

Contextualizing Gender's Role in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*: A Comparative Historical Study

Arwa Waleed Albader*

Indiana University of Pennsylvania, USA

Corresponding Author: Arwa Waleed Albader, E-mail: albaderarwa@gmail.com

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ABSTRACTS

This study, through a new historicist comparative approach, strives to explore the dynamics of women in marriages and in friendships for Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*. Although Chopin's novel was written in 1899 and Alsanea's in 2005, both received harsh condemnation and rejection in newspapers and book reviews when they were published, emphasizing gender's role in both cultures. By explaining the reciprocal relationships between the texts and the newspaper reviews, and ephemera, this paper adds to scholarly understanding of how the newspapers and the critics' reflection for a certain literary text, as a human constant, can describe the gender segregation of the context's time. Using textual analyses in the form of close readings of the female characters' interactions with their partners and other women, and the struggle and experience of each women in both novels in terms of marriage, this paper will demonstrate links between the thoughts of critics as context and the novel as a creative historical output as both writers deftly caused great social discussions for change.

Key words: New Historicism, Comparative Study, Gender Segregation, Reviews of Newspapers

This paper will analyze newspaper articles and reviews of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* in order to investigate perspectives on women and gender segregation at the time the novels were written. By analyzing these reviews and the female characters in relation to the male characters in both novels, the paper will show how women are discriminated against through the roles imposed on them, especially marriage. Although Chopin's novel was written in 1899 and Alsanea's in 2005, both received harsh condemnation and rejection from the newspapers and reviews of their time, emphasizing women's position in both cultures at different time frames. It is important to delve into the historical context of both texts to understand how both writers embark on effecting change in the situation of women. There is always an interesting desire to probe novels in understanding the cultural and historical aspect of the time as Charles Johanningsmeier concedes: "they serve to highlight how important and influential the works are that they study (if the texts weren't so powerful, this argument implies, the authorities wouldn't take the trouble to challenge them)". For me, both novels, from different time and cultural frames, can be regarded to this day as some of the most significant novels written about the emancipation of women as both of them geared toward resisting the restricted roles on both genders, even though they have also been strongly opposed and rebuked, as will be seen in this study.

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* describes the lives of three women: Edna Pontellier, Madame Ratignolle (Adèle),

and Madame Lebrun. Edna is described as "not a mother woman" and becomes a revolutionary trying to cross gender boundaries and seek liberty (Chopin 11). In contrast, the two other women are revealed to be the "angels of the house." Madame Ratignolle is restricted to her role as a mother and wife, and Madame Lebrun fills the domestic role of a nineteenth-century woman by taking care of the house and hosting a party. As a twenty-first-century reader, I agree with Martha Black's comments on the role Chopin tries to depict in her description of the female characters and the rebellious Edna. In "The Quintessence of Chopinism," Black states that the novel "tests society's assumption about women" (22).

By analyzing the reviews on Edna's depiction in the novel, this paper will show how Chopin's novel tries to reconstruct the role of women and marriage in her time and question the reasons behind the negative reviews. Dedria Bryfonski describes how *The Awakening* was received by critics and well-known writers like Willa Cather:

The Awakening (1988) was widely condemned. Critics called it morbid, vulgar, and disagreeable. Willa Cather, who would become a well-known twentieth-century American author, labeled it 'trite and sordid.' (Bryfonski 50)

Through the ideas that Edna tries to question and how she compares to the other female characters, Chopin attempts to define a new stance and role for women and reveals how social and material pressure on a woman drives her to a tragic end, which the novel shows in a very romantic way. At

the same time, with this phenomenal protagonist, Chopin seeks to defy the feminine ideals of “Victorian prudery” (Killeen 23).

The Awakening makes it clear that the misfortune of women and men is not the making of individuals but a state of society at any given time. The allegory at the beginning of the novel gives a foreboding of characters that Chopin is about to develop in the rest of the text. The allegory of the parrot and the mockingbird at the beginning of the novel is perhaps Chopin’s best expression of how the characters of her novel are affected by society’s norms. The parrot laboriously speaks a language little understood, while the mockingbird gives reflexive responses. Mr. Pontellier has the option of quitting their company, but the parrot and the mockingbird do not have the luxury of changing their state of life. In the following introduction of characters, it is clear that not only are the characters prisoners of their circumstances, but also that they are unable to change their fate. The meaningless talk between the birds is an allegory that speaks to the pointlessness of the discussion that takes place among Edna, Robert, and Léonce shortly after that. Edna seems unwilling to submit as a wife but is forced into wifely submission as much as Léonce is forced into his mundane responsibilities as a husband.

