratives: Saudi Women Reclaiming the City Through Fiction

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Abstract- This study explores the representation of urban spaces in Saudi women's novels from the turn of the twenty-first century, a time marked by shifting social and cultural dynamics in Saudi Arabia. During this period, the city becomes a multifaceted environment where traditional gender norms collide with the forces of modernity. The research focuses on two influential novels—Laila Al-Juhani's Alfirdaus Al-'Aliyyab [Barren Paradise] (1998) and Raja Alem's Setir [Concealment] (2005)—to examine how female characters navigate, negotiate, and reinterpret urban spaces. These characters not only encounter urban settings that are often restrictive but also find ways to assert their presence and voice within them. Using a combination of feminist literary theory and spatial analysis, this study seeks to reveal how Saudi women writers from this transformative era use the urban landscape as both a site of limitation and empowerment. Through their works, these authors offer new perspectives on women's relationships with the evolving social and spatial dynamics of urban life. The study also addresses how the portrayal of urban spaces reflects broader themes of identity, autonomy, and the ongoing negotiation of tradition and modernity in contemporary Saudi society. This study contributes to the field of contemporary Arabic literature by highlighting the role of urban spaces in shaping the experiences of women and offering new perspectives on their relationships with evolving social and spatial dynamics.

Keywords: Saudi Novel, Saudi Women, Saudi City, Gender, Space.

I. Introduction

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the modern Saudi city realm seemed to hold out the promise of women's empowerment. It opened up new opportunities, possibilities, and a relative freedom of movement. This period marked the opening of opportunities, possibilities, and a relative freedom of movement for Saudi women, as they began to access education, employment, and public spaces in ways that were previously restricted.However, the Saudi city as depicted by the women novelists in this study is a domain of complexity in which modernity coexists with traditional gender norms. The freedom offered by the city to Saudi women is generated without eliminating previous restrictions and dilemmas faced by women in spaces such as the home and other domestic settings. Hence, the city becomes a 'part of a complex and contradiction-filled societal spatialization that simultaneously enhances and inhibits, provides new room and imprisons, offers solutions but soon beckons to be destroyed" (Soja, 102).

For subtle and searching depictions of Saudi women's urban experiences in literature, this study will focus on Laila Al-Juhani's Alfirdaus Aliyyabāb [Barren Paradise] (1998) and Raja Alem's Setir [Concealment] (2005). Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Soja's concept of contradictory spatiality and feminist theory, the study explores how urban planning in Saudi Arabia enforces gendered boundaries and hierarchies. The research integrates insights from urban studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial critiques, emphasizing the city's dual role as both a space of empowerment and a site of persistent societal limitations. To analyze literary representations of Saudi women's

urban experiences, close reading is employed as a methodology through which to interpret selected works. In the two texts, the female protagonists, while depicted actively using the urban space they dwell in, are faced with spatial complexities in which "classic patriarchy" is at work (Kandiyoti, 274). This can be seen in the way in which the cultural and social infrastructure of the Saudi city is planned at the turn of the twentieth-first century to maintain gender boundaries and hierarchies through emphasis on the segregation of the sexes, and the separation between public and private with defining women's accepted place and proper role in society. Nevertheless, Al-Juhani and Alem provide an intriguing and insightful picture of resilient Saudi women, tackling such contradictions of the city space. These women are depicted entering and determinedly occupying spaces from which they have previously been excluded. Both novels present a female counter-narrative of the city which highlights the potential of women's urban experience to surpass and subvert rigid social and spatial boundaries.

