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Kanie, M.

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Young Saudi Women Novelists: Protesting Clericalism, Religious Fanaticism and Patriarchal Gender Order

MARIWAN KANIE

Abstract: From the early 1990s Saudi Arabia witnessed a significant surge in women's writing, especially of novels. This was not a temporary phenomenon but continued into the new millennium, at which time a new generation of young woman novelists emerged who developed a deeper critique of the Saudi state and society than their predecessors in the 1990s. Three well-known and challenging novels are examined: Raja' al-Sani'i's *Banat al-Riyadh* [Girls of Riyadh] (2005), Warda Abd al-Malik's *Al-awba* [Return] (2008), and Samar al-Muqrin's *Nisa' al-munkar* [Women of Vice] (2008). It is argued that a fundamental aspect of these works is their critique of religion, or at least of clerics and their discourse which, in the case of Saudi Arabia, is a profound act. It identifies two approaches by the authors: the individualization of religion and especially the re-articulation of the image of God as a friendly and humanistic God, in contrast to the official discourse; and the development of a strong anti-clerical discourse.

Keywords: women's novel, Saudi Arabia, anti-clericalism, *mutawa'a*, protest literature, gender

1 Introduction

The history of women's novels in Saudi Arabia can be divided into three distinct periods. The first was 1958–79, during which time only six novels written by women were published. The second period was 1980–99, when thirty-three novels were published, while the third period from 2000–10, saw publication of around 100 novels.[1] This number has increased considerably since 2010, and new names are continually added to the list of women novelists. Some literary critics regard the third period as being that of "the revolt of the novel", since a considerable number of novels broke the taboos of sex, religion and society during that time, addressing these themes without reservation. In these novels women's social, emotional and physical emancipation is central and the writers ask for fundamental changes to the bitter reality of the lives of Saudi women. As Mawdawi al-Rasheed says, these novelists "are seeking recognition and a voice in writing".[2]

Mariwan Kanie is Lecturer in Arabic Studies at the faculty of Humanities at the University of Amsterdam, Spuistraat 134, 1012 VB Amsterdam, The Netherlands, m.kanie@uva.nl.

Author's note: I have no financial interest or benefit arising from the direct applications of this research.

[1] Al-Mḥish, "Al-riwaya al-niswiyya al Sa'udiyya wa as 'ila al-hawiyya wa al-mawqif min al-akhar" [Saudi Women's Novels and Questions of Identity and the Position Towards the Other] (2013).

[2] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (2013), p. 176.

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This paper concentrates on the third period, focusing on three well-known and popular novels: Rajaʾ al-Saniʿ's *Banat al-Riyadh* [Girls of Riyadh] (2005), Warda Abd al-Malik's *Al-Awba* [Return] (2008)[3], and Samar al-Muqrin's *Nisaʾ al-Munkar* [Women of Vice] (2008). These works approach critically different aspects of the social, cultural, and religious life of Saudi society, and at the time of their publication each, in its own way, caused a considerable shock to the Saudi public. I look mainly at the religious aspect of these works, highlighting their critical engagement with religion and their attempt to re-articulate Islam as a force for the empowerment of women. Although the novels are not written from a secularist point of view, let alone from an atheistic stance, they still contain a radical critique of religious elites and institutions in Saudi Arabia and introduce a more individualized perspective of religion and religious life.

The paper analyzes the two important aspects of the religious critique in the novels: their strong anti-clerical attitude and their attempt to re-articulate religion in a way that empowers women and contradicts official interpretation. Both aspects are parts of the same process of defending women's individual choices and rights. The novels, individually, protest strongly against the Saudi religious establishment, especially the religious police called *mutawaʿa*. The characters are presented not simply as the victims of this organization's cruelty and its dogmatic interpretation of Islam (which of course is based on the interpretation of the country's religious establishment), but are also able to criticize, condemn and attribute barbaric characteristics to it. At the same time the characters, as well as the authors, introduce an alternative perspective on religion that aims to make Islam into a force for creating more individual spaces, freedoms and rights for them. The paper shows how this re-articulation of religion and anti-clericalism takes place while the characters — and the writers — defend love, personal choice, individual freedom, individual dignity, and the enjoying of art, music and poetry.

2 Beyond a secularist perspective

This new cohort of women novelists in Saudi Arabia has been researched in several studies,[4] but insufficient attention has been paid to the religious critique in those works, mainly because it does not emerge from a secularist perspective. By a secularist perspective, I mean approaching religion from an anti-theist, agnostic or even atheist perspective; or reducing religion to a kind of medieval form of knowledge; or considering religion to be against the emancipation of mind and gender relations; or regarding it as an instrument for oppressing the society. There is a consensus among various researchers that these works are "non-revolutionary" or "non-radical", since they do not criticize Saudi society from a secular, progressive and emancipatory perspective but simply reproduce an outdated, backward and conservative religious perspective.

Sadekka Arebi, for example, acknowledges that these authors are trying to change the male-dominated discourse about women in Saudi Arabia, but is disappointed that they do not challenge Islamic norms.[5] Soraya Altorki adopts the same perspective. She claims that although these writers do not criticize the holy texts, or religion itself, they are, on the contrary, as devoted to their faith as others in their country; what troubles these women, in her opinion, is not the

[3] The title of this novel can also be translated as The Plague.

[4] For an overview of the development of Saudi women's novels, see: al-Wahhabi, *Al-riwaya al-nisaʾiyya al Saʿudiyya wa al-mutagairat al-thaqafiyya* [The Saudi Women's Novel and Cultural Changes] (2010). See also: Arebi, *Women and Words: The Politics of Literary Discourse* (1994).

[5] Arebi, *Women and Word in Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Literary Discourse* (1994).

sacred texts themselves, but the prejudicial interpretation of them by men.[6] Ommundsen presents these works as an instrument to "highlight gender relations in Saudi Arabia", but does not appear to find that they are radical in doing this; for instance, she sees the reaction of the characters in *Girls of Riyadh,*

> [as] a curious mixture of protest and compliance. They experiment in secret with forbidden pleasures: champagne, cigarettes, clandestine online affairs. They speak all night via mobile phone calls or e-mail to lovers they are not permitted to meet, but in the presence of family they take on the role of obedient and demure daughters and sisters.