The first scene of the novel, where Mr. Pontellier is unable to read his newspapers because of the singing parrot, shows the gap between gender roles in representing the liberty that Mr. Pontellier has; at the same time, he expects his wife to be silenced in her domestic role and perform her duties quietly. It is depicted in the sense of unconformity that reveals the situation of their marriage: “Mr. Pontellier unable to read his newspapers with any degree of comfort, arose with an expression and exclamation of disgust” (Chopin 1). Chopin’s idea of being caged in a household is clearly depicted in her manuscript “Emancipation: A Life Fable” (1870), written a year before her marriage to Oscar Chopin:

There was once an animal born into this world, and opening his eyes upon Life, he saw above and about him confining walls, and before him were bars of iron through which came air and light from without; this animal was born in a cage. (2)

This piece of writing, in which she describes the bird inside the cage that survives because life’s essentials can reach the cage through its window, shows how Chopin views the life of women in her time. She is given a home, food, and children but never given time for herself, her own happiness, or her hobbies, like writing or exploring the world. Allison Berg comments that Chopin’s symbolic figure of the cage, just like for Gilman and other writers of the same period, “represents women’s psychic entrapment through the metaphor of a cage” (Berg 33). So Edna becomes the talking woman inside the cage who looks for another way of belonging in society while her husband criticizes her and thinks she is not “a mother woman” (Chopin 12). This further leads him not to think of anything when Edna tells him that she will leave the house rather than caring about the societal views that will negatively affect his work. It is described in chapter XXXII:

what people would say. He was not dreaming of scandal when he uttered this warning; that was a thing which would never have entered into his mind to consider in connection with his wife’s name or his own. He was thinking of his financial integrity. (95)

Mr. Pontellier’s selfish thinking helps to understand why he always criticizes her and does not spend the emotional support or time to fix this marriage. Why does he think that she is helpless and needs medical interference? Instead of addressing the problem with her, he escapes to work or mocks her irresponsibility toward the children and house. In fact, Mr. Pontellier is an outcome of his time and culture, believing that the happiness of marriage and success of domestic life stems solely from the wife, not from both partners in a marriage. This view can be seen in Richard A. Wells’ *Decorum: A Practical Treatise on Etiquette and Dress of the Best American Society*. Here, Wells discusses the “duties of wife” and the many rules a woman should follow since she “devoids the privilege and pleasure of rendering home happy” (143).

Women are confined to particular values in society, and their own aspirations and will are irrelevant in the grand scheme of social organization. Edna is only viewed as valuable for her wifely duties and motherhood. It is evident that Edna has a life she wants to live that is different from the motherhood emphasized by society. The society of the late nineteenth century clearly speaks through Edna, Léonce, Adèle, and to a much lesser extent Robert and Mademoiselle Reisz. Therefore, the book is a conversation between a rebel like Edna and the larger conforming society to which unquestioning people like Léonce belong. Edna’s struggle is not even against Léonce Pontellier, as she agrees to the claims that her husband is the best according to social and Victorian norms: “Mrs. Pontellier was forced to admit that she knew of none better” (Chopin 33), but with him, she cannot practice the freedom and happiness she experiences with Robert because he views her only as the mother of his children.

Consequently, Léonce’s attitude and his degrading view of his wife lead him to think Edna is a bad mother unable to take responsibility for the house when he is absent. For example, when he comes late from a party and wakes her up to look for one of the children, who is sick, he does not think she is a good mother. The social and cultural norms of his time are so strongly embedded in him that he finds it acceptable to wake his wife from her sleep instead of himself taking care of the problem; the children “needed looking after” (Chopin 8) but not by him as their father. Because he is a man and his job exists outside of the house, Edna should be the “parrot” inside the cage, taking care of everything. The narrator describes Mr. Pontellier’s rage and thoughts when he lights a cigar to think of Edna’s role in the house: “If it was not a mother’s place to look after the children, whose on earth was it? He himself could not be in two places at once” (9).

Based on Margo Culley’s argument of the role of women in “The Context of the Awakening,” a woman at that time was considered one of her husband’s properties. She writes

that "the wife was bound to live with her husband, and follow him wherever he chose to reside" (Chopin 141). Hence, Edna is neither expected nor allowed to be anyone other than a mother, even if she is not. Mr. Pontellier believes that he has passive control in the house and over his children, like any American husband of that time, as discussed in "The American Wife" by the American journalist and columnist Dorothy Dix (1861–1951). She writes: "The American father is generally a devoted parent, but he wants his wife to do the managing" (164). This reveals the feeling of satisfaction inside Mr. Pontellier's mind because he thinks he cannot deal with his children since this is not his role, and he needs Edna's guidance in solving the children's problems.