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature regarding the intersection of urban spatiality, gender, and literary representation in the context of Saudi Arabia. While existing scholarship has extensively explored themes such as the evolution of urban planning in Saudi cities (Al-Hemaidi, 2001; Al-Hathloul & Saleh, 1985) and the negotiation of gender roles in Saudi society (Altorki, 1986; Kandiyoti, 1988), there has been limited focus on how Saudi women's urban experiences are articulated through literature. Furthermore, while works like Aghacy's Writing Beirut (2015) have examined urbanity and its depiction in Arabic novels, such studies rarely delve into Saudi women novelists' perspectives on their negotiation of modernity and tradition within urban spaces. By analyzing Alfirdaus Alyabāb by Laila Al-Juhani and Setir by Raja Alem, this study bridges this gap through uncovering how these authors present the Saudi city as a paradoxical space—simultaneously offering liberation and reinforcing patriarchal structures. This nuanced analysis contributes to the broader discourse on gendered spatiality (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2013), positioning Saudi women's literary voices as critical to understanding the socio-cultural dynamics of urbanization in the Kingdom.

II. The Saudi city at the turn of the century

Before delving into the analysis of fictional representations of the Saudi city in the selected works, it is necessary to develop a brief understanding of the real Saudi city of the turn of this millennium. The city planning was accelerated after the oil affluences of the 1970s and was mainly an implementation of Western concepts of urban planning and modernization (Al-Hathloul and Anis-ur-Rahmaan, 1985; Al-Oteibi ET all, 1993; Al- Naim, 1998). Modernization itself is a mid-twentieth century Western theory which set the standardized guide to move societies towards a Western model of "democracies, market economic, urbanization, widespread affluence, high mass consumption and service sector expansion" (Jordan, 9). Accordingly, a parallel social reconstruction was needed to keep pace with the escalated urban modernization in Saudi cities. By the turn of the century, the old traditional town was replaced by the Western-style modern city which tried to distance itself from the past (Al-Hemaidi, 2001; Ebn Saleh, 2002). In the meantime, the social reforms were slow to follow (Jordan, 126). The end result has been a growing social and spatial polarization symbolized in the "conflict with prevailing cultural attitudes and ways of life [which] in some cases led to subversion") Graba, 604). While this is not the whole story, the conflicting aspect of the modern Saudi city, arising directly from the rapid socio-spatial transformation, serve the purpose of this study which is not trying to be anthropological in its scope.

A polarization built around gender, and of which employment, mobility, segregation, confinement, and financial dependence are but few forms, was and still, to a certain extent, is at work in the modern Saudi city. In the meantime, the socio-spatial modernization has created a myriad of issues for Saudi women which they can only tackle within the city space itself. In other words, the city realm has created an altered context for the struggle of women towards gender equality and empowerment as will be explained later. My main focus in this study is to read into the novels'

representation of these crisis-filled urban spaces and of women's attempt to tackle the various forms of discrimination and oppression within such spaces.

While not discussed at length in this article, the bias politics surrounding honour and women's sexual conduct in the Saudi society, are the main subject of Al-Juhani's first novel, whereas in Setir, Alem approaches Saudi women's quest for equality and independence in a post-9/11 era. In both works, the novelists present a textured picture of women's everyday experiences in the city space. Jeddah is the city in which most of the events in Setir and Alfirdaus Aliyyabāb are set. The city of Jeddah is economically renowned for its position as the largest seaport in Saudi Arabia (AlMunajjed, 1997: 2). The financial leap that the city took on the back of increases in oil revenues and large inflows of foreign investment by the end of the twentieth century changed the city's quotidian life and its social structure. Prior to the oil boom, the economics of Jeddah were mainly dependent on the seafaring and maritime trade, with men in control of all kinds of work and enterprise, and women restricted to land and to household management (Al-Yafi, 2010: 53). The late twentieth-century economic leap brought in new cultural and communal roles for women. Women started working, leaving their homes, and socializing beyond their circles of family and friends—an unprecedented liberty hitherto (Altorki, 1986; AlMunajjed, 1997).