She claims that their aim is "not a wholesale revolt, and, significantly, it is never aimed against their religion".[7]

Mawdawi al-Rasheed continues this line of inquiry and, in a more critical approach, comments that their work lacks any political dimension.[8] According to her, these works and the "women's issue" in Saudi Arabia in general "all combine to boost state legitimacy at a critical moment in its quest for new recognition".[9] Al-Rasheed refers here to the legitimization crisis of the Saudi state after the 9/11 attacks in New York in 2001 and the internal and international pressures on the Saudi state to change its authoritarian religious character. She states that "women novelists and literary figures do not create their own agendas but are co-opted into political projects that are set up by more powerful agents in society, from individual kings and princes to media institutions, education, and dialogue forums",[10] and goes even further by relating these novels to the attempts of the Saudi state and some segments of Saudi society to create the image of Saudi women as educated, cosmopolitan women in order to escape the accusation of producing terror and terrorists. She presents the "heroines" of these young female writers as individuals who are "immersed in a cosmopolitan fantasy, portrayed as cappuccino drinkers, shisha smokers, and globetrotters", because the Saudi state needs this image to make its image better for international audience. These women [the "heroines"]

> move between home, college, private business, and shopping centre like aspirant, privileged youth anywhere today … . Heroines are lovers who travel to London and Sharm al-Shaykh to experience freedoms denied at home, such as spending a night with a dream lover, simply sipping a glass of wine in a bar, or sharing time with the opposite sex in restaurants, cafes, and parks.[11]

Al-Rasheed claims that these books are written in "response to market forces, consumption patterns and the expectations of an international reading audience";[12] that "the novelists and their heroines are products of the neo-liberal capitalist economy";[13] and that a women novelist is "considered less threatening than an activist who mobilises a community of women".[14] In her view, the reason why women write novels has to do with their inability to "establish their own pressure

[6] Altorki, "Layla al-Jihni's Fiction: Conceits and Deceits", *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 3.2 (2010), pp. 207–17.
[7] Ommundsen, "Sex and the Global City: Chick Lit with a Difference", *Contemporary Women's Writing* 5.2 (2011), p. 114.
[8] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, p. 191.
[9] Ibid., p. 209.
[10] Ibid., p. 210.
[11] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, p. 213.
[12] Ibid., p. 216.
[13] Ibid., p. 213.
[14] Ibid., p. 176.

group, or mobilise as women". Fiction has thus "become a strategic move to cope with the authoritarianism and domination that prohibit independent civil society organizations, promote conservatism, apply strict religious teaching, and enforce constant surveillance of women in public places."[15]

Clearly al-Rasheed not only denies any radical aspects in these works, but also downplays their importance and dismisses their critical aspects. Indeed, it is remarkable how all the authors neglect or dismiss one of the most important aspects of these novels (namely the critique of religion through re-articulating it in opposition to its oppressive forms in the country), by harshly criticizing religion institutions and through ridiculing the religious characters in the novels. In the context of Saudi Arabia each of these is extremely important; not only because the country's religious establishment is one of the most powerful bodies in Saudi Arabia, but because the entire legitimacy of the Saudi political system is based on the dominant interpretation of religion. Wahhabism is the official ideology of the Saudi state and the Wahhabis control the ideological sphere and the conduct of Saudi society. Al-Rasheed points to the centrality of "sexual desire, romantic love, society's denial, and personal suffering" in these novels, calling them "well-rehearsed themes, which increased in demand as a result of communication and consumption associated with late modernity". However, she makes no reference at all in these works of the critique of religion that is inseparable from all the other aspects that she mentions.[16] This negation is puzzling because the religious critique in these works is too obvious to be overlooked.

In my view, and as noted earlier, the secularist perspective is behind this denial and precludes the ability to see this important dimension of the novels. Therefore, a more adequate understanding of these works requires one to go beyond the secularist perspective. To revolt or to be an active agency does not mean inevitably to adopt a secularist perspective and to take a stance against religion.[17] As Saba Mahmood has strongly argued, elements of religiosity can function as the basis of critical politics, moral agency, and self, without relying on secular liberal assumptions. In other words, secular liberal forms of the self are not the only forms that can act critically on the self and the society. The normative critical subject is not reducible to the secular liberal subject.[18] It is true that the characters in these novels are not anti-religious secularists. They are absolutely not atheist. In their own ways they are all pious persons, but they are active agencies who start by narrating their own life stories, criticizing the religious establishment, and ending by rethinking religion and re-articulating it as an instrument for personal emancipation. In these novels their criticism of the Saudi religious establishment (*ʿulama*), and the religious police (*mutawaʿa*) is harsh and unprecedented. Further, re-articulating religion in these works not only goes beyond the official interpretation of the Wahhabi clergy, who monopolize religious knowledge and spiritual property in Saudi Arabia, but also introduces new ways of seeing and approaching religion.

Before dealing with these important elements in the novels, I highlight the context in which the works are written, to show in particular the role played by the official interpretation of religion in the Saudi society as well as the justifying of the authoritarian Saudi state. It is also essential to elaborate in some detail on the *mutawaʿa* as a powerful institution and an important part of the country's power structure — an organization which controls public life and is severely attacked in these novels.[19]

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[15] Ibid., p. 176.

[16] Ibid., p. 216.

[17] For a critical approach to secularist perspective see: Asad, *Formation of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (2003). See also: Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (1994); Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (2005).

[18] Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* (2005).

[19] The *mutawaʿa* are officially known as the Committee to Protect Virtue and Prevent Vice.

