

Noty

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Girls from Riyadh by Rajaa Alsanea as a Literary Statement of Changes within Contemporary Saudi Society

Contemporary Arabic literature and particularly that created at the beginning of the 21st century may be seen as a mirror reflecting social moods, cultural currents, new political thinking or emotions emerging within a nation. An example of such dependence between literary creativity and the actual state of social reality is the novel by Rajaa Alsanea (Raġā' aṣ-Ṣāni') *Girls from Riyadh* (Arab. *Banāt ar-Riyād*, Radža as-Sani, transl. into Polish *Dziewczyny z Rijadu* by Eryka Lehr, Smak Słowa, Sopot 2010), which appeared in 2005, and which caused from the very start a huge sensation within the Arab world, directing the eyes of the world to the increasing internal gulfs emerging in the Saudi nation. Using the characters of the four main female protagonists: Lamis, Gamra, Michaelle and Sadim as well as the mysterious female narrator of the tale, the author presents a penetrating diagnosis of social realities, depicting the anxiety, unfulfilled hopes, growing anger and dissatisfaction of Saudi Arabians.

To support the above thesis it is worth examining a few symptoms of the many years of mental and social stagnation that have gripped Saudi Arabia as observed by the author of the novel; symptoms which could have resulted in the appearance of Saudi citizens on the streets of cities and the banding around of slogans of freedom. The most significant and most strongly emphasised within the novel are cultural conventions, the rigid frameworks of Muslim tradition, which in its Saudi version is the most radical within the Middle East. The novel's protagonists, young female inhabitants of the Saudi capital, stand up to the conservatism, bang their heads against the wall of the rigid social regulations which shape each and every detail of daily life (family, work) and those spheres of a fundamental nature for an individual (views on love, interpersonal relations, social intercourse). The omnipresent convention, custom, disturbs the most fundamental of bonds, particularly marriage, reducing it to a civilian-legal agreement concluded for an

increase in wealth, for prestige, for an assurance of luxurious living conditions. Sadim is rejected by her formal spouse, Gamra is betrayed, rejected, finally sent away, Michelle is not able to be accepted by her beloved's conservative family, everything as a result of the rigid aspiring for the universally present tradition. The dramatically different view on social convention that is presented by the young and the modern as well as the traditional and older inhabitants of Riyadh leads to generational conflicts and subsequent divisions within the nation.

The freedom of expression leaves also a lot to be desired, while the all present hypocrisy, gossip mongering, network of secrets create a barrier of silence, one which the voice of a rejected woman, one beaten, humiliated has no possibility of breaking through. The author brings to light, in the form of emails, the tempestuous stories of her friends; she experiences social exclusion, accusations as to her lack of morality, she reads in the Internet strong words directed towards her for raising topics widely considered as taboo and comments on her situation thus:

“Unfortunately the voices of those who had unleashed [hell] on her are listened to more carefully than those of everybody else, for they are advocates of the same strategy that the loudest is always right. Is it not better for them to use excessive force to commence a revolution against these repugnant ideas and sick traditions than to fight with those who try merely to talk about the matter? Everyone condemns the bravery with which I write, accusing me of obstinacy in broaching taboo subjects, about which we are unable to talk openly in our society, and already in particular from the perspective of a young girl such as I. But is this not how all revolutions begin?” (p. 107 of Polish translation).

The next important problem is the unawareness of social mechanisms, the lack of interest in political affairs, questions of basic citizenship, brought about to a large degree by the absence of access to reliable information on the subject of current events happening within the life of the country and the nation, which are the basis for the creation of a coherent civil life. Saudi Arabians do not know about government and in not understanding the political decisions of their leaders remain under the authority of a dictatorial system; they are unable to direct the social life of their own nation. They want to create and be an active part of the life of their country, but such an opportunity is effectively taken away from them, which is emphasised by the novel's narrator in the following way:

“Before her eyes there rose a demonstration in which she wished to participate along with her classmates, but they had been forbidden from above. Protests were then occurring in every Arab country, they were to show solidarity with the Palestinian nation and the Intifada al-Aksa. Many countries started to boycott American products, but only a handful of

people she knew summoned up the energy for this. Why in their country are the decisions taken only by the dictatorial authorities in power, instead of handing politics over to the people? [...] why are there no longer people who are able to fight for their ideals? Why are her peers not interested in politics, and if they are then only in scandals, such as that concerning Bill Clinton and Monika Lewinsky?" (p. 175).

