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Research Article

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Feminism and Postmodernism in Kuwaiti Women's Fiction: Four Novels by Fawziyya S. al-Sālim

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Abstract: This article comparatively examines the first four novels of Fawziyya Shuwaysh al-Sālim (b. 1949): *al-Shams madhbūḥa wa-l-layl maḥbūs* (1997), *al-Nuwākhidha* (1998), *Muzūn* (2000), *Ḥajar ʿalā ḥajar* (2003). I argue that these novels reflect not only the stages of the author's career as a novelist but also of the transition of Kuwaiti women's fiction from the conventional to the postmodern narrative technique and discourse. Al-Sālim's first and second novels typically reproduce—albeit subversively—the dominant literary discourse and employ conventional narrative techniques. On the other hand, her millennial—third and fourth—novels signal the inception of the feminist-postmodernist novel in Kuwait; in varying degrees, both texts utilise present-day, globalised linguistic vulgarism and fragmented narrative techniques to explore feminist discourses bordering on female transcendence and self-determination.

Keywords: Kuwaiti feminism, postmodernist fiction, slavery and gendered violence, culture and sexuality

Introduction

Fawziyya Shuwaysh al-Sālim was born in Kuwait in 1949. A university graduate, she has published seven novels to date, all outside Kuwait—either in Syria, Lebanon, or Jordan—admittedly, in order to avoid censorship. This article presents a comparative analysis of her first four novels—al-Shams madhbūḥa wa-layl maḥbūs [The Sun is Slaughtered and the Night is Confined] (1997), al-Nuwākhidha [The Shipmasters] (1998), Muzūn (2000), Ḥajar ʻalā ḥajar [Stone upon Stone] (2003).¹ Of some 195 pages, al-Shams madhbūḥa is the shortest of these novels, and the simplest, in terms of plot and character development and of the depth and diversity of contents. Set in the latter part of the pre-oil era of the modern Arabia Gulf history—presumably between the 1900s and 1950s—the novel tells the story of Waḍḥa, a fourteen-year-old Kuwaiti girl, who is forced to marry a rich man of the same upper-class as her parents. In protest, Waḍḥa avoids sexual encounters with her husband, and she carelessly performs her domestic chores in such a way that infuriates her mother-in-law. Consequently, under the influence of the mother-in-law, she is divorced in less than a year into the marriage. About three months after the divorce and as she is preparing for another wedding with her childhood lover and cousin Ḥamūd, Waḍha is again forced to remarry her first husband.

Al- $Nuw\bar{a}khidha$, the second novel is set in an earlier pre-oil period of the pre-oil era, presumably from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. It tells the story of $Ibr\bar{a}h\bar{1}m$ al- $^{\circ}\bar{U}d$, a great shipmaster and ship-owner with a large family and a huge seafaring-cum-pearling business. But a feminist reading of the

¹ Please note that, unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine; and that, in translating words and phrases from the selected texts, I have adopted idiomatic translations that I think better reflect the contexts in English.

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novel would emphasise that it is the story of several female struggles and experiences—from slavery to gendered violence and sexual repression—in a male-dominated world. For instance, Hayā—its most central Kuwaiti female character—falls victim to various forms of societal oppression. She is forced into seclusion and denied marriage to her childhood lover Saʿūd because he is a poor worker—pearl-diver—while she is the daughter of the wealthy pearl merchant. These culminate in her "madness," which leads to her in-house incarceration. She remains "'azrā' lam talid" (a childless virgin) (al-Nuwākhidha 349) till the end of her long life, presumably around 100 years of age.

With a much more complex plot, *Muzūn* presents the stories of three generations of an Arabian Gulf family. Its heroines are Zayāna, an Omani matriarch who lives from the early to the late twentieth century; her daughter, Zuwayna, who is an "illegitimate" child of an undisclosed French father and lives from the mid- to the late-twentieth century; and Zawayna's daughter, Muzūn, who is of a Kuwaiti father and lives from the late twentieth century onward. While Zayāna and Zawayna experience forced or arranged marriage as prevalent in their eras, Muzūn does not. An employee of a public institution, Muzūn is not only educated and economically independent, but also, she enjoys the freedom to take decisions on the affairs of her life personally.

Whereas in *Muzūn*—and the earlier two novels, marginally, since they do not delve much into the post-oil era—the author depicts the struggle between tradition and modernity, she takes the topic much further in *Ḥajar ʻala ḥajar*. In this novel, the reader finds its youngest and third heroine, Nūra, reflect on the events and personalities that have had immense influences on her life and character. Those events include her parents' divorce and the symbolic divorce (war) between Iraq and Kuwait. References to these and several other historical events serve as narrative digressions in the more expansive narration of the stories of the onerous quests—adventures—embarked upon by Nūra's mother and the second heroine, Mūḍī, and by her great-grandmother, Rachael, the novel's first heroine who had lived in fifteenth-sixteenth century Spain and Arabia. In what follows, I demonstrate how these four novels reflect not only the stages of the author's career as a novelist but also of the transition of Kuwaiti women's fiction from the conventional to the postmodern narrative technique and discourse.

