

# The Impact of Socio-Cultural Contexts on the Reception of Contemporary Saudi Novels

Noura Algahtani<sup>a</sup>

## Abstract

This paper examines how the socio-cultural contexts have affected readers' responses to particular Saudi novels. It draws on Fish's concept of "interpretive communities", which argues that interpretation is an institutional practice, and that consequently readers hold shared prior assumptions that constrain their interpretive strategies (Fish 1980). Not surprisingly, then, some responses to Saudi authors are based on the ideological belief that their novels consist of acts of rebellion against a conservative culture. A close reading of the conflict between Saudi novelists and the social responses to their works can reflect how cultural and social contexts shape the reception of contemporary Saudi novels, and can also help to construct public attitudes toward these texts. Saudi novelists have faced a number of social constraints and factors which have affected the development of the novel in Saudi Arabia. For example, works by al-Gosaibi, Munif, Khal, al-Hamad, al-Mohaimeed, Alsanea, and al-Juhani have all been banned because they were seen to pose a major threat to the dominant, patriarchal Saudi ideology. While the social controversy around these writers was raging, some other writers applied self-censorship to avoid touching upon what were perceived to be the most sensitive issues.

## Keywords

Saudi novels, ultraconservative readings, interpretive communities, reception theory, ideology

In order to truly understand the dynamics of Saudi literary space, it is necessary to be aware of the distinctive nature of the cultural context in Saudi Arabia, which has had a significant influence on the development of the literary scene there. The religious authorities, oil-fueled economic growth, the Gulf War, and the events of 9/11 have all contributed to the transformation of Saudi society. In terms of the Kingdom's cultural context, a number of additional factors, including education, media, and censorship, have all helped to form Saudi's distinctive culture to a greater or lesser degree. These factors which have influenced the political, social, and cultural contexts in modern Saudi Arabia, show that some of these have significantly affected the development of this modern nation. From the outset, the alliance between Ibn Saud

and Sheikh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab has illustrated the complex links between politics, religion, and culture in the Saudi context and the potential for conflict and challenge in the modernisation process. The role of the religious opposition has been one of the most important factors in shaping life in Saudi society, and this internal debate and ideological conflict between conservative and more liberal voices has been ongoing over the decades, especially during the 1980s. However, increasing governmental

---

<sup>a</sup>University of Leeds, UK

## Correspondent Author:

Noura Algahtani, Arabic, Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies,  
School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, Michael Sadler  
Building, University of Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom

pressure, especially in the aftermath of the shocking events of 9/11, has meant that, more recently, extremism in religious discourse has gradually given way to a more tolerant and conciliatory tone.

Another of the key factors which has played a determining role in transforming Saudi Arabia's once traditional Arab existence into a contemporary cosmopolitan lifestyle has been the economic impact of the oil industry. Income gained from this successful economic resource has made a major contribution to social reform by increasing the provision of education which has arguably done more to bring about social and cultural change in Saudi society than any other single factor.

Developments in the political, social, and cultural sphere in Saudi Arabia have also resulted in literary developments, with the novel emerging as an ideal vehicle for documenting these socio-cultural changes and contemporary challenges and tackling the often contentious issues which arise from rapid modernisation. These socio-cultural contexts have had a significant impact on the reception of Saudi novels. For many decades, the Kingdom's religious institutions have had a great influence on public attitudes toward novels by Saudi writers. An insightful reading of the conflict between Saudi novelists and the social responses to their works can reflect how the cultural and social contexts shape the interpretive strategies of Saudis, and can also help to construct the public meaning of the novel. Drawing on his concept of "interpretive communities", Fish argued that the interpretation has become an institutional practice, with readers consequently holding narrow focuses as a result of shared prior assumptions (Fish 1980: 306). Not surprisingly, then, some responses to Saudi authors are based on the ideological belief that their novels consist of acts of rebellion against a conservative culture. This can be related to the controversial attitude of Saudi liberal writers, who often raise certain expectations regarding the reception of their works for two main reasons. First, a reference

to the 1980s conflict between modernists and traditionalists (*hadatha* and *sahwa*) often reminds readers of the fatwas against certain writers and their works. Second, novels written by liberal writers are often considered by ultraconservative Muslims to be a means of corrupting public morals. Therefore, the market for creative literary works is limited due to the widespread censorship of domestic distribution.