Noticeably, it is not only her husband who expects Edna to fix their life, as described in the novel: "it would have been a difficult matter for Mr. Pontellier to define his own satisfaction or anyone's else wherein his wife failed her duty toward children" (Chopin 44). It is also the other women who represent the Victorian gender role of women in America: Adèle Ratignolle and Mrs. Lebrun. Adèle is Edna's antagonist and seems to represent the ideal role of women of that time: obedient to their husbands' commands and surrendering to motherhood. She becomes pregnant repeatedly and criticizes Edna for not being with her children in the absence of their father. Adèle asks Edna to think of her children during a difficult time; during the scene where the baby is delivered, Edna is exposed to "inward agony" at witnessing her friend's constant pain and suffering. Adèle's ironic request to Edna is defeated by what is described as "the scene of torture" (111), where Edna is led to question who imposes such pain and makes it normal and bearable, suggesting that every woman should accept it.

In contrast to Edna, Adèle represents the type of woman that Raimond describes in her letter to Kate Chopin, who reaches awakening because she is always near her husband, doing what society expects her to do. Thus, she thinks she has the right to advise Edna because she is righteous in the light of society's gendered expectations. This illusion about herself as a good wife and mother propels her to view Edna, who tries to find her own self and achieve economic fulfillment, as an immature woman who should not be left alone. She says, "I advise you to be a little careful while you are living here alone. Why don't you have someone come and stay with you?" (96). The conflated personalities of Edna and Adèle suggest what "awakening" means for a woman at that time, which Chopin tries to refute by illustrating how Edna struggles with the restrictions and childish, immature treatment aimed at her: "In some way, you seem to me like a child" (96). According to the time of the context, Adèle represents the type of good mother who enjoys her husband's company and the feminine privilege of having many children. She strives to be the ideal type of mother and wife of her time; this clashes with Edna's nature of rebelling against such an angelic image of motherhood. She wants to be treated as a human being, finding her own needs away from the gaze of Adèle, who becomes the eyes of the patriarchy. The harsh criticism and condemnation from everyone around Edna lead her to embark against these antifeminist norms

to search for freedom. Pursuing her true self away from society's walls reveals a new acknowledgment of her identity as something other than a parrot imprisoned in domesticity, as described by the narrator: "In short Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being and to recognize her relation as individual to the world within about her" (66).

By contrasting Edna, who rejects the role of the breeding wife, and her friend Adèle, who is described as a woman who likes to have children, Chopin tries to "reject the idea of the family as equivalent of feminine self-fulfillment and raised the question of what women were to do with a freedom, that in nineties they had not yet own" (Ziff 13). This does not mean that Edna does not like her children, but she refuses to be defined only within this role and not find other choices in life. She seeks not only limitless geographical boundaries, but also identity boundaries. She states these feelings freely to Dr. Mandelet, who asks her to think about her children and her relationship with her husband. This conversation is brought into the realm of nature, seeking to force Edna not to question it all and perceive anything beyond this role as an "illusion." He says that "youth is given up to illusions. It seems to be a provision of Nature; a decoy to secure mothers for race" (Chopin 112). However, she understands her love for her children, but she will not sacrifice her life for them. This is another articulation of women's role beyond maternity that a twenty-first-century reader can understand and accept.

Chopin's novel is, therefore, a reflection of American society in the late nineteenth century, but also the biography of a social outlaw. Chopin manages to paint a picture of what could have been a radical of the time, a rebel within her society. Edna not only rejects the societal expectations of women but also recognizes that men are bound by the same oppressive norms. She, therefore, gravitates from Léonce Pontellier to Robert Lebrun. It is not only Edna who suffers from the American Victorian restrictions and expectations of gender, but also her husband and her lover Robert. Léonce Pontellier is a victim of his marriage to Edna because he has lost any connection or interest in his wife; at the same time, he cannot divorce her or look for a solution, as Margo Culley explains:

Louisiana was a largely Catholic state, and divorce was a scandalous and rather rare occurrence...in 1880. In any case, Chopin's Edna Pontellier had no legal grounds for divorce, though her husband undoubtedly did (Chopin 141).