Al-Sālim's Feminist Narrative Strategies: From the Conventional to the Postmodern

Basically, this article conceives of feminism as any movement, process, act, statement, thought, etc., that rejects—expressly or implicitly—gender inequality and women's oppression, and that clamours for women's rights. While feminist scholarship has been approached from the perspectives of many sociophilosophical, linguistic, literary, and cultural theories and movements (see, e.g., Buchanan 165-69), the article incorporates more ideas from 'literary postmodernism' and its appropriation by feminist writers and critics. Both in theory and practice, postmodernism is about breaking free from all forms of established principles for invention and re-invention (Slemon, 426-37). The postmodern art, in Jean-François Lyotard's words, is "a sort of 'bricolage'" (47) that entails a mixture of all styles, tones, or modes from more than one thing or period; it is characterised, in other words, "by the use of historical and vernacular style elements and often fantasy, decoration, and complexity" (*Webster's College Dictionary*).

As Tarek El-Ariss notes, effects of postmodernism can be noticed in the rapid changes that have happened to contemporary Arabic literature thereby making writing "cool again" (511; emphasis in original). With special reference to the production and reception of the works of some contemporary Arab writers—including, from the Gulf, the Saudi Arabian "Abdo Khal (b. 1962) and Rajaa Alsanea (b. 1981)"—El-Ariss notes further that:

New novels and short-story collections exhibit multiple forms of linguistic play and narrative structure, mixing technowriting with [classical] poetry, the diary genre with political critique. With varying aesthetic qualities, they include one-time hits and bestsellers, vulgar scandal literature, experimental texts and postmodern takes on the [Naguib] Mahfouzian narrative. They also involve abundant references to works by international authors such as Milan Kundera, Paolo Coelho, and Chuck Palahniuk, and are systematically in dialogue with popular culture and film both in the Arab world and [beyond]. (511)

Some other scholars have highlighted how modern Arab women writers, in particular, have experimented with postmodernism in their narratives (e.g., Suyoufie 222-48). But employing postmodernist narrative styles and techniques is still an emerging trend in Kuwaiti fiction, and al-Sālim sets the pace through her turn-of-the-century novels, all of which fit El-Ariss' description above. Al-Sālim experiments with postmodernist techniques in treating common feminist issues, thereby making her novels differ from those of her contemporaries among the first generation of Kuwaiti women novelists—such as Laylā al-'Uthmān (b. 1945), Nūriyya al-Saddānī (b. 1946), Ṭayyiba al-Ibrāhīm (1952-2011), Fātima Yūsuf al-'Alī (b. 1953) and Khawla al-Qazwīnī—whose collective contribution to the development of the Kuwaiti novel I have examined elsewhere (Tijani, "Kuwait" 282-94).

In his foreword to al-Sālim's *al-Nuwākhidha*, Edwār al-Kharrāṭ highlights the importance of the novel's detailed illustration of Arabian Gulf cultural and historical heritage (7-16). But most of his observations delimit the significance of the novel as a feminist tract; rather, they portray al-Sālim as a typical woman writer who merely reproduces the dominant patriarchal, or male-oriented, literary tradition. This way of reading Arabian Gulf women's novels has been provided by other scholars such as Sabry Hafez (154-74) and Samar al-Faysal (112-18). I have countered such reading in several other places, arguing that a female writer's adoption of the dominant narrative discourse does not necessarily imply her support of and complicity in women's oppression; the actions and thoughts of the women who populate her texts should be taken into consideration alongside her language, style, and tone (Tijani, Male Domination 61-66; "Irony and Humor" 9-19).

In Male Domination, I have particularly critiqued Hafez's reading with some depth because it is theorized—based on Elaine Showalter's categorisation of the phases of British women's fiction in the past two centuries into the "feminine, feminist, and female." Showalter explains that the 'feminine' phase is characterised by the "imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of its standards of art and its views on social roles." The "feminist" phase is one "of protest against these standards and values, and advocacy of minority rights and values, including a demand for autonomy." And there is the third phase of "female" "self-discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity (Showalter 13; emphasis in original). I would not like to hammer too much on these categorisations as they sound generalist and descriptive; in fact, alternative orderings of these phases have been provided by other critics such as Toril Moi (1985).

Nevertheless, Showalter adds some caveats which are noteworthy here: that "these phases overlap; there are feminist elements in feminine writing, and vice versa;" and that "one might also find all three phases in the career of a single novelist" (13). The overlap and the mixing of these elements are characteristic of the postmodern art, as earlier noted, and they are found in al-Sālim's novels. Thus—in consonance with El-Ariss' observation cited above—all of al-Sālim's novels feature a mixture of modern standard Arabic with the vernacular—Kuwaiti and, occasionally, other Arabic dialects—in both their narrative and dialogic aspects. Moreover, they are replete with quotations from Arabian Gulf folk songs; are written in very short sentences and phrases in a way that is more akin to (the free verse form of modern Arabic) poetry than prose; and contain verbal jugglery and musically-rhythmic words and sounds.