Censorship and the lack of freedom of expression can pose serious problems for the media, publishers, and individual writers in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi literary scene is particularly affected by legislation and restrictive practices imposed across the Kingdom, as censorship "is often aimed at stopping the publication or distribution of content deemed politically, morally, or religiously sensitive" (Schwartz et al. 2009: 4). To cite but one specific example, novelist Abdo Khal won the 2010 International Prize for Arabic Fiction (Arab Booker Prize) for *Tarmi Bisharar* (*Throwing Sparks*), a satirical account of a wealthy modern society clashing with ancient traditions. However, his winning novel was banned in his own homeland. Hence, many Saudi writers tend to publish their books in Cairo and Beirut in order to obtain better distribution. As well as the press, radio, and television programmes have also been subjected to the negative effects caused by censorship.

Despite this widespread censorship, a new generation of writers and readers has found different ways to overcome these restrictions. Until the 1980s and early 1990s, government censorship was able to exercise total control; however, with the advent of the Internet, mobile telephony, and satellite television, things have shifted dramatically. A new generation of young Saudi writers has been able to take advantage of new digital technologies and social media platforms to write, share, and publish work and ideas. This has enabled a new generation to engage in political participation in Saudi Arabia, spreading ideas about human rights and freedom of expression in different media forms. The Saudi novel's newly-found maturity

as a literary genre is reflected in the fact that works by contemporary Saudi authors, male and female, have found their way onto bestseller lists in both the Arab and Western world.

Within this atmosphere, Saudi novelists have faced a number of social constraints and have even, in some cases, been imprisoned, and factors which might affect the development of the Saudi novel, as Shboul observed:

The remarkably belated “beginning” of the genre in Saudi Arabia is not simply tied to the “ability” of Saudi authors to write novels. Rather, it has to do with their “perception” of their conservative society’s “reception” of the potentially unsettling “alternative intentions” of novels that deal with sensitive issues in that society. (Shboul 2007: 204)

Thus, al-Gosaibi’s novels were forbidden from entering Saudi Arabia until 2010<sup>1</sup>. Also, the novels of Munif, Khal, al-Hamad, al-Mohaimeed, Hifni, and al-Juhani were banned because they were seen as posing a major threat to the dominant, patriarchal Saudi ideology. While the social controversy around these writers was raging, some other writers applied self-censorship to avoid touching upon the most sensitive issues. However, some writers continue to criticise extremist discourse and social tradition in their writings, the best-known examples are al-Hamad and Khal.

### **ULTRACONSERVATIVE READERS: IDEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO SAUDI NOVELS**

As previously mentioned, the battle against the modernists in the eighties has had a significant impact in shaping cultural awareness in Saudi society (al-Kheder 2011). The intolerant religious discourse constructed a particular prejudiced position against modernists and any ideas contradicted their own ideology. These negative attitudes have affected the social reception of Saudi novels both directly and

indirectly since 1980s. As an example, al-Hamad’s trilogy *Atyaf al-Aziqah al-Mahjurah* (*Phantoms of the Deserted Alley*), consisting of *Adama*, *Shumaisi*, and *al-Karadib* (1997-1998) has received a mixed critical reception. Whilst his novels were enthusiastically received by some critics in the Arab world, some Saudi religious scholars rushed to prohibit the distribution of these novels in Saudi Arabia. Following this ban, some religious scholars issued three fatwas against al-Hamad and his books in order to prevent these from being read. The most draconian of these fatwas was giving permission to kill the writer on his blasphemy (al-Oglaa 1999). al-Oglaa’s fatwa provoked a major controversy in the Saudi literary scene, with various individuals arguing in defense of or attacking al-Hamad. His work provoked strong reactions following the issuance of three fatwas and al-Hamad reported that he received several public death threats that intended to make him seek refuge in another country (al-Arabiya 2006). Despite this, al-Hamad is often considered to be one of the first to express his views explicitly in writing, whether in his journalistic articles or novels, paying scant heed to censorship.