3 Religion and politics: Saudi state and religion

The Saudi state is an absolute monarchy without a constitution, political parties, legally-protected unions or associations. There is no division of power between the executive, legislative and judicial branches. The royal family dominates both the state and civil society. Religion, in this case Wahhabism, legitimises the royal family.[20] However, there is a very specific division of labour between state and religious establishment in Saudi Arabia. According to this division the Saud family rules the state, and daily life comes under the control of the religious establishment. In exchange for its religious legitimacy, the state guarantees the Wahhabi *ʿulama* a strong position in Saudi society. Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia is a strict set of beliefs about society and the state, interpreting events and aiming at organizing and filtering social and cultural life.[21]

Because of the crucial role of the Saudi *ʿulama*, the Saudi anthropologist ʿAbdullah Anwar calls Saudi society the "society of *fatwa*s". In his words, Saudi Arabia is a "Wahhabi Vatican": nothing will enter Saudi Arabia officially without a *fatwa* that legitimizes its presence in Saudi society,[22] and every week there will be dozens of *fatwa*s that legitimize or forbid various societal developments. According to him, more than 1,000 *fatwa*s are issued annually in Saudi Arabia, and more than 30,000 *fatwa*s were issued between 1971–98.[23] They cover a wide range of issues including: eating, clothing, insurance, music, art, love, perfumes, toys, fighting insects, literature and, of course, sexuality and the movement of women in society.[24] Whenever the ruling family needs a *fatwa* to legitimize its policies it will get one from the highest mufti in the country.[25] The difference between the *fatwa*s of the Wahhabi *ʿulama* in Saudi Arabia and those of *ʿulama* in other countries is that the former are official and binding; they have the power of law whereas the latter are merely opinions. The state actively participates in this process by creating the necessary space for the Wahhabi *ʿulama* to achieve this goal. Bin Baz, the former mufti of Saudi Arabia who legitimized the presence of the American army in Saudi Arabia, issued more than ten thousand binding *fatwa*s.[26] The Wahhabi elite also dominates the education system, runs the legal system, and establishes and controls a huge network of mosques and religious centres.[27] Thus religion is a crucial part of the country's political, social and cultural life.

The anti-woman policies in Saudi Arabia go back to 1979 when a group of radical Saudi Wahhabis, under the leadership of Juhayman ibn Muhammad al-Otaibi, occupied the Grand Mosque in Makkah in protest against the "religious and moral laxity and degeneration of Saudi rulers".[28] The group was defeated by the Saudi rulers who then actually adopted the group's conservative vision themselves. As a consequence, the first wave of anti-woman activity occurred. As Naomi Sakr

[20] Kanie, *Martelaarschap tussen Natie en Religie: Politieke Liefde, Poëzie en Zelfopoffering in Koerdisch Nationalisme* [Martyrdom between Nation and Religion: Political Love, Poetry and Self-Sacrificing in Kurdish Nationalism], PhD diss. (2010).

[21] Sakr, "Women and Media in Saudi Arabia: Rhetoric, Reductionism and Realities", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 35.3 (2008), p. 386.

[22] Anwar, *Khaṣaʾṣ wa ṣfat al-mujtamaʿ al-Wahhabi al Saʿudi: baḥth sociology – anthropology* [The Characteristics and Qualities of the Wahhabi Saudi Society: A Sociological and Anthropological Research] (2004), p. 19.

[23] Ibid., pp. 19–20.

[24] Ibid..

[25] This *fatwa*, issued by the Saudi grand *mufti* in 1990, legitimized the presence of US forces in Saudi Arabia to protect it from Saddam Hussein's army after the occupation of Kuwait.

[26] Anwar, *The Characteristics and Qualities of the Wahhabi Saudi Society*, pp. 20–1.

[27] Höhne-Sparborth, "Social Change in Saudi Arabia", *Orient* 49 (2008), p. 5. On Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, see: Commins, *The Wahhabi Mission and Saudi Arabia* (2006).

[28] Al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (2002), p.144.

notes, Saudi women attributed this new negative development in particular to the *mutawaʿa*,[29] an organization that is a semi-autonomous force with considerable legal authority. It is "organized under the king in conjunction with the Islamic clergy (*ʿulama*) [. … and] is primarily responsible for ensuring compliance with the respect of Wahhabism."[30] The director of the organization has held the position of Minister since 1977,[31] while the organization itself maintains a comprehensive watch over public life and holds people accountable for forms of behaviour regarded as "vice".

Historically, *mutawaʿa* members, ascetic individuals with little education, were engaged in the Protecting of Virtue and Preventing of Vice. During the 1950s, they were volunteers from Najd who did not receive regular salaries from the government, but lived from the *ḥisba* (gifts) of the wealthy. However, they rapidly received state recognition and subsequently became a powerful institution in Saudi Arabia, sometimes even "more powerful than the official security institutions".[32] From the very beginning the organization's qualifications and powers were never clear. What its members consider as vice is not defined; and clear instructions for the treatment of vice are also absent. *Mutawaʿa* not only follow the instruction of government but also the *fatwa*s issued by individual religious scholars whom they follow. Many followed the *fatwa*s of Shaikh Bin Baz, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia.[33]

Saudi society did not accept this organization without protest. The first objection against the *mutawaʿa* had already occurred in 1956 when nineteen youths complained about the institution, asking for its members' influence to be reduced, as well as to be allowed to open cafés, to drink tea and smoke shisha, and to ride bicycles. These young people were duly arrested and sent to prison in Riyadh. However, young men were given permission to ride bicycles three years later.[34] In 1981 the first member of the organization was killed while carrying out an operation in Barida.[35]

After the Gulf War of 1991 the *mutawaʿa* were increasingly allowed "to abuse women and foreigners and detain and sometimes beat and torture Saudi men. There were many sudden raids on private homes based solely on suspicion, and the use of systematic beating of the body."[36] *Mutawaʿa* were also engaged in killing people. In November 1998 several members of the organization "attacked and killed an elderly Shiite prayer leader in Hofuf for calling the prayer according to Shiite tradition".[37] From 2002, Saudi newspapers began to censure the way in which the organization functioned, with many critical articles appearing in the Saudi media, although disparaging the religious establishment and *mutawaʿa* had its roots in the 1990s. From this point three different groups can be discerned who publicly criticized the Saudi rulers, including the religious establishment, developed a new language of rights, and demanded reforms. These were the "liberals" or "modernizers", the *Saḥwa* Islamists, and the Shiite intellectuals and religious leaders.[38]

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[29] Sakr, "Women and Media in Saudi Arabia", p. 391.

[30] Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century: The Military and International Security Dimensions* (2003), p. 294.

[31] Al-Naqidan, *Al-muluk al-muḥtasabun: al-amr bi al-maʿruf w al-nahi ʿan al-munkar fi al Saʿudiyya (1927–2007)* [Calculated Kings: Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, 1927–2007] (2012), p. 30.

[32] Ibid., p. 15.

[33] Ibid., p. 76.

[34] Ibid., pp. 28–9.