In terms of narrative techniques, the selected four novels can be divided into two categories. On the one hand, al-Shams madhbūḥa and al-Nuwākhidha are conventionally chronological, with their events unfolding in a largely sequential order and, contextually, both depict apparently submissive heroines, as further explained below. These two novels represent the first phase of al-Sālim's career as a novelist, a stage whereby she resorts to a kind of "indirect feminism": by employing irony and humour as narrative strategies, rather than making her heroines in these texts openly confront patriarchal authorities to reject their oppression (Tijani, "Irony and Humor" 9-19). My use of the term "indirect feminism" here aptly aligns with Jason Barrett-Fox's adoption of the same label with regard to the American female comic legend Anita Loos (1889-1981) who "snuck questions of gender into and poked fun at hyper-masculinity in her comedic movies" (Kait, "Anita Loos"). Barret-Fox explains that, through her indirect approach, Loos "was able to introduce feminist questions into the mainstream simply by disguising them with humor," which "was a clever way ... to present gender inequality to the masses ..." (qtd. in Kait, "Anita Loos").

Al-Sālim's first two novels embody indirect feminism because both are set in an era—the periods up to the 1950s—when the Kuwaiti women's liberation movement was not manifest. While female literary awakening in Kuwait dates back to the late 1940s and the early 1950s, open feminist social activism only began in the country in the early 1960s, through the awareness-raising public events organised by several women's organisations. These activities—literary and social—were triggered by the introduction of women's education in the late 1930s and their consequent entrance into the labour force as parts of the broader effects of the oil boom on the country (al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait* 44-78; FKWDPC 54-94).

Al-Sālim's third and fourth novels, by contrast, represent a kind of "direct feminism"—an overt call for women's liberation—through her portrayal of openly defiant female characters as well as the radical change in her narrative techniques, style, and language. Both texts non-conventionally feature a completely fragmented, non-sequential ordering of events; still, as characteristic of the postmodern novel, "the unity of the book, the odyssey of that consciousness, even if it is deferred from chapter to chapter, is not seriously challenged" (Lyotard 45). Furthermore, both novels are—much more than their predecessors—polyphonic, featuring several narrative voices mostly presented intermittently in the first, second, and third person modes. The multi-vocal nature of both novels reflects, on the one hand, how their respective major female characters connect to influence one another as a way of raising feminist consciousness; on the other hand, it also reflects cultural and ideological hybridity and multiplicity—a hallmark of the contemporary, postmodern world—as further explained below.

In terms of language, both the third and fourth novels use some words and symbols that are indicative of the concept of <code>fadiha</code> (social dishonour/scandal) or '<code>ayb</code> (shameful thing/act) in Arab societies. In the fourth novel, in particular, the author is more deviant than before in her use of language—with statements such as "fuck you" and "watching porno on TV" boldly written/printed in English (the Latin script) within the Arabic text (<code>Ḥajar</code> 134, 136). The use of this kind of vulgar language—which is absolutely not acceptable in the Kuwaiti public—underscores a radical shift in the level of compliance by writers with the societal order. In what follows, I examine al-Sālim's treatment of several feminist discourses, highlighting how her handling of the novels' subject-matters successively reflects a marked progression in her individual artistry and literary feminism, on the one hand, and in the status of women in her immediate society, on the other hand.

From Femaleness to Wo(hu)manness: Depicting the Postmodern Arabian Gulf Woman

"Femaleness," in this section, is used in the sense of the socially and culturally constructed concept of being female, the so-called weaker sex in a male-dominated world. An ideology that enshrines gender inequality and male superiority, "femaleness" is embodied in a related concept known as "The Cult of True Womanhood" which, as Judy Sneller explains, "defined the roles of [nineteenth] century American white women in terms of their 'private domestic sphere' and a 'public sphere' of business, politics and law for men" (41). The "True Woman," Barbara Welter notes, was expected to possess "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity... Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement, or wealth, all was ashes" (qtd. in Sneller 41). As symptomatic also of the historical and cultural contexts of the pre-oil Arabian Gulf, the same ideology of "The Cult of True Womanhood" pervades al-Sālim's first three novels which successively concentrate on depicting the concept of "femaleness," by focusing largely on instances of gender inequality and women's oppression-cum-submissiveness, as illustrated below.

By contrast, the fourth novel exemplifies postmodern feminist fiction that portrays the concept of "wo(hu)manness," a term used herein to refer to the feeling by women that they are humans and should feel free to pursue their aspirations and to function in society on their own terms with little or no emphasis on sexual inequality/politics. As Jane Flax recommends, feminist theorists and writers should "enter into and echo postmodernist discourses as [they] have begun to deconstruct notions of reason, knowledge, or self and to reveal the effects of the gender arrangements that lay beneath their 'natural and universalizing facades'" (173).

By so doing, the woman writer graduates from representing forms of gender/sexual politics to illustrating what Nancy Chodorow describes as a "feminist understanding [that] requires a multiplex account [...] of the dynamics of gender, sexuality, sexual inequality, and domination." Chodorow adds that "It is the focus on relations among elements, or dynamics, along with an analysis and critique of male dominance, which defines an understanding of sex and gender as feminist, and not just the exclusive focus on male dominance itself" (184). In this sense, the notion of "wo(hu)manness" is inclusive in its approach to feminist scholarship and philosophy and so it signifies a higher level of consciousness for women than "femaleness," which is exclusive. The following are examples of al-Salim's representation of femaleness and wo(hu)manness in the four novels, arranged thematically rather than chronologically.