Jeddah of the turn of the millennium represented modernity, opportunities, and a break from the past. The promises that such representation encompassed for Saudi women is, however, significantly ambivalent. Henri Lefebvre argues in his book, The Production of Space (1974): "Any determinate and hence demarcated space necessarily embraces some things and excludes others; […] such a space asserts, negates, and denies. It has some characteristics of a "subject", and some of an object" (Lefebvre, 188). This sense of demarcated space, which is simultaneously a "subject" and an "object", applies to the city space in the novels under study. The city's spatiality, which can be inclusive of or inhospitable towards women, is also the object of the social and institutional powers which construct and regulate urban spaces and social relations.

The women protagonists in Alfirdaus Aliyyabāb and Setir are pictured navigating the city streets, whether going to work, socializing, shopping, entertaining, walking on the city's beaches or even visiting its poorest districts. This relative freedom of mobility is facilitated by the new roles that women have acquired in the urban space. Increased access to education and employment, modern facilities such as convenient modes of transport, safe public social places like shopping centres, café and tearooms, parks, playgrounds, community centres, and neighbourhood spaces in residential areas, are urban initiatives to legitimate women's presence in the public arena (Almehrej, 2015: 152-3). The new relative freedom that Saudi women experience in the city's public spaces is also made possible by the changing gender norms which is linked to the rise of the nuclear family by the late twentieth century (Alnuaim, 2013). In nuclear families, women work and participate in the family's income, which disrupts the traditional gender roles of men as breadwinners and women as housewives and enhances women's economic independence and social status (Al-Khateeb, 1987: 221). However, the very optimistic vision that the urban realm seems to offer to Saudi women is overshadowed by the new forms of repression which hinder women's full urban participation. Women's long-standing driving ban (which were finally lifted in 2018), harassment in public domains and workplace, institutionalized patriarchy through guardianship law which restrict women's public dealings such as work, investment, and travel. The effect of the law of guardianship on women is highlighted in Alem's Setir, where the young protagonist, Mariam, declares in an interview with a Human Rights representative that "there should be no guardianship of adult women" (Alem, 2005: 259). Mariam's declaration resonates a recent campaign to end the male guardianship law in 2016 (Jarbou, 164). Controversially, the 25-years-old, upper-class female protagonist is depicted traveling the world, making relationships and getting married to a man of her choice.

Similarly, al-Juhani's heroine, Saba, who is a middle-class university graduate woman, is portrayed exercising a relative freedom of movement within the city and having a place of her own

outside the family's house. Both women's unconventional lifestyles are represented in the texts as defying cultural and social restriction on women's movement and independence. Nevertheless, Saba and Mariam are faced with other forms of social and spatial barriers which they relentlessly transgress and surpass. In what follows, the study will explore to what extent the changing urban spatiality of the city has impacted the Saudi women's negotiations of their right to equal urban experience.

III. Urban Narratives

In Alfirdaus Aliyyabāb, Al-Juhani portrays her protagonist, Saba, as a woman walking the city of Jeddah. Throughout her account of her aimless lonely walks in the city, Saba gives an intriguing image of Jeddah's streets:

As I went into its hidden labyrinths, Jeddah stayed behind, vibrant as it is with lights; neon lights on its high commercial buildings; shop front signs with so many names: foreign names, silly names, and names that we only find in its street (Al-Juhani, 1998: 11).

The image of Saba walking the city of Jeddah, with an eye on its contradictions as suggested by the "names on the shop fronts", and its beauty as suggested by the sparkling lights, evokes the idea of the Western figure of the flâneur or the city-stroller. The flâneur as defined by Walter Benjamin is a modern hero idly wandering and observing the city and for whom the "the street becomes a dwelling [where] he is as much at home among the façades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls" (Benjamin, 37). While Benjamin dismissed the possibility of a female flâneur by limiting this type of wandering to a "modern hero", more recent works proposed a flâneuse which is a feminine form of the flâneur that is forged by writers like Lauren Elkin who defines this figure as "a determined resourceful individual keenly attuned to the creative potential of the city, and the liberating possibilities of a good walk" (Elkin, 2017: 22). Elkin's image of the flâneuse may seem impossible to find in the streets of Jeddah by the end of the twentieth century. However, Al-Juhani presents a counterpart to the Western flâneuse in her heroine's idle, aimless wandering of the Saudi city. Al-Juhani's heroine challenges barriers to mobility and visibility that the society erects against women within the realm of the Saudi city. Walking the masculine streets of Jeddah, which are dominated with crowds of men, walking, driving, selling, or just smoking and watching, Saba becomes visible, triggering the gaze of young men who mischievously examine her. Saba's flânerie thus exposes the gendered aspect of Jeddah's public space.