[35] Ibid., p. 30.

[36] Ibid., p. 175.

[37] Cordesman and Obaid, National Security in Saudi Arabia: Threats, Responses, and Challenges (2005), p. 303.

[38] Lacroix, *Awakening Islam: A History of Islamism in Saudi Arabia* (2010). On the new generation of Islamists in the kingdom, see: Al-Rasheed, *Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New*

Members of these groups took to writing public petitions to the king asking for reform. In 2003 and 2004, the modernizers drew up new petitions seeking the widening of civil and human rights, freedom of speech, greater roles for women, and fundamental reform of the education system. The petition movement, the activities of some segments of the Islamists, and the commitment of some Shiite intellectuals and organizations, were the voices of Saudi civil society, and included the voices of women calling for the Saudi state to reform. In 2002 the *mutawaʿa* became a target in the Saudi media for some intellectuals, while the visibility of women in the media has been obvious since 2004 and continues to increase.

> Women were now appearing daily on the front pages of all eight official newspapers, which had previously been "monopolized" by men. Official television channels, which had once "minimized" the presence of women in newscasts and other programs had now … turned into "advocates" for an *iqtiham* (invasion) of the media by Saudi women.[39]

From this time the presence of women in the media was "recognizable for the Saudis themselves: Saudi women's faces could now be widely seen in public, where only a short time ago they were barely seen at all".[40] However, in 2011 King ʿAbdullah gave the *mutawaʿa* organization 200 million Saudi *riyals* to finish constructing its headquarters in various Saudi provinces; further immunities were also given to influential religious scholars with close connections to the organization. This new support by the Saudi state for the organization was due to the new circumstances that arose as a result of the Arab Spring. The *mutawaʿa* was aggressively against the protests,[41] in short, intimidating, constraining, abusing and even killing those who appeared not to respect the strict religious code. This organization and its members are widely present in the women's novels analysed in this paper. The novelists represent the members of the *mutawaʿa* as religious fanatics, sexual deviants and barbarians, a point that I return to later.

The novels written by women are part of this complex historical process by which different groups in Saudi Arabia undertake action and develop strategies to challenge the status quo. These works cannot simply be reduced to a mere component of a well-developed plan by the Saudi state to improve its image as a protector of women and their rights through creating an image of the Saudi woman as cosmopolitan, elegant, sophisticated, and educated.[42] These novels are shaped by the context while they are also shaping the process.

4 *Al-bawḥ* and protest

The Arabic concept used to capture the essence of what these women writers are doing is *al-bawḥ*, which means revealing or disclosing, as opposed to covering or veiling,[43] in other words, revealing what was hidden and forbidden, and telling what is not permitted to tell. *Al-bawḥ* is a specific type of behaviour related to an individual's bitter experience of an accumulation of failure and frustration, and his/her futile attempts to obliterate or to keep it secret. Eventually, when it proves impossible to negate and to remain silent, and becomes unbearable, *al-bawḥ* becomes a

Generation (2007). On liberals in Saudi Arabia, see: Dekmejian, "The Liberal Impulse in Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Journal* 57.3 (2003), pp. 400–14; also Meijer, "Liberals in Saudi Arabia", presented at the *2011 Gulf Research Meeting* in Cambridge, 6–9 July 2011.

[39] Sakr, "Women and Media in Saudi Arabia", p. 390.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Al-Naqidan, *Al-muluk al-muḥtasabun*, pp. 119–20.

[42] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, p. 225.

[43] Yusuf, "Al-bawḥ fi al-riwaya al-niswiyya al Saʿudiyya" [Revealing in the Novels of Saudi Women], *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 4 Feb. 2010.

way of coping with it through revealing it in public.[44] These works are therefore dealing with experiences of frustration, failure and dissatisfaction that society refuses to talk about or to expose. Looking at these novels through the lens of *al-bawḥ*, it can be said that they are revealing a world that is not permitted to be revealed, telling resentfully of experiences that are considered non-sexist. Through *al-bawḥ* the novelists and their characters are opening up a social, cultural and symbolic order that fiercely resists openness. They declare what they feel and think, unlocking their minds and feelings before the eyes of the world.

In the male-dominated and religiously-controlled Saudi society *al-bawḥ*is a kind of cultural and moral war that women declare on the mechanisms of keeping things hidden and unspoken. Behind *al-bawḥ*there is an eager desire to be free, to live outside the social and religious taboos that cover almost all aspects of social and personal life for females in Saudi Arabia. *Al-bawḥ* also points to the will and desire to have an identity as a woman without any social or religious repression. Criticizing patriarchy, dominant forms of masculinity, and men are all parts of this aspiration.[45] The characters in the novels are highly individual — they are women with specific desires, wishes, longings, ways of facing their problems, and carrying on with their lives. They have individual ideas about happiness, marriage, love and Saudi men and society, and individual ideas about what constitutes religion and how it should function. In short they are not just objects of society, but are active subjects, who want to invent their own lives through their own agencies.

These works can be conceptualized as *protest literature*: i.e., literature that challenges society and breaks its social, religious and cultural taboos; and literature as a powerful medium for social and cultural criticism, if not as a site for social and political transformation. These writers are protesting against different aspects of Saudi society: the tribal culture, social oppression, male dominance, problems relating to women's sexuality, the rigidly-arranged marriage, the school system, abuse and discrimination against women in the parental home, the limits of social and individual freedom, and the discriminatory education system.

The novels are well-known and read by huge numbers of readers inside and outside Saudi Arabia. They show a generation of young women who are assertive, innovative and critical, women speaking for themselves, shaping their perspectives and developing a language that is their own. Although political criticism is avoided and issues of political participation and criticism of the state are not directly utilized by these writers, their works remain loaded with a spirit of protest and activism. Their writing shows the image of Saudi women as active cultural actors who participate in shaping and reshaping the country's cultural field. In an earlier work Madawi al-Rasheed called these new developments a "different kind of revolution" that was taking place in Saudi Arabia, noting that "Young women novelists are pushing the boundaries in unprecedented ways through producing Saudi versions of "chick lit". A new generation is writing about women as sexual agents rather than submissive victims of patriarchal society."[46]

The importance of these works is not in their literary quality but in the practising of *al-bawḥ*, the mentality, will and courage of talking to confront the society; to tell about problems as they are, to let desire speak its language. The social message in these works surpasses their literary weight and the spirit of protest supersedes the aesthetics. Nevertheless this new generation of women has created a new cultural and literary environment in which readers cannot stay

[44] Ibid.