Slavery and Gendered Violence

Although the first three novels focus largely on male domination and women's oppression, it is only al-Nuwākhidha that explicitly explores the theme of gendered violence—in this case, violence caused by men against women— interweaving it with that of the operations of the slave trade in the wider Indian Ocean and Arabian Gulf region. The history of women and slavery in the Gulf region has been examined by scholars such as Patricia Romero (373-92). However, the topic has been largely ignored by contemporary fiction writers from Kuwait; hence, the significance of al-Nuwākhidha (97-140) and, marginally, Hajar 'ala hajar (317) as examples of Kuwaiti fictional texts that explore slavery as a crime against humanity. Al-Nuwākhidha's account of slavery and gendered violence in the pre-oil Arabian Gulf is similar to the accounts of piracy and gendered violence in the Mediterranean region around the same historical epoch, as Judith Tucker's study shows:

Certainly, pirate posturing and attacks were highly masculinized forms of violence that terrorized women and threatened them with capture, enslavement, and sexual assault. Such ruthless treatment of women could be read as a naked display of patriarchal power, one that constrained women by rendering the sea an unsafe space, fraught with special perils for females. And it is true that women were captured and subsequently subjected to the absolute power exercised by masters over slaves. Such dangers of sea voyages for women were amply represented in popular accounts of female captivity as well as various artistic representations of women being held in thrall. (31-33)

Al-Nuwākhidha treats piracy, albeit non-extensively (72-73), and it is repeatedly mentioned in the novel as one of the inherent dangers associated with seafaring (e.g., 63, 69, 270). Though the novel does not link piracy with gendered violence, its portrayal of rape as a part of the experience of slavery exemplifies the scenario described by Tucker in the above extract.

The representation of gendered violence is captured through the point of view of the novel's principal narrator, Mangi, who is a black African female slave travelling on board one of the pearl-merchant Ibrāhīm al-'Ūd's ships from East Africa to Kuwait. Mangi narrates how she had been kidnapped—together with her little brother, Mugumu, and a number of other African females—by a group of slave merchants. Their captors are men also of African origin but working in collaboration with some "white men" (al-rijāl al-bīḍ) (111) who, from their descriptions elsewhere in the text (130), also include Arabs. Mangi narrates that, at a point during the journey, an unnamed "beautiful girl" among the captives becomes a victim of sex crime: "One of the [African] guards suddenly rose, after consulting with the others." He "grabbed the girl," dragging her along with him to a room in a corner of the seaside building where the captives have been kept pending the arrival of another ship. "She was crying .. screaming .. wailing (tuwalwilu) .. bawling (tanūh) .. while the man was breathing heavily (yashhaq) .. braying (yashkhar) and mooing (yakhūr)" (105). The girl is stripped naked and gang-raped by five men. At the turn of the fifth man, "we heard his brays and [orgasmic] groans, but we did not hear a sound from the young woman" (105). Soon thereafter:

The fifth man entered [the large hall] with the girl's body on his back .. He threw her on the floor; her clothes were torn and her hair ruffled up (mankūsha). She has fainted .. (106)

This scene represents some of the consequences of rape on a woman's body and mind, which usually include painful penetration, unwanted pregnancy, psychological or mental disorder and, in some cases, death (Moser 30-51). Due to the excessive pains associated with the gang-rape, the girl goes into a coma for many hours. Consequently, she dies and her body is thrown into the sea (*al-Nuwākhidha* 106, 112). The scene also illustrates Tucker's remark that "The specter of rape and death haunts the narratives [of piracy and gendered violence ...] and one of the ubiquitous if unstated morals of these tales is that the woman who travels the sea has sailed out of protected domestic space and thereby courts male violence" (9).

The rape scene also shows how gendered violence sometimes intersects with other categories of difference, such as nationality, ethnicity, race, and religion. This can be corroborated by the fact that, since she is an in-transit African slave, the girl's rape and death are not reported and the offenders are left unpunished. Her death is "kept secret by the [darkness of the] night" (106). Even when "the white man" detects the "the girl's clothes as well as the blood-soaked parts of her body floating on the sea," he remains silent (111-12). He looks angry, though. But, implicitly, that anger is not because of the acts of violence, murder, and humiliation committed against the girl's body, but for having lost the money he paid in advance as the price for the girl.

Furthermore, the other female slaves who witness the rape incident could not voice their condemnation of such an appalling act. They feel traumatised, and the incident haunts them throughout the remainder of the journey and thereafter (112-36). The novel's depiction of this type of male-engendered trauma illustrates Tucker's observation—with reference to early modern Venice—that "gendered violence was largely [considered] a private affair, lightly regulated by the state" and that "Violence against women, in particular, has been both naturalized and silenced." It is "often rendered invisible, overlooked, and ignored in the literary and historical record" (11-12).