The city of Jeddah seems to assist women's movement and presence in its public realm, nevertheless, the realm of the city where unequal gender power relation are played out is actually perpetuating and reinforcing traditional forms of patriarchy within its modern urban reality. Throughout the narrative Saba presents oscillating opinions about how it feels to be a woman in the public sphere of Jeddah. In a scene where she and her girlfriend are running from heavy rainfall, Saba declares: "we were two crazy girls, with two umbrellas, running in a place where only men are allowed to run" (Al-Juhani, 1998: 7). This innocent act of running under rain is perceived with "doubt" and "contempt" by passers-by because the two young women were considered transgressors in the public domain claimed by men as their exclusive space in the city of Jeddah. Saba's transgression goes beyond the public/private domain of the Saudi city as she aspires for a more transnational flânerie of cities like: "Beirut, Rome, Damascus, Moscow, Berlin, Peking, Geneva, Cairo, Sana'a, Madrid, New York and Alexandria" (Al-Juhani, 1998: 23). Although Saba dies before she can walk in any of these cities, Al-Juhani's narrative nonetheless holds out the possibility of her heroine realizing this dream.

In Writing Beirut: Mapping of the city in Modern Arabic Novel, 2015, Samirah Aghacy describes how an Arab city like "Beirut as such is a modern city tempered by non-modern elements and embracing modernity without cutting the umbilical cord with the past" (Aghacy, 2015: 24). This description of the city as simultaneously embracing modernity, and preserving traditions is applicable

to the city of Jeddah by the turn of the 21st century. The Saudi city facilitates, yet resists, woman's movement in its urban spaces. With the new social and cultural roles for women in the city, they are seen crossing boundaries of public and private divide. Women's presence in the public arena presents a threat to traditional gender boundaries. The city itself therefore becomes a threat to social hierarchies and gender power relations. In Doreen Massey's discussion of how the industrial structuring of labor in the United Kingdom of the nineteenth century affected the social structure, she asserts that "the fact of escape from the spatial confines of the home is in itself a threat, metropolitan life itself seemed to throw up such a threat to patriarchal control" (Massey, 180). Likewise the urban space of the Saudi city challenges the male-controlled construction of women's proper place in society and the clear-cut distinction between public and private spheres. Women are not contained within the confines of the home anymore, a containment which has, for a long time, created an imbalanced gender power relations in the Saudi city.

The modern space of the city in Alfirdaus Aliyyabāb is depicted as a disruption to the gender power hierarchies and to patriarchal norms. The antagonism between the man and the city is vividly illustrated in a conversation between Saba and her lover, Amer, when the former starts complimenting the beauty of Jeddah and Amer frowns, arguing: "it is nothing, but a huge dumpster and we are nothing but mice" (Al-Juhani, 1998: 16). The image of the city as a dumpster connotes degeneracy, corruption and decay, whereas the word "mice" suggests meekness. Amer's suggestion of the city's degradation and its' inhabitants' compliance can be traced back to his love relationship to Saba; a secret relationship that is considered transgressive to social and religious rules governing sexual conduct in the Saudi society. The degradation of the city in Amer's view stems from the idea of its women's transgression. Though such transgression is not tolerable for both men and women in the Saudi society, it is more tarnishing in the case of women who "carry the burden of family honor and be subject to a range of disciplinary obligations that include chastity, concealment, and silence"(Moore, 14). Amer, while part of this transgressive relationship with Saba, is yet aware of the underlying social double standards that relieve men from guilt. He then becomes part of the social power that shames and punishes women's sexual conduct and labels it as degeneracy which results in the degeneracy of the city. Through the character of Amer, the playboy who uses Saba for temporary fulfilment then abandons and assaults her for giving in to his advances, Al-Juhani exposes the double standards that the society can play against the woman, hence against the city. The narrative portrays an image of the city which is open up for women and in which women move about freely and exercise their agency. This image, in itself, challenges the traditional norms which uphold patriarchal supremacy through trying to maintain control over women's movement and to restrain their lives to the realm of the domestic and the private.