[45] For the role of men in Saudi women's novels, see: Al-Naʿimi, *Al-riwaya al Saʿudiyya* (2009), pp. 58–61.

[46] Al-Rasheed, "Saudi Chick Lit: The Girls Are Doing It", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 6 May 2011.

neutral, untouched or impartial about what they read. They are not limited to readers in the literary field, i.e., people who are interested in literature as literature. In the first place, readers of these books may well be outside the literary field, readers who do not read these texts as literature but as a *bawḥ*, as statements and manifestations of unhappiness with the world in which they live. In this sense these texts have created a new generation of readers who can identify important aspects of their own lives in these books. The religious establishment also constitutes a kind of collective readership for these works; one with considerable power that feels compelled to make these young women stop writing and talking.

And as the following sections show, these authors are not only critical of the dominant form of religion in Saudi Arabia, but also suggest looking again at religion and re-articulating it in a more humanistic and individualized manner. The plots and reflections of the stories shape a new understanding of religion as part of creating a new Saudi individual and society, with new forms of subjectivity in which religion utilizes the individual's capacities to create an independent subject.

5 The three works

5.1 Banat al-Riyadh *[Girls of Riyadh]*

Banat al-Riyadh, written by Rajaʾ Sanicʿ, is a story of the restricted lives of four young Saudi girls, Gamrah, Michelle (or Mashael), Lameer, and Sadeem. The novel takes the form of fifty emails to a Yahoo! Listserv by an anonymous narrator, who recounts the intimate details of the lives of four of her close girlfriends who are all in their early twenties, and three of whom are university students. The girls are bright, full of life and dreams. As members of Riyadh's upper class they lead lives of luxury, seeking glamour and fashion, and travelling easily between Riyadh, London, Chicago, and San Francisco. The main theme of the novel is Love and the four young girls are in search of it within a highly-segregated Saudi society. Since they want to experience romantic love and choose their future husbands for themselves, they refuse the arranged marriages expected of them according to their tribal norms and religious rules. The marriage experience ends in disaster at least for two of the girls. Gamrah's husband divorces her because he wants to explore a love affair with another woman, while Sadeem's husband divorces her because she had sex with him before the proper marriage ceremony had taken place, which in his eyes is an indication that she is not a respectable woman. Only one of the four girls finds a man who loves her and whom she also loves.

The narrator reveals to the reader details of the hidden desires and wishes of the girls, including their sexual desires, showing their inner worlds by means of *al-bawḥ*. They have rich secret lives, whereas their public lives are eventless but nevertheless harshly controlled and observed. In secret they reveal their true desires and experience various forms of forbidden pleasure: champagne, cigarettes, online affairs, and watching television shows such as *Sex and the City*. They use their mobile phones and e-mails to communicate with their lovers since they cannot meet them in public. Exchanging phone numbers takes place fleetingly on the street and the long calls start at night. The girls wear traditional dress in Saudi Arabia according to Islamic rules, but when they travel abroad they change their clothes in the aeroplane and wear fashionable and expensive western dresses. The novel portrays Saudi society as a hypocritical society full of contradictions, deceptions and lies, making the lives of women miserable. In response to the narrator's e-mails, the readers in the novel react by sending critical emails and accusing her of betraying her country, her religion, and her gender identity by revealing the thoughts and actions of young Saudi women.

Through *al-bawḥ*, this novel presents a rigorous protest against patriarchy, male arrogance, and double standards. Although I agree with Wenche Ommundsen that the characters are not

revolutionary, neither do they aim to revolt, I do not think it is adequate to portray them simply as the "rich and spoilt daughters" of upper-class Saudi Arabia. Further, Ommundsen misses the point when she claims that the characters' attitudes and relationships to religion are not critical, and that they do not revolt against their religion.[47] Although the novel does not adopt a secularist point of view, this does not exclude it from rethinking religion critically as a part of individual lives and a force that might play an emancipatory role in the individual and collective life. The conflict in the novel is not between a secularist and a religious perspective, but between various old and new interpretations and re-articulations of religion.

5.2 Nisaʾ al-munkar *[Women of Vice]*

Nisaʾ al-munkar is a short novel written by Samar al-Muqrin. The original Arabic version of less than 100 pages was published in 2008 by Dar al-Saqi in Beirut;[48] it immediately became a best-seller at the Beirut International Book Fair and was banned in Saudi Arabia. Its first edition numbered only three thousand copies, the second edition ran to ten thousand, and the book was published in a third edition in the same year. According to the Saudi newspaper *Al-Riyadh* on 2 February 2009 fifty thousand illegal copies of the novel were published and distributed in Cairo.[49] Al-Muqrin is a journalist and her novel resulted from her investigation into Saudi women's prisons. She acknowledged in an interview on the website Okaz.com.sa on 25 March 2009 that her prison visits had been the main source of the stories in the novel.[50]

The book tells the story of a thirty-year old woman called Sara who desperately wants to divorce after eight years of marriage, but because the central Riyadh Court does not accept her appeal she finds herself suspended for years between marriage and divorce. Meanwhile she meets a new man called Raif. After having encountered him in the virtual world of the Internet, their first meeting takes place in London, and the first ten pages of the novel are devoted to describing the details of the warm moments of their romantic love and their erotic meeting.

After this brief adventure in London Sara and Raif return to Riyadh. Here she tries hard to contact Raif and to meet him again, but her attempts fail and Raif does not react. Finally they meet in a restaurant in Riyadh but the end is a disaster; members of the *mutawaʿa* raid the restaurant and arrest all those who are together without being married or related. Raif serves a three-month prison sentence, but Sara is punished with four years in prison and 700 lashes. In prison she meets other women, arrested because of murder, adultery and prostitution.