In al-Hamad’s trilogy, the protagonist Hisham al-Aber focuses on the lifestyle of young people in the 1960s and the early 1970s in Saudi Arabia, using a flashback technique and a third person narrator to recount events in two cities, Dammam and Riyadh. He represents Arab youth in crisis at that period, facing political, sexual, and intellectual conflicts. In the third volume, *al-Karadib*, Hisham grows frustrated during his imprisonment for political reasons, and asks himself “Aren’t God and Satan just two sides of the same coin?” (al-Hamad 2005: 137). This phrase is most frequently quoted in reviews written by religious scholars or opponents of al-Hamad and his writing. In their opinion, this offensive phrase proved the writer is an infidel (Kafir), which provoked violent reactions in the public sphere. Notably, the opponents of the novel read this as an expression of al-Hamad’s own

religious views, ignoring the fictional context of the novel in which it appears. In various media interviews, the writer has emphasised that this particular phrase is said by a fictional protagonist in a literary context and does not represent his own opinion (al-Hamad 2012). In Fish's theoretical framework, the term "ideological"<sup>2</sup> would be applied to these religious readings, and the most common reason for a text eliciting such strong responses is that the readers share a set of interpretive strategies (Fish 1980: 171), thus forming what the theorist refers to as an interpretive community. According to Fish, the interpretive activities of such a community "are not free, but what constrains them are the understood practices and assumptions of the institution" they belong to (Fish 1980: 306). In this case, the way in which these Saudi readers interpret al-Hamad's text has been influenced by a set of common experiences, namely, their religious beliefs and institutional perspectives. The similarity and stability of how they choose to interpret the statement made by Hisham al-Aber in al-Hamad's novel can be said to be a direct result of the power of a particular religious discourse which exercises the strongest influence over this group of readers. As Fish argued:

If the understandings of the people in question are informed by the same notions of what counts as a fact, of what is central, peripheral, and worthy of being noticed—in short, by the same interpretive principles—the agreement between them will be assured, and its source will not be a text that enforces its own perception but a way of perceiving that results on the emergence to those who share it. (Fish 1980: 337)

In this instance, this particular group of Saudi readers focused on those aspects of the text of *al-Karadib* that supported their view of novels as a source of blasphemy which may have a negative influence on public values.

Based on this notion, some Saudis espousing ultraconservative Islamic doctrines wrote articles and

books to warn their fellow Saudis about the moral dangers posed by al-Hamad's novels. al-Kharashy's book *Nazrah Shar'yyah fi Kitabatwa Rewayat Turkial-Hamad (Religious View of Turki al-Hamad's Writings and Novels)* (2011) has been made freely available to the public on different websites<sup>3</sup>. In his book, al-Kharashy reads al-Hamad's novels from a conservative religious perspective and argues that some phrases would not be said by any true Muslim believer but only by someone whose conversation was marked by apostasy and rejection of Islamic values (al-Kharashy 2011: 190). Then, he draws a comparison between al-Hamad's trilogy and that by Mahfouz's trilogy<sup>4</sup> which is also seen as a source of corruption (al-Kharashy 2011: 256). This shared understanding has therefore become a predominant form of discourse which is able to rapidly shape social opposition toward Saudi authors and their novels, creating a gap between literature and society. Thus, some Saudi novels such as those by al-Hamad, Khal, al-Sanea, al-Muhaimeed, and al-Juhani have met hostile reactions from the public in Saudi Arabia because of the impact of the religious discourse that is still used in contemporary debates about them and their novels.