The figure of the Saudi women's flâneuse envisioned by Al-Juhani in her protagonists aimless wandering of the city of Jeddah, is further developed in Alem's depiction of her female protagonist's walking, not only Saudi cities such as Jeddah and Riyadh, but also the cosmopolitan capitals of the World such as Cairo, London, New York, Paris. Alem's Setir forges a smooth unproblematic movement for women between public and private and between home and abroad; traveling as they do within and between cities. In their everyday life, these cosmopolitan, middle/upper class women are depicted as being more outside of their homes, in the city's boulevards, coffee houses, in places of business and of leisure. While their smooth movement which crosses between boundaries—public/private and home/abroad—it is never dismissive of their existence. However, the text depicts women's abilities to negotiate and mitigate such boundaries. Alem's novel portrays the possibility of a Saudi flâneuse who is capable of dismantling the social construction of women as marginalized, second-class citizens.

Alem's construction of her female characters traveling the world, denotes woman's ability to negotiating stereotypical assumption of women's marginality and inferiority in their homeland or/and abroad. After moving to Miami, Ṭofūl clashes with the city's underpinning boundaries, namely transportation and language. The former kept her isolated for the first few months of moving into her

new apartment: "In Miami, if you don't have a car you feel like a cripple; public transport is inconveniently spread out" (Alem, 2005: 111). This leads her to dismiss the idea of studying English in a distant language institute, which advances her sense of isolation. Not only is she isolated by language barriers, but she also experiences feelings of shame and otherness based on her language. In an incident where she attends a bodybuilding competition night to support her husband—a champion bodybuilder—with a group of her husband's American friends, Ṭofūl starts shouting: "aunfukh aunfukh ya ḥabīby" (blow up, my love, blow up [your muscles]!), whereupon the friends start looking at her with astonishment. Their look makes Ṭofūl realize that she was shouting in Arabic and that her shout sounded "more like a weird bleat" (Alem, 2005: 164). Afterwards Ṭofūl feels ashamed: "She sinks back into her chair trying to undo the sound of her shout in her mind! Praying that no American will ever be able to understand the hieroglyphs that came out of her mouth" (Alem, 2005: 164). Being looked at in such a way makes Ṭofūl questions her sense of belonging, her language and identity. She hears her voice as "bleat" and her language as "hieroglyphs", which implicates an idea of self-Orientalizing that is based in relations of power. The position of Ṭofūl as a gendered, inferior other underpins her sense of shame. However, Ṭofūl tackles her inferior positionality and overcomes boundaries of gender, race, and class. She overcomes the language barrier by self-studying English, and she becomes financially independent through a small private investment. By the end of her first year in Miami, Ṭofūl is depicted walking, talking, and socializing in a place that initially seemed to shut her out. She even becomes able to negotiate her identity as a Saudi woman in a Western country. In a scene where Ṭofūl is working-out in the gym, the white American coach approaches her and curiously asks:

> "So, you're from Saudi Arabia?" he says, "People are curious about women in your part of the world". Ṭofūl was quick to answer, "I know, I know, you must be wondering: Do we have heads? Are we imprisoned behind the great walls of our home?" "Seriously, at first we were totally unaware of your existence at all! Lately given recent events you just appeared to us as being masked in black veils, confined to your homes and procreating devils to terrorize the world" (Alem, 2005: 112).