Research has shown that women who have been victims of gendered violence are often ashamed to report their experiences to the concerned authorities. Such women would play an important role in filling the gaps created by the silences in the historical and statistical record. They are encouraged to document such experiences themselves or through other people such as family members, friends, writers, researchers, and journalists (Das 205-25; Tucker 12, 18-19). The significance of *al-Nuwākhidha* as a feminist tract partly lies, therefore, in trying to fill the gaps in the coverage of sex crimes in the pre-modern Arabian Gulf historical record.

Several aspects of the novel foreground some elements of modern-day slavery. They remind one of the stories of exploitation, domestic servitude and, of more relevance here, gendered violence committed against some low-waged female migrants who work as housemaids in the contemporary Gulf states. Most maids of nowadays come from African and Asian countries, such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, the Philippines, and Indonesia. Like the fictional rape victim in *al-Nuwākhidha*, real-life victims of nowadays are often silenced, with their cases either not reported or investigated by the law enforcement agents. Even when reported, the claimant might become the accused; this, in most cases, often results in detention to be followed by deportation (see, e.g., Gikuru 47-67; Human Rights Watch).

According to the novel, all the female African slaves are sexually harassed at one point or another (see, e.g., 145). Two of them die in-transit: the unnamed rape victim and Clara—whose trauma leads to a severe nervous breakdown during the journey on the Indian ocean; she eventually dies and is also buried at sea (117-22). By contrast, Mangi, Mugumu, and the rest of the slaves have some "success stories" to tell, through which the author tries to historicise and contextualise the process of the assimilation of the blacks into the social fabric of Kuwaiti society. They are lucky enough to make the journey to Kuwait and are portrayed as having been "happily" assimilated and acculturated, having their names changed to Arabic ones (140, 149-60).

Soon after settling down, Mangi, in particular—who is given the name Janna (meaning Paradise)—is taken by her master, the same Ibrāhīm al-'Ūd, as his concubine. No sooner had she become pregnant than she regained her freedom to become his legalized wife, for whom she bears a son who becomes the heir to the man's business empire (154-67). Thus, the story of Mangi/Janna serves to show how slavery sometimes offers the opportunity to gain an improved economic and social status (112, 137, 250-51). Even such a hitherto helpless woman-in-bondage might soon gain political power, by becoming a ruler's woman who could

wade some influence both within the hierarchy of the ruling class and in society at large. Corroborating this point are some real-life accounts of female slaves who became wives or concubines of powerful rulers or government officials in the pre- and early-modern periods, as shown by studies such as Tucker's—with regard to the Mediterranean region (19-21)—and Romero's—with regard to the Arabian Gulf and Persia (373-92).

Sexual Repression

Another instance of femaleness in al-Salim's first three novels is their extensive portrayal of women's sexual repression or lack of sexual freedom. For instance, the three texts depict the perception of zinā (adultery) and the repercussion—for women—of indulging in it in pre-oil Kuwaiti and Omani societies. Although this aspect of the novels may be less applicable in this twenty-first century, I have demonstrated elsewhere the sexualpolitical implication of the author's act of frequently making reference to al-zāniya (the adulteress) whereas she mentions $al-z\bar{a}n\bar{i}$ (the adulterer) only occasionally. By so doing, the author is "point[ing] to the fact that the word *al-zānī* has much less currency in [pre-oil] Arabian society than its feminine form, *al-zāniya*." As I have shown elsewhere with regard to Muzūn, al-Sālim's frequent representations of "gruesome images of [al-zāniva] without [those] of [al-zānī]" are symptomatic "of a kind of superimposition of patriarchal values over those of [the Islamic] religion." The Qur'an stipulates the same type of punishment—public flogging for both parties (24:2) but, in practice, the zāniya is often the scapegoat (Tijani, Male Domination 144-45).

Furthermore, al-Sālim often argues that some pre-oil Gulf women's indulgence in zinā—craving for sex out of wedlock—was a result of their sexual repression, whereas their menfolk indulged in it as a show of male supremacy. This point can be corroborated by some historical and anthropological findings as documented in, for example, Haya al-Mughni's Women in Kuwait (41-46). Thus, although in the first and second novels women's sexual repression resonates, several of their aspects indicate some women's desires and agitations for sexual freedom-to be able to choose their lover or husband by themselves without familial imposition. In the first novel, for instance, Wadha flirts with her cousin-lover, Hamūd, while she is still married to another man and during the 'idda which, in Islam, refers to the waiting period of three months (or three menstrual periods) before a divorce process is finalised (al-Shams 175-83).

Like Wadha, Nāyifa—a major female character in the second novel and a younger sister of its earliermentioned heroine Hayā—is forced to marry Dhiyāb, even though she is in love with another man, Abdullah. Portrayed as an active, non-compliant girl, Nāyifa indirectly rejects patriarchal authority in at least two ways: by avoiding all sorts of cordiality with her husband, declaring that "al-mawt ahwan 'indī min 'ishratih" (death is easier for me than living with him) (al-Nuwākhidha 235); and by escaping from her marital home on several occasions in order to meet her lover (203-07 and 234-38). The escape scenes are captured through the interior monologue technique; for instance, on the second occasion of her escape, she muses:

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There you go, Nāyifa ..
On your second escape .. you are asking for the ways to take .. hoping to be helped by a kind person ..
Your decision will never be swayed by anything... If death is the way to make me free from [Dhiyāb], then it is welcome ..
[.....]
Oh, how identically-looking (are the paths) in the desert! ..
And how this conspicuous distortion (of the paths) complicates the acts of escaping and hiding! .. (al-Nuwākhidha 237)
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As evident in this extract, being a secluded girl from the middle/upper class of pre-oil Kuwaiti society, Nāyifa does not know the ways around the town. But she succeeds in escaping anyway, not minding the consequences.