Due to the power that the religious discourse wields in shaping public opinion toward these novels, the clash between al-Hamad and ultraconservative opinion has also informed the terms of debate for most critics and journalists whenever they discuss the development of the Saudi novel. Saudi literary critics generally paid attention to the importance of al-Hamad's trilogy, stating that it shook up the conservative Saudi society and has become a model in breaking taboos, and in doing so it opened the door for a new generation of Saudi writers to challenge this dominant discourse (al-Nemi 2009: 31).

The ultraconservative Islamic readers as an interpretive community adopted similar strategies in their readings of al-Sanea's novel *Banat al-Riyadh*

(*Girls of Riyadh*) (2005). They focused on its theme of rebellion against traditional values, and sometimes expressed their view in violent terms “This novel is a great sin...and its writer must repent” (al-Ashmawi 2005). Moreover, some members of this interpretive community took out a court action against the writer herself and the Ministry of Culture and Information to reverse the decision concerning the granting of permission for the novel to be published (Alyaum 2006; al-Arabiya 2006). They judge the novel from an ideological stance and seem unable to read the literary text as fiction, interpreting it by means of their particular standards and criteria based on their rigid religious beliefs. Thus, they describe the author al-Sanea as a rebellious woman because of the liberal opinions expressed by characters in her novel. Their evaluative comments suggest that they are directly criticising the author herself, focusing on her rather than on her text, repeatedly advising her to confess her sins and beg for forgiveness.

These interpretive responses of this group influenced wider public response to this novel, particularly when some religious scholars cautioned their congregation against reading it in sermons delivered in mosques (al-Sanea 2006). This religious discourse clearly influenced some reviewers heavily with their judgments focusing on moral issues such as love and sex in male-female relationships and the wearing of the niqab and hijab. al-Shuwair (2006) as an example, wrote an article in defence of Islamic values. Others strike a similar chord when they describe the novel as a scandalous story about the girls of Saudi’s capital city and assess the text as though it were an autobiographical account (Qadi 2005). As with the case of al-Hamad, readers from this group addressed the author directly by using threatening language, such as “How dare you speak on behalf of Saudi women!” (al-Kharif 2005). al-Kharif’s reading also confuses the protagonists of the novel with the author. Interpretations of this type make personal attacks on the writer herself rather than critiquing the

text as a piece of literature, with reviewers failing to differentiate between the novelist’s real life and the fictional world of her work.

According to Fish (1980), readers of the same community often share similar interpretive discourse, leading them to accept or reject particular novels. Other novels written by Saudi authors including Khal’s, al-Muhaimeed’s novels have been rejected by these ultraconservative Islamic readers as they are potentially controversial and attack what are perceived as key tenets of religious belief. Khal’s novel *Tarmi bi-Sharar* (*Throwing Sparks*) (2009) faced equally strong reactions on the grounds that its representation of sexual issues could negatively impact on public morality. Some ultraconservative members tried to banish Khal by bringing a case against him (Faqihi 2010) or by calling for his dismissal from his job as a teacher. Some of ultraconservative groups call themselves *Muhtasib* also tried to ban the sale of his novels in Saudi bookstores or even at the Riyadh Book Fair, when this novel won the 2010 Arabic Booker Prize (Zain 2010). In an interview, Khal expressed the opinion that some conservative segments of Saudi society find it difficult to accept these novels as they have been trained to follow the ideology of a particular religious discourse for decades and have learned what is acceptable and what is not (Khal 2012). Thus, it might be argued that their attitudes toward Khal’s novel do not differ markedly from the previous readings of al-Hamad’s novels, which reveals how the dominant religious beliefs and perceptions shape the readers’ reactions. This might also be seen as an intertextual view of some journalists’ readings, as will be discussed later in this paper. According to Fish’s concept, Roberts argues that certain individuals and groups (ultraconservative Islamic scholars in the Saudi case) are more likely to be able to influence public opinion:

Those who shout the loudest and whose words are the prettiest will gain more members. And when interpretive

power is given to such a group, the more members who advocate a specific position, the more likely it will be that that position is accepted as fact by a majority of the people. (Roberts 2006: 37-38)

Readers interpret the meaning of novels according to the messages they hear repeatedly throughout their lifetime. Hence, these messages and the interpretive schemas they encourage amongst those forming part of their community can help to influence readers to interpret the meaning of novels in similar ways.