The *mutawaʿa* plays a central role in the story and the characters discuss the harsh and cruel behaviour of the organization. This novel presents the *mutawaʿa* as a congregation of extremist and fanatic believers who see the society as a corrupt entity, and whose duty is to correct it by eradicating vice everywhere. *Nisaʾ al-munkar* is a protest against the religious establishment in general and the powerful *mutawaʿa* organization in particular. It is also remarkable that Madawi al-Rasheed describes Sara as someone who seeks a "cosmopolitan life", while all she wants is a life in which she can sit in a restaurant in Riyadh with a man whom she loves without being attacked by the religious police. Or alternatively she is a woman who wants to be able to be officially divorced after having been deserted by her husband.[51]

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[47] Ommundsen, "Sex and the Global City".
[48] Al-Muqrin, *Nisaʾ al-Munkar* [Women of Vice] (2008).
[49] Al-Marzouqi, "Interview with Samar al-Muqrin", *Al Riyadh* (2009).
[50] Dawud, "My Visit to Prison Made Me Write This Novel", *Okaz*, 24 Mar. 2009.
[51] For the analysis of this character by al-Rasheed see: Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, p. 233.

5.3 Al-Awba *[The Return]*

Warda Abd al-Malik's novel tells the life story of a young Saudi girl, also called Sara,[52] a bright secondary school pupil who expects a lot from life and reads novels as well as her schoolbooks. Reading novels, though, is forbidden for Saudi schoolgirls, who have to undergo regular searches at school for "immoral" and "corrupt" products. This involves going out of their classrooms while leaving their bags behind. When, during one such search, some novels are found in Sara's schoolbag, the school wants to punish her, but Filwa, the school's social worker, mediates between Sara and the headmaster and arranges that she is not punished. Thirty-year-old Filwa, unmarried and a fanatically religious woman, belongs to circles of extremist preachers and the *mutawaʿa*, and introduces Sara to these circles and their teachings.

The novel describes this extremist learning process as a comprehensive and detailed form of brainwashing. Sara learns, among others things, that heaven is not attainable if the woman does not do exactly what her husband expects from her; as a result she undergoes a radical transformation and also becomes a very devout fanatic believer in Islam who thinks relentlessly about hell. To avoid this hell she segregates herself from the outside world, changing from a playful, bright and enthusiastic young girl into an obedient, fearful, religiously-obsessive individual. During this process she destroys her music cassettes, and burns the only photograph of her deceased father because she learns that photos are forbidden by her faith. She listens only to the religious sermons of the *mutawaʿa* from which she absorbs the teaching that hell awaits every non-believer. While Sara is undergoing these radical changes Filwa convinces her to marry her brother ʿAbdullah who is fifteen years older than Sara. Sara leaves school and marries him. ʿAbdullah is a fervently pious person and a member of the *mutawaʿa*. He is also a very lonely and isolated man who suffers badly from a serious and recurring mental illness. He is receiving professional treatment in a Riyadh hospital for his psychiatric disorder but Filwa has kept all this information secret from Sara.

After Sara marries ʿAbdullah she starts to leads a very difficult and bitter life. At one point she decides to end it and leaves him. As part of the process of healing from her ultra-fanatic beliefs and way of life, she swaps her religious cassettes for normal music, cuts her hair short, and dances while travelling to Sharm al-Shaikh and London. In London she leads an independent life, mixed with love, sex and alcohol. Sara sees this change as being reborn, and emancipated from the restricted and widely-regulated religious life of the *mutawaʿa*.

Al-Awba is a novel offering a radical critique of religious fanaticism and of the official version of religiosity in Saudi Arabia, as well as thorough criticism of the *mutawaʿa* as the main point of the work. Again, however, Madawi al-Rasheed does not consider this criticism as an important aspect of the novel, which, according to her, "focuses on the suffering of the body in a disappointing and frustrating marriage, the quest for real pleasures with other men, and opting out from the comfort of the prayer mat." Al-Rasheed goes further: "here we have private pleasures explored in a cosmopolitan context where men and women feel free".[53]

6 Critique of the religious establishment and discourse

As already mentioned, the three novels have a strong critical dimension with regard to religion and the religious establishment in Saudi Arabia but, as noted, this does not emerge from a secularist point of view, let alone from an atheist perspective. The criticism in these novels takes place from within the religious worldview itself, and gives the religion a new and different meaning. The first sentence in *Girls of Riyadh* is a quotation from the Qurʿan: "Verily, Allah does not

[52] ʿAbd al-Malik, *Al-Awba* [The Return] (2006).
[53] Al-Rasheed, *A Most Masculine State*, p. 236.

change a people's condition until they change what is in themselves". A few pages later, in Chapter 9, the narrator begins the chapter with a well-known *Hadith* (saying of the Prophet Muhammad): "Deeds are measured by the intentions behind them" and the narrator asks God for help: "May God consider my writings as good deeds, as I only have good intentions."[54]

Both these citations emphasize internal and individual intentions in understanding religion. According to the narrator, the inner core of the individual is the place where religion should be located and to be religious means to be aware of one's inner intentions. Here religion does not originate from the coercive acts and discourses of the *mutawaʿa*, but comes from the person's inner being. What matters here is not external religious laws and instructions but the individual's own correct intentions, since, if the intentions are good then the right path of religious belief is followed. This individualistic approach to religion totally contradicts the dominant form of religion that the novel's characters experience in the outside world. In the novel the characters replace the conservative dogmatic and institutional form of Islam with their subjective individualized Islam, which fits their ambitions, desires and expectations. The narrator in *Girls of Riyadh* also creates her own version of Islam and the chapters begin with citations from the Qurʿan and Sunna, interspersed with other quotations from non-religious and secular literature. Her version of Islam is one that is at peace with poetry, pop-culture and music; it coexists beside Nizar Qabani's love and erotic poetry, quotes from Oscar Wilde, and the relishing of life.