Nāyifa's defiance generates a fatal reaction from Dhiyāb. Attempting to assert his authority and to avert the attendant shame ('ayb) of his wife's fadīḥa, he mistakenly kills himself with the gun he had wanted to use to kill his wayward wife (al-Nuwākhidha 239). After Dhiyāb's death, Nāyifa is able to marry Abdullah in an elaborate wedding ceremony. Her success in this regard may not be a realistic representation of the dominant trend in pre-oil Kuwait, but the author allots an ample narrative space to the wedding ceremony

and to Nāyifa's everlasting happiness thereafter (240-46) as a way of calling society's attention to a feminist alternative to the conventional practice of forced marriage.

Nāyifa's nonconformity is actually a sub-theme in *al-Nuwākhidha* and it is overshadowed by other paramount themes revolving around women's repression and domestic servitude, with the pearl-merchant Ibrāhīm al-'Ūd's household as the epicentre. Thus, in addition to the earlier-discussed theme of slavery and gendered violence, the novel reflects, more extensively, how excessive patriarchal control leads to Hayā's depression and, then, "*junūn*" (madness) (87). Her people claim she is possessed and so she has to go through a series of exorcism and spiritual deliverance in the Islamic way (79-81). But, in reality, the cause of her 'insanity' is her denial of marriage to her childhood lover, Sa'ūd, because of class difference, as noted earlier. Through the points of view of both Hayā and Sa'ūd, the novel treats how both male and female are affected by patriarchal social conventions (45-52, 70-78). For instance, after his failure to get the girl's father's support and consent, Sa'ūd expresses his frustration and lamentation about his status in society: "A homeland that rejects me (*lafazatn*ī) .. an unjust [would-be bride's] family .. they go with the strong .. I'm a poor sailor seeking God's mercy .. of no good stock (*'azwa*) and having no support (*sanad*), no money, no power .." (70). Nevertheless, it is the girl's predicament that interests this article more.

Hayā's seclusion—on attaining puberty—aggravates her depression and she soon begins to hallucinate. Consequently, she is isolated in an attic, a dark underground room in her father's house, in what seems to echo the recurrent image of the madwoman in the attic of nineteenth-century Anglo-American women's novels (Gilbert and Gubar). But the reader realises that Hayā—through the aspects of the novel narrated by her—is not actually insane, she is only acting to be in protest against her father's control over her affairs. Nevertheless, she feels isolated and alienated not only from society but also from the immediate environment of her parental home (31). For Hayā, the harem is not a just prison, as many people/writers would describe it; it is a "grave" (34), an "isolated grave" (148). Elements of the women-and-madness theme can also be deciphered in the story of Zuwayna, in al-Sālim's third novel. Like Hayā, Zuwayna experiences psychological depression. But hers is not caused by forced seclusion or forced marriage but by her experience of female genital mutilation (*Muzūn* 202-03; Tijani, *Male Domination* 139-40), a practice which feminist and human rights activists continue to condemn and which has now been officially outlawed in the Gulf states.

Sexual Freedom

Unlike the first two novels, the third and the fourth expansively illustrate the emergence of some level of sexual freedom in some sections of contemporary Gulf society. The third novel shows that Zayāna's wilful indulgence in an adulterous relationship with a visiting Frenchman, Yves, is a protest against her abandonment by her fellow Omani husband, who had migrated to Zanzibar in East Africa for economic reasons. By contrast, Muzūn—as Zayāna's granddaughter—enjoys the freedom to choose her husband and, after his death, she feels free to engage in "illicit" sexual relationships with an Omani man, Dārī, and then a Frenchman, Bernard, who—like his uncle Yves—is also on a visit to Oman. Muzūn's demonstration of her sexual freedom is reflective of the effects of the westernisation and modernisation of the region (Tijani, Male Domination 124-48). Nevertheless, al-Sālim's creation of an emerging postmodern Arabian female personality is perfected not in the character of Muzūn, but in that of Mūdī of the fourth novel, as further discussed below. This is indicative of the progression in al-Sālim's career as a feminist writer and of the generational shift in the region's attitude towards the woman question in the twenty-first century.

Unlike its predecessors, Ḥajar alā ḥajar does not exclusively "focus on male dominance itself" (Chodorow 184), just as this issue does not constitute the main concern/struggle of its most central female figure, Mūḍī. Features of a postmodern feminist writing can be deciphered, most especially, in the story of Mūḍī who—rather than her daughter, Nūra, who is a twenty-first-century teenager—is the focus of the narrative. Mūḍī is a role model that evinces women's determination and decisiveness in many ways. For instance, after her husband has married another wife, Mūḍī insists on a divorce, and after getting it, she refuses to yield his pleas for conciliation (Ḥajar 126-28). Similarly, unlike many people and despite the pressures from her family members, Mūḍī refuses to leave Kuwait during the 1990-91 Iraq-Kuwait war. Nūra narrates:

I was amazed by [my mother Mūdī's] firm decision to remain ..