The girls from Riyadh are aware that they live in social and political ignorance, which is already the first step to wanting a change in position and to take matters into one's own hands. The heroines in the following way aptly define their present state of involvement in the life of the country:

"She knew nothing of politics, also her friends had only a foggy idea about what the whole thing meant. Which was nothing strange given that they had never fulfilled any role in social life? They had no influence on anything. If I could only understand something from politics, if I had some issue about which I could fight – thought Sadim – I could at least be involved in something." (p. 175).

An extremely significant and intensely underlined question within the novel is also the problem of the clash between the Arab world, and here the concrete realities of Saudi Arabia, and the Western world, the phenomenon of the flow of technological innovations, social thought (here in particular revolutionary and freedom thought) and their influences not only on daily life but also on the psychic and mental condition of the young generation of Saudi Arabians. The huge financial potential at the command of the families of the female protagonists, as standard examples of Saudi families, consumed on luxuries, attempts to constantly match European and American fashion, results in not only vanity and the desire for wealth but also problems with identity. The author of the novel gives as an example of the extremely strong interference of cultures the example of the celebrations that accompanied the quickly suppressed holiday of Valentine's Day and its appearance in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabians started to celebrate Valentine's Day at the end of the 1990s after they had found out about it by means of illegal satellite dishes picking up television programmes from the Lebanon and Egypt. That was the case until sanctions were imposed against flower sellers selling in secret, like smugglers, red roses to their VIP clients. The festival of love has been banned in our country, but Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day have remained even though it is the very same Shari'at law in force (p. 67). A specific example of being lost and only a superficial adherence to the contemporary realities which suddenly entered into the life of the country together with the increased exploitation of the petroleum resources is the figure of Michelle, who being half American and half Saudi does not feel good in her country, she experiences rejection as being not good enough from the perspective of traditional Saudi families even though she has liberal

modern views, she is well educated, intelligent and attempts to transfer certain good customs of social intercourse onto a Saudi soil: Michelle never was able to explain not even to her closest female friends what exactly she felt upon returning to Saudi Arabia from the States. Her friends were aware of Michelle's enormous dislike of traditional and restrictive Saudi society, they knew that she mocked the limitations and bans which the lives of young women were fortified with, yet not one of them would have ever thought that a strong internal struggle was being played out in her. She felt as if she was in the centre of a clash between two contradictory civilizations and this could only be understood by someone with equally broad horizons to herself." (p. 66).

The intensive clashes of Western and Saudi cultures leads to young Saudi Arabians becoming lost, with money, fashion, the desire for the increasingly higher media and public-opinion inspired standards being more important than a search for true values.

Despite the fact that Rajaa Alsanea's novel might strike the Polish reader as trivial, with the heroines' problems appearing shallow and trifling, it is the book *Girls from Riyadh* that shows the important problems facing Saudi society. Generational conflicts, technological and cultural innovations as new ways of diverting attention from matters of true importance, the rationalisation of fundamental life questions to the basis of money, the severe clash with the West, which has opened the eyes of some while entrenching others into the correctness of existing conventions, the ubiquitous surveillance, rumours, these are only a part of the problems which constitute the backcloth for the daily life of Saudi citizens. Yet the author does not leave the reader with open questions, she shows that there is a spark within the nation; a spark which could be the beginning of a new society and a new Saudi Arabia, she advances ideas, proposes solutions through the words of her heroines, she points to a way out of the situation:

"The greatest mistake would be if we were to jump at one another and look down on each other despite the fact that we realise that we are linked by a common goal, and this is the reform of our society and the aspiring towards a better existence." (p. 98).