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, a human rights rhetoric emerged in the West and it was dominated by the idea of "saving or liberating Muslim women" (Abu-Lughod, 2002: 785). Real Saudi women, in all their complexity, found themselves framed and reified in the image of the oppressed, restrained, confined, and abused Muslim woman. In Setir, Alem addresses Saudi women's awareness of, and resistance to such stereotyping. By depicting resilient female characters who express dissent towards unequal gender norms within the Kingdom and stereotypical configurations from the outside world, Alem transforms the received view of Saudi women. She turns the image of the oppressed Muslim woman into a representation in which women are not waiting to be saved but actively resist and reconfigure their own identities and agency.

While representing Ṭofūl's position in the American city as troubled by the post-9/11 clash of civilizations, Alem presents a contrasting image in her protagonist's experience in the city of London which is depicted as space of cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism, and gender-neutralism. London in the novel takes on many metaphoric levels, against which to measure the inclusion/exclusion of women in other cities at home or abroad. In London, Alem's heroine, Mariam, is pictured freely walking the city: "In front of her eyes extended a splendid image of London's streets […] she immersed body and soul into the place" (Alem, 2005: 10). Merging with the city "body and soul" evokes Elkin's passionate "flâneuse-ing" (Elkin, 2017: 3). While Elkin's explores questions of the social mores and spatial restrictions, old and new, which impact women's experience in the city, these questions varies, sometimes drastically, from one city to another. The leisurely roaming of London in Alem's Setir, is different to her roaming of Jeddah or Cairo. In London, Setir's protagonist is pictured experiencing an indefinable freedom whether walking across a London bridge, taking an underground train, getting "hit

by a wave of bodies of human walkers", or stepping aside to watch these walkers in their rushing rhythmic movement (Alem, 2005: 27). The depiction of the protagonist's movement in London is different from her quotidian experience of movement in Jeddah. This can be liked to her anonymity and marginal, temporary position as a tourist. Assuming this position of anonymity and invisibility gives Mariam the ability to observe and be the subject of the gaze rather than the object thereof; an aspect of flânerie that is missing from Mariam's walks in Jeddah where she is constantly under surveillance. Her visibility in Jeddah is linked to her transgressive position as a woman in a public sphere; she can attract attention by the sheer act of being out in the city. The particular urban experience of the Saudi female flâneuse, as presented in both novels,derives from her position as a transgressor, an intruder in the public space. She struggles to navigate between her status as the object and the subject of the gaze, failing, most of the time, to escape the fixed sexuality that mark her presence in the city streets.

In their introduction to Gendering the City (2000), Kristine Miranne and Alma Young argue that "women's active use of space and time often results in changes to the spatial and social structure of the city" (Miranne, 1). As the women characters in Setir find a way to include themselves in the city's streets even if by defying and breaking social norms, they become involved in the creation of the city's space. The city's amenities, its places of work, education and entertainment are reconstructed, whether institutionally or commercially, to facilitate their movement and safeguard their presence. To illustrate how this change is expressed in the selected novels, a key scene from Setir in which the protagonist and her friend Ṭofūl meet in a café in the city center. In the café, which has become the friends' usual meeting spot, the narrator shows how the women customers start to outnumber the men. Noticeably, the café has become more women friendly as demonstrated in the owner and workers' attitudes to the women visitors and in the facilities provided for the women costumers such as private computer terminals. Allowing the women to have a space of relative freedom where they can communicate, meet with potential partners, and use the online cyberspace, the café is assisting women's spatial expansion in the city's public sphere. Such an expansion goes against the gendered spatiality of the Saudi city where the public is deemed men's exclusive realm of privilege and freedom. In the café scene, as the Mariam and Ṭofūl settle at their usual table, they start noticing how:

> [t]he black abāyah [Saudi women's code dress] are taking over the place and the number of the white thūbs [Saudi men's code dress] is declining and shyly trying to be seen. The abāyahs which are supposed to be a ḥajb [blocking or concealing] are with the silk colourful embroidery turned into an open loud shout. […] A group of young women sitting at the café's computers are checking their emails or browsing the online chatting rooms. The young cashier smiles warmly to Mariam from behind his desk (Alem, 2005: 38).