The image of God that is reconstructed in the novel is another way to re-articulate Islam as religion of peace, cooperation and mercifulness. God in the novel is one who loves human beings and is ready to help them whenever they face the difficulties of life. In Chapter 17, for example, the story begins with a Qurʿanic verse that emphasizes God's co-operation with human beings, making their life easy: "have we not laid your chest open for you, and put aside your burden for you". In Chapter 15 another citation from the Qurʿan is used to construct the image of God as someone who is never unjust: "Surely Allah does not do any injustice to men, but men are unjust to themselves".[55] In Chapter 19 the image of a merciful God and the God who shows the right path to human beings appears again: "Our Lord, let not our hearts deviate after You have guided us and grant us from Yourself mercy. Indeed, You are the Bestower".[56] God as a friend and guide of human beings is the dominant image of God in the novel — one who will never leave human beings alone: "and I entrust my affairs to Allah. Indeed, Allah is seeing of [His] servants".[57] This helpful and assisting God is to be found on different occasions in the novel. For example, it was God's mercy that the twin sisters Lamees and Tamadur were born after long years of waiting: "the couple had only these twins, and moreover had had them only after enduring much suffering and medical attention over a span of fourteen years, after which they had been given, by God's mercy, these two lovely baby girls."[58] This helpful God is the one that Lamees approaches for assistance and mercy when her love and the marriage experiment failed:

> She cried and cried, mourning her first love, buried alive in its infancy before she could even find pleasure in it. She cried and she prayed, she prayed and prayed, in hopes that God would set guidance before her in her plight, for she had no mother to comfort and reassure her, no sister to stand by her side in this trial.[59]

[54] Al-Saniʿ, *Banat al-Riyadh* [Girls of Riyadh] (2005), p. 68.

[55] It is remarkable that this and some other Qurʿanic citations that are crucial in creating a humanist image of God in the novel, are omitted in the English translation of the novel.

[56] This citation is also omitted in the English translation.

[57] Al-Saniʿ, *Banat al-Riyadh*, p. 139.

[58] Ibid., p. 46.

[59] Ibid., p. 74.

Not only is God a helpful and assisting being, but the Prophet Muhammad is also a cooperative individual, with ordinary human traits: the novel represents him as someone who takes care of his family, and does daily household tasks with his wife. Chapter 12 starts with this narrative about Muhammed's behaviour:

> I asked ʿAisha, "Prophet Mohammed's wife", what did the Prophet — peace be upon him — do in his home? She said, He was occupied in the vocation and service of his family and when it was prayer time, he went out into the mosque to pray.

In Chapter 13 this human image of the Prophet is repeated: "The Prophet — the blessing and peace of God upon him — did not beat a single servant of his nor woman, nor did he strike anything with his hand".[60] These humanistic images of God and of the Prophet are in clear contradiction with images of the *mutawaʿa* in which God punishes human beings with the fire of hell and makes the lives of human beings on earth miserable.

Although *Girls of Riyadh* does not attack the Saudi religious establishment directly, this does not mean the novel does not say anything critical about it. In Chapter 11 the narrator introduces a special character description of religious types in Saudi Arabia, which pays special attention to those men and women who join *mutawaʿa*. The typology is from one of the older women in the story, Um Nuwayyir, who distinguishes three types of religious men and women in Saudi Arabia: the extremely religious, the rational, moderate religious, and the wild religious.[61] She analyzes each type in detail, among them the *mutawaʿa* type which, according to her, contains those people who were once wild but have turned religious because they fear wildness. This type is also afraid that he will degenerate morally after marriage, so frequently ends up in a polygamous marriage, and often prefers his wives to be at least as zealous as he is. According to Um Nuwayyir the women who belong to the *mutawaʿa* type are those who are mostly brought up in strict religious families and have been isolated from the outside world, living under high self-discipline or the surveillance of the family. But some of them have fantasies of bursting out into something new, into some kind of liberation. This "psychological" analysis of Um Nuwayyir's type of the extremely religious men and women who join *mutawaʿa* presents them as abnormal individuals with a very limited knowledge of the world and a distorted spirit; people with extreme fears and phobias. They are actually presented as psychologically weak individuals in a society dominated by men and religion.

In Chapter 25, the narrator reacts to the religious criticism of some of the unknown readers of the e-mails and portrays them as the "unfortunate ignorant". The religious readers accuse her of promoting "moral corruption" and "fornication and abomination spread through our paragon of society". In reaction to this accusation, the narrator writes:

> May God be merciful with everyone, and may He remove from their eyesight the grim affliction that compels them to interpret everything I say as morally depraved and wanton. I have no recourse but to pray for these unfortunates, that God might enlighten their vision.

She asks further for a "respectful dialogue, without attacking others as unbelievers, without humiliating them, and without rubbing them in the dirt".[62]

In short, *Girls of Riyadh* does not adopt a secularist perspective, but the novel reconstructs an individualized form of religion with a friendly and co-operative image of God. There is also indirect and mild criticism of the *mutawaʿa* in the novel.

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[60] Ibid., p. 97.
[61] Ibid., pp. 75–6.
[62] Ibid., p. 168.

The two other novels discussed are more radical in their critique of clerics in general and *mutawaʿa* in particular. Publication of *Girls of Riyadh* paved the way for a new generation of female novelists to write, with much less fear and to point to the burning issues of Saudi society, among them the position, manner of thinking and practices of the Saudi clerics, including the *mutawaʿa*. While al-Muqrin's *Nisaʾ al-munkar* and *Al-Awba* by Warda ʿAbd al-Malik have the re-articulation of religion in common with the *Girls of Riyadh*, they differ from the latter by their strong anti-clericalism. The following section clarifies what I mean by this term.

7 Anti-clericalism

Anti-clericalism covers a wide range of different forms of criticism against the clergy or the *ʿulama*. By anti-clericalism I mean not only viewing religion or religious clerics critically but in addition regarding them as dangerous to society. As Richard Rorty puts it, anti-clericalism is a viewpoint which regards official and institutionalized religion, despite all the good it may do, as dangerous to the health of a democratic society.[63] Anti-clericalism considers religion as not dangerous in itself, but sees institutionalized and politicized forms of religion as potentially dangerous and as a possible instrument of oppression in society. Anti-clericalism's main argument is not that religion is irrational or mythical or superstitious, but that it is politically dangerous. In this sense, anti-clericalism does not mean atheism: as Rorty claims, it is "a political view, not an epistemological or metaphysical one".[64]

In the case of Saudi society anti-clericalism means criticizing the country's powerful and well-established Wahhabi *ʿulama* who intervene widely in the daily life of the Saudi people. It is a battle against the official, authoritative religious institution and their interpretation of religion. In this sense anti-clericalism is in the first instance a charge against the clergy, made by depicting them in terrible, barbaric and inhuman images.