Just as I was by her firm decision to depart ..

To separate from my father and to remain in Kuwait while the majority were running away, evacuating. (Ḥajar 127)

For Nūra, these two antithetical decisions—to depart (separate from) an 'unfair' husband and to remain in defence of her beloved homeland against an 'unwarranted' foreign occupation—make Mūdī a role model. The novel does not extensively explore the Iraq-Kuwait war—al-Sālim's fifth novel, Rajīm al-kalām [Curse-Mouthed] (2006), is dedicated to that—but Mūdī's resoluteness on the divorce is discussed extensively.

Some feminist critics and writers have argued that divorce is one of the weapons used by men to oppress women who are not financially independent. "A divorce is like an amputation, you survive it but there's less of you," writes Margret Atwood in Surfacing (qtd. in Pearce and Mills 199). Portrayals of divorce as a burden on women abound in Kuwaiti fictional texts, with most male writers representing it in a stereotypical manner that serves to perpetuate women's dependency on men (see, e.g., al-Sanousi; Idrīs; al-Maleh and Farghal). By contrast, even when they depict women as victims of divorce, most of the women writers often put the blame on the patriarchal social system, as shown in novels such as al-Mar'a wa-l-qitta [The Woman and the Cat] (1986) by al-'Uthmān and Muţalliqa min wāqi' al-ḥayā [A Female Divorcee in the Reality of Life] (1997) by al-Qazwīnī. Similar portrayals can be found in fictional works by women from other Gulf countries (see, e.g., Arebi; Akers and Bagader; Javyusi; Johnson-Davies).

In her own, al-Sālim always represents divorce as a means of freedom from matrimonial entrapment. For instance, Wadha in al-Shams madhbūha sees divorce in this light. Typical of the pre-oil generation of Kuwaiti women, she is apparently submissive, at least in the eyes of the other characters in the novel. But, to the reader, Wadha is a rather deviant—though not openly defiant—female character. Though speechless and helpless, she still possesses some level of agency which, according to a recent definition, "refers to the thoughts and actions taken by people that express their individual power" (Cole). Unlike Hayā, in al-Nuwākhidha—who is resigned to her fate as she recourses to madness—Wadha accepts to marry the man forced on her. But she works, surreptitiously, to get a divorce, seeing it as a means of securing her freedom from an undesired marital bond. This is depicted in several of her earlier-mentioned acts of deviance, which I have examined in some depth under the rubric of "irony and humor as feminist narrative strategies" (Tijani, "Irony and Humor" 9-19).

Wadha's non-stereotypical perception of divorce is captured through her inner consciousness. For example, the reader finds her in a joyous mood because:

[In just] a week .. the 'idda months will be over.

In seven days the box would be locked ..

Its key would be lost ..

It would be swallowed by the sea, in its depth ..

[......]

I would be cleansed of any memory of him, stripped of my past with him. (al-Shams 189)

But Wadha's high spirits soon vanish, as she is unable to sustain the freedom she has enjoyed throughout the nearly-three-month separation from the husband. Just as she is forced to marry the man in the first place, so too, is she forced to return to him just before the expiration of the 'idda deadline (al-Shams 191). All her female relatives appear to disapprove of the actions of the two men—her father and her husband (192). But their silence and inactivity symbolise their submissiveness and perhaps complicity in the perpetration of women's objectification in society. In many disheartening statements-such as "my body has been perforated" and "my body is dead" (194)—Wadha describes how her hope has been dashed, her aspirations contained, and her future mortgaged by patriarchal authority.

The kind of an aspiringly strong female which al-Sālim creates in the character of Wadha vis-à-vis the issue of divorce is also perfected in the character of Mūdī of the fourth novel. That perfection can also be found in the character of the eponymous heroine of "al-Yāziya" (2007), a short story by the Bahraini woman Su'ād Āl Khalīfa. Acting under the influence of her grandmother, al-Yāziya initially refuses to marry. And when she eventually agrees to do so—due to pressures from her parents—she asks for a divorce on the wedding night. Her reason is that her husband had lied to her on the issue of the illness and subsequent death of her grandmother on the eve of the wedding (Āl Khalīfa 13-14). A graduate and an economically independent woman, al-Yāziya—just like al-Sālim's Mūḍī—sees divorce as a means not just of securing freedom from male control, but of female self-assertiveness. A related real-life story happened recently in Saudi Arabia—as posted on Twitter on 14 March 2018—where a woman filed for a divorce from her husband, just because he lied to her that he was going on an official trip abroad whereas he had gone to marry a second wife secretly (MSN.com).