Here, the social, written and unwritten, rules of the public/male and private/female are challenged and reinscribed by women customers on the social space of the café. Norms of gender segregation, and of visibility and invisibility, which are represented in the contrast between black and white, are no longer at force in the café space as the abāyahs outnumber the thūbs. Meanwhile, the women subvert meanings associated with dress codes as the abāyahs which conventionally denote women's bodily invisibility are turned into an assertion of presence and visibility. The abayāhs are no longer all in the same black color or the same style but, rather, come in different colors or fabrics and display different embroidery patterns and accessories. The word ḥajb in the passage denotes blocking and concealing, both of which meanings are challenged by the colorful embroidery on the abayāhs. The symbolic significance of embroidery on the women's abayāhs operates at the levels of space, visibility, and audibility, as this needlework is described as a "loud shout". The synaesthetic metaphor of the loud shout of the colorful silk suggests that there are different ways of making women's voices heard, such as being unapologetically present in certain places and in certain numbers. Women's nonconformity to norms of clothing and confinement, as depicted in the passage, denotes resistance. These women

are knowingly or unknowingly involved in a form of solidarity based on the recognition of women's right to equal urban experiences.

IV. Conclusion

In their critique of the Saudi city, both Al-Juhani's Barren Paradise and Alem's Concealment depict the Saudi urban landscape at the turn of the twentieth century as a complex terrain of gendered inequalities, revealing its potential as both a site of discrimination and a space for autonomy. Rather than contradicting the notion of the city as a place of gender restriction, these novels present it as a dynamic space where women can resist marginalization and assert their agency—especially in contrast to the more constraining domestic sphere. Through their protagonists' journeys, Al-Juhani and Alem depict women actively challenging restrictive norms, finding ways to assert presence, and subtly reshaping urban spaces as they seek visibility and autonomy.

Al-Juhani's portrayal of Jeddah reveals the city as a fraught, uncertain place for women in the late twentieth century, filled with both potential freedoms and lurking dangers. Her protagonist, Saba, embodies the figure of the flâneuse as she explores Jeddah's vibrant streets, both captivated by and critical of its contradictions. Through her wandering, Saba confronts the city's barriers to women's mobility and visibility, exposing the gendered dynamics that shape public spaces. By contrast, Alem offers a more optimistic perspective on urban life, emphasizing women's agency and autonomy even within the confines of social and spatial inequalities. Her female characters move seamlessly between the public and private spheres, as well as between Saudi cities and global capitals, suggesting a vision of the Saudi flâneuse who transcends boundaries both physical and cultural.

Together, Barren Paradise and Concealment illustrate how the Saudi city has become a stage for women's resistance and transformation, where they push against social hierarchies, negotiate identity, and claim their right to be seen and heard. These novels portray urban space as a site of transgression and potential solidarity among women, who, in small but significant ways, begin to reconstruct public spaces like cafes, streets, and even modes of dress, in defiance of norms that seek to limit their visibility and mobility. By reimagining the city as a place where women can resist and redefine traditional roles, Al-Juhani and Alem signal a quiet revolution within Saudi society, offering a vision of urban life that not only challenges patriarchal norms but also holds the promise of a future marked by greater gender equity and inclusion. In these novels, the Saudi cityscape transforms into an arena where women engage in subtle but powerful acts of autonomy, reshaping both the social structure and the very fabric of the urban environment.

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