In *Nisaʾ al-munkar* and *Al-Awba* the clergy and especially the *mutawaʿa* are represented through a cluster of negative images, among them:

(a) Members of *mutawaʿa* are presented as a group of liars, schizophrenics, and hypocrites. In the first page of *Al-Awba* we hear the main character Sara saying: "I shall expose their schizophrenia as I have witnessed it, their hypocrisy that divides my subjectivity into two parts, and their quackery and the voodoo that they put in my head". She labels the *mutawaʿa* members as *al-awbash* (ragtag thugs), a representation that is also found in *Nisaʾ al-munkar*.

(b) Members of the *mutawaʿa* are devilish and unscrupulous individuals who inflict much pain on individual lives through misusing heir immense and uncontrolled power — al-Moqrin labels them literally as "devils".[65] She shows how *mutawaʿa*, who she also calls "religious police",[66] hunt men and women everywhere — in public locations and even in their homes — without showing any guilt about their activities. When undergoing a harsh interrogation by *mutawaʿa* the protagonist defends herself, saying "Oh shaikh, I have done nothing; what I did is something between me and my God. You came and brought me here from my home, not from a whorehouse".[67] Beating,

[63] Rorty and Vattimo, *The Future of Religion* (2005), p. 33.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Al-Muqrin, *Nisa al-munkar*, p. 12.
[66] Ibid., p. 16.
[67] Ibid., p. 62.

humiliation, and using derogatory words typify the *mutawaʿa* men when they deal with their victims. In *Nisaʾ al-munkar* the women's prison is presented as the *mutawaʿa*'s prison, and those responsible for the humiliations that take place in the prison are the *mutawaʿa* themselves. In *Al-Awba* Sara calls Riyadh the City of the Inquisition.

(c) Clergy in general and the members of *mutawaʿa* are also presented as men who lack chastity and even religiosity. Al-Muqrin creates an image of them as a force "able to do with those woman [in prison] what they want". On the first page of *Al-Awba* the protagonist calls the *mutawaʿa*'s God a bad God without mercy or compassion; she calls him "a God of chains and fire". In a thoroughly cynical tone she also distinguishes between the "*mutawaʿa*'s heaven" with its "seventy virgin and *gulam*, young boys without beards" in the next life, and her own heaven, which she wants to establish on earth.[68]

(d) The image of the lustful cleric is dominant in *Al-Awba*. When her grandmother takes Sara to a shaikh to deal with her depression and mysophobia, the shaikh begins to touch the girl's sexual body parts in front of her grandmother. The image of members of the *mutawaʿa* as sexual perverts who ought to be punished, rather than be moral guides for society is also dominant in *Nisaʾ al-munkar*. Warda ʿAbd al-Malik creates the figure of a religious shaikh who manipulates an illiterate woman and makes her recite the Qurʿan while practising anal sex with her. The novels create images of these clerics as hypocrites, as people who are everywhere creating a false moral code and world.

(e) Samar al-Muqrin presents the *mutawaʿa* as an organization that tries to turn the entire population into spies by recruiting people who, for instance, work in restaurants, hotels, and furnished apartments, to report all "suspected" gatherings, meetings or appointments between males and females in the country.[69]

(f) *mutawaʿa* are also presented by al-Muqrin as a criminal organization whose members commit crimes against individuals, humanity, the fatherland, and against the faith of Islam as religion. "They speak in the name of Islam and use it to humiliate human beings and crush their dignity".[70] Al-Muqrin did not hesitate to call them by their real name: "the fanatic Wahhabis".[71]

8 Conclusion

The main theme of these novels may not be religion or a critique of the religious establishment and discourse, but the characters in the novels cannot escape religion while they live and narrate their lives, since they are in a daily confrontation with the power of the clergy and *mutawaʿa* in Saudi Arabia. This confrontation with official religious interpretations and institutions does not take a secularist form, but the characters do re-articulate the notion of religion against the background of their individual and social desires, dreams and expectations. Religion thus becomes in these novels an internal experience focusing on a specific image of God: a merciful God who tolerates human mistakes and assists people in their difficult journey through life**.** In this sense the "essence" of religion in these novels undergoes changes and distinguishes itself profoundly from its dominant interpretation in the society. The novels do not suggest atheism, nor the decline of

[68] Al-Malik, *Al-awba,* p. 1.
[69] Al-Muqrin, *Nisaʾ al-munkar*, pp. 38–9.
[70] Ibid., p. 44.
[71] Ibid., p. 11.

religion, nor even separating religion from public life; they do, however, suggest another form of religion that helps individuals to create themselves as happy and responsible beings, as persons controlling their lives and choices. They suggest that this new form of religion assists the young women who are portrayed to confront their lives with confidence and self-assurance. For them religion is not one option among many — it is a permanent option, but one that does not destroy other options in life.

Religion in these works is directly related to morality, and to be a religious person means to be a good, involved and friendly person, to be good to others and oneself, and to treat the world and the others gently. In this sense, religion has little to do with the sense of another reality, nor its relation to the infinite, nor with a higher truth. It is, however, a power related to self-realization; something that assists individuals to go further in their lives with some confidence and self-assurance. The well-being of their souls is not dependent on what clerics tell them, and surely not in accordance with what the *mutawaʿa* thinks and does. The characters in the novels want to reach God without the intervention of the clergy and the religious establishment; they transform religion outside the terrain of the religious authorities, and make it part of a critical individual consciousness. For these characters, religion is an individual compass, but certainly not the only one, since it is present together with poetry, music, fun, and happiness.

Developing new forms of morality which undermine the moral authority of the religious establishment, is part of what these novels are suggesting, and it is not for nothing that the religious authorities in Saudi Arabia saw them as a great insult to their material and symbolic power, and presented them as a plot against Islam. Their critical approaches have created a new cultural and literary environment towards which readers cannot stay neutral, or remain untouched or impartial about what they read. The popularity of these works has also changed the nature of the audience. These works have attracted a vast number of readers who do not read the texts as literature but as critical statements and as the manifestation of dissatisfaction with the world in which they live. In this sense, the novels have created a new generation of readers who can identify with their content.

What is most important in these novels, however, is not the literary quality of the texts but their courageous protest and harsh criticism, as well as the mentality and courage to confront and name the fundamental problems of their country with, among others, their own specific names: the patriarchal gender order, religious fanaticism, and a despotic control of public and individual life. Here the social and the political in these works surpass the literary.

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