Female Transcendence/Adventurousness

Another aspect of al-Sālim's fourth novel that enhances its feminist-postmodernist qualities is its emphasis on women's adventurousness, transcendence, and independence, rather than focusing on social and gender inequalities as she has done in the earlier novels. All the three heroines of <code>Ḥajar</code> are adventurous and their concerns in life are not about the struggle against male domination. Nūra narrates how she inherently loves adventure, which is why she tours and explores the US city of Miami where she is studying as a foreign undergraduate student from the Arabian Gulf. She portrays her mother as a brave woman who—just as her great-grandmother Rachael 500 years earlier (188-91, 257, 277)—embarks on successive tours of the deserts and jungles of Yemen, unaccompanied by a male relative as required by Arabian laws and customs. "Like my mother," Nūra recounts further, "I find myself inclined towards" embarking on tasks that are characterised by "al-mughāmara wa-al-ṣu'ūba wa-l-khaṭar" (adventure, difficulty, and danger) (249). According to Nūra, these are some of the personal attributes that make Mūḍī "imra'a min ḥadīd" (an "iron lady") (127). Although this adjective is often used to refer to a woman with strong personal qualities—a no-nonsense woman—I would like to emphasise here the significance of iron as a symbol which, conventionally, signifies "physical strength" and "symbolizes predominantly male energy" ("Elemental Alchemy Symbols").

Gendered symbolism—showing that a symbol or an object is masculine or feminine—is a common phenomenon in Kuwaiti women's fiction. But the women writers usually invert the conventional perceptions of the symbols they feature prominently in their texts. For instance, in her short story entitled "Dimā' 'alā wajh al-qamar" [Blood on the Face of the Moon] (1998), another Kuwait woman writer Fāṭima Yūsuf al-'Alī's (b. 1953) employs the metaphor of the moon's monthly cycle—"as an analogy for the stages of human development" ("Moon")—to symbolize the life of its heroine, Najma, from birth through childhood to the end of her life at adulthood. The story portrays Najma (lit., the feminine form of "star") as a valiant young woman, who participates in the Kuwaiti resistance movement against the Iraqi occupation of her country (1990-91). I have noted elsewhere that al-'Alī uses the story of Najma to condemn the general perception of female inferiority in a patriarchal society, illustrating instead the female potential and capability for activity, resistance, and transcendence (Tijani, "Gendering the Iraq-Kuwait" 264-67). Thus, the story inverses the feminised symbols of the moon and the star.

The same inversion of patriarchal codes can be found in the use of symbols in some of al-Sālim's novels. Of more relevance to my point in this section is the title of the fourth novel— μ ajar' alā μ ajar (Stone Upon Stone)—to show how it is symbolic and gendered. The novel inversely uses—in addition to iron, as explained above— μ ajar (stone) against its universal, mythical conception as masculine. Generally, stone "has been, since prehistoric times, the principal material used to build and adorn important structures, where solidity and permanence are the paramount considerations." It has become "paradigmatic of stability, hardness and endurance in all languages, bearing a wealth of symbolic meaning, with many deep rooted psychological and historical associations and suggestions" (Zeldis).

Of course, the title—Stone Upon Stone—is derived from, or refers to, the naturally idyllic, hilly landscapes of southern Yemen (Ḥajar 261). But I would argue that the text inverses the universal masculine perception of stone. All its male characters are reduced to the background, they are all minor characters. This makes the symbolism of the title rest more on the resoluteness of Mūḍī on embarking upon the arduous, multifaceted quests--genealogical, historical, sociological, and anthropological—for the roots and remnants of Arabian Jews as well as for the interconnectedness of the world's most famous religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism (229-46).

Conclusion

A feminist-postmodernist writer, al-Sālim's fictional texts are uniquely different from those of her Kuwaiti contemporaries—in terms of her use of a combination of lyrical style, fragmented narrative sequence, detailed treatment of the issues of culture and sexuality, and the rejuvenation of the Arabian Gulf cultural heritage and historical archive. Linda Hutcheon's remarks that postmodernism "paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity" (qtd. in Slemon 428) captures one of the hallmarks of al-Sālim's four novels examined in the foregoing. They all enact change in Kuwaiti women's fictional language, style, and technique while, at the same time, celebrating continuity—in terms of the representation of some aspects Arabian Gulf cultural heritage. One object that more symbolically represent that cultural continuitythereby connecting the classical and the (post)modern periods—is found in *Hajar 'ala hajar*. It is the ancestral carpet-repeatedly mentioned throughout the novel on pages 115, 121, 222, etc.-which Nūra hopes to inherit from Mūdī, who had inherited it from her great-grandmother Rachael, who in turn had inherited it from her Arab-Jewish ancestors.

Al-Sālim's prototypical, strong-willed female character is Wadha, whose fictional progenies—in the order of the publication of the novels: Hayā, Nāyifa, Zayāna, Muzūn, Rachael, Mūḍī, and Nūra—all epitomise, in varying degrees, women's defiance, deviance, activism, and self-assertiveness. Through her portrayals of these heroines, the author allows the reader to see a kind of independent (-thinking) Arabian Gulf women in both the pre- and the post-oil eras. Admittedly, the evolution of the postmodern trend in Arabian Gulf literature is an area that is worth further exploration, just as are most of the feminist themes examined in this article.

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