However, the post-9/11 era produced a cultural shock in Saudi society, when religious intolerance was held responsible for an act of extremism and this may have led to some changes in the cultural discourse and also in the attitude toward novels. To provide one specific example, Salman al-Udah is one of a number of religious scholars who have recently shifted their previous position in relation to some Saudi novels. In an interview, he stated that authors such as al-Hamad and al-Gosaibi should not be judged on the basis of their novels on the understanding that these are texts of fiction, not autobiography (al-Udah 2012). This suggests that a new more tolerant attitude has emerged as a result of the cultural developments in this era. However, some religious scholars still criticise al-Hamad, particularly when he was arrested in December 2012 for his tweets<sup>5</sup>, when there were calls for him to be placed under house arrest for the rest of his life and for his books and novels to be withdrawn from bookstores in Saudi Arabia (al-Luhaidan 2012).

## CONCLUSIONS

It can be concluded that a complex relationship between authors and readers has been produced by the conservative nature of Saudi society which has led to a particular type of social reaction toward literature. This suggests that many Saudi citizens are not yet ready to accommodate these particular themes. This conflict often occurs between elements within a cultural discourse system, one is visible, the other is

implied (al-Ghadhami 2001). The power of the ultraconservative religious discourse and the issuance of fatwas relating to Saudi writers themselves and their works have had a significant effect on shaping the reception of Saudi novels. Most ultraconservative Saudi readers, who publicly criticise novels they judge as unacceptable, were unable to differentiate in their criticism between the opinions of the writer and the content of their fictional works. A possible explanation for this might be that the similar form of ideological background in which they engage can affect their understanding of the text, particularly when they make reference to the question "Does this text pose any threat to my beliefs?" and tend to quote directly or indirectly other reviewers.

## Notes

1. It was allowed to sell al-Gosaibi's books by the Minister of Culture and Information in 2010. This was confirmed by the writer in an interview (2011), retrieved (<http://sabq.org/2hPede>).
2. The term "ideology" here refers specifically to "a set of beliefs, convictions or ideas which both binds a particular group of people together and determines the actions they take" (Buchanan I. 2010. *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*. Oxford University Press, p. 243).
3. See for example these forums: (a) [http://www.elthwed.com/vb/showthread.php?1437-%D3%E1%D3%E1%C9-%DF%D4%DD-%C7%E1%D4%CE%D5%ED%C7%CA-\(10\)-%CA%D1%DF%EC-%C7%E1%CD%E3%CF](http://www.elthwed.com/vb/showthread.php?1437-%D3%E1%D3%E1%C9-%DF%D4%DD-%C7%E1%D4%CE%D5%ED%C7%CA-(10)-%CA%D1%DF%EC-%C7%E1%CD%E3%CF); (b) [http://www.saaaid.net/Doat/naseralsaif/22.htm?print\\_it=1](http://www.saaaid.net/Doat/naseralsaif/22.htm?print_it=1).
4. al-Kharashy links between al-Hamad's trilogy and Mahfouz's *The Cairo Trilogy*: *Bayn al-Qasrayn* (*Palace Walk*, 1956), *Qasr al-Shawq* (*Palace of Desire*, 1957), and *Al-Sukkariyya* (*Sugar Street*, 1957) in terms of the number of parts, similarities between the protagonists of these trilogies, Marxist perspective, sexual scenes, and ridicule of religion and religious scholars [al-Kharashy, S. 2011. *Nazrah Shar'yyah fi Kitabatwa Rewayat Turki al-Hamad* (*Religious View of Turki al-Hamad's Writings and Novels*). Pp. 256-266].
5. The comments he posted attacked radical Islamists, stating that "a neo-Nazism is on the rise in the Arab world" he meant Islamic extremists who have distorted the Prophet Mohammed's "message of love", retrieved (<http://stream>).