Léonce thinks his ultimate role as a husband is to bring money and make a name for his family, but he rarely spends time with Edna or shares responsibilities with her. This leads me to focus in some depth on how Chopin questions the dilemma of marriage by revealing Edna's silent depression and her confusion between her dull empty life with Mr. Pontellier, who always presses the domestic, wifely role on her, and the free immature love with Robert, who gives her the space to live beyond the restrictions of domesticity and maternity. She describes marriage as "the useless degrading life of most married ladies" (Chopin 140). Indeed, this marriage degrades both Edna and her husband into a dead end. So it is not Edna at fault as she propels herself into ending

her life, but the restrictions and ignorance imposed on her against her will by her husband and other women in society. She does not want to endure this lifeless marriage for too long because, unlike her, her husband—though he is a victim—has the geographical freedom to go where he wants. Thus, Edna is not, as described in the 1899 *Los Angeles Sunday Times* review, “a selfish capricious woman” but a victim of a loveless marriage (*Los Angeles Times* 187). Unfortunately, her husband, who thinks he does his best to help Edna live happily, “did not make this interesting discovery himself, but he had his brokerage business to think about and brokers deal in stocks not hearts” (Porcher 180).

Effectively seen as a social victim just like Edna, Robert cannot choose the love he wants with her because he thinks it will be socially unacceptable. He cannot run away with her, but he runs from her to Mexico, a place that has no promises for his future, only loss. This is emphasized when he writes letters to Mademoiselle Reisz, the emblem of the modern woman, instead of to Edna, because he knows that these letters may socially fail him if Edna receives them. As Frances Porcher’s review in *The Mirror* describes, this emotion and love between them are going to show “what an ugly, cruel, loathsome monster passion can be, when like a tiger, it slowly stretches its graceful length and yawns” (180). At the same time, Adèle condemns the love that Robert has for Edna, and she scolds Robert as he walks her to her home in the Grand Isle. Like Edna, Robert feels that he is looking for a position that fits the gender expectation of his time. He strikingly defends himself against the judgment of Adèle, who looks down on his behaviors toward Edna, by saying, “You made one mistake, Adèle... there is no earthly possibility of Mrs. Pontellier ever taking me seriously. You should have warned me against taking myself seriously” (Chopin 22). Robert tries to defend himself and Edna, who, as a woman who should be seen virtuous and far from earthly whims, will be more affected by this scandal. He goes to Mexico, pretending he has business there; this escape hurts him but also protects his image as a working man.

Similar to the negative critique Kate Chopin received from reviews and letters from different writers and critics of her time is the response to Rajaa Alsanea’s *Girls of Riyadh* (2005), which was rebuked and dismissed by critics and writers in conservative Saudi society. Just like *The Awakening*, which is depicted as “not a healthy book” (St. Louis Daily Globe-Democrat 181), *Girls of Riyadh* is criticized, like other Saudi novels of the time, with its concern for showing “love and sexual desire in their narrative to make their way to the world” (Al-Qahtani 7).

Rajaa Alsanea is a Saudi dentist and writer born in 1981 who pursued her education at the University of Illinois. She obtained both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from the same university in 2009. She published *Girls of Riyadh* (*Banat al-Riyadh*) in 2005, and it was translated into English in 2007. It was published in Beirut instead of Riyadh because the novel was revolutionary in addressing issues of women and gender in a very religious conservative society at that time. Therefore, she published outside the Kingdom to avoid censorship from the Ministry of Media,

since the novel contains topics contrary to the situation of women in that patriarchal society. In the *Los Angeles Times*, Donna Abu-Nasser describes the novel as a “bombshell.” Alsanea declares that she wrote the book to “highlight issues that society denies...I wanted to show both men and women are victims of society” (Abu-Nasser 3). The present study will examine this stated goal of Alsanea’s by asking how this novel reflects the struggle of Saudi women in light of marriage and gender relationships at the time. Through close reading and analysis of reviews in various Eastern and Western newspapers supported with evidence from the novel to show the passive role of four female characters in society, I will posit that both male and female characters in the 2000s are victims of the cultural norms revealed under the name of religion and virtue.

Before I delve into the text and reviews, I will discuss the reason for Alsanea’s chosen place for publication and what it tells us about women and women’s writing in Saudi Arabia at the start of the 2000s. Schwartz et al. suggest that the novel was banned because “it tells a tale of four women’s intimate daily lives” (33). In his *Reuters* article, Andrew Hammond states that this novel was rejected in Riyadh because “modern literature itself has been viewed as suspect by a powerful clerical establishment in austere religious society that practices strict gender segregation” (4). However, I believe this book was banned for other social reasons that have less to do with religion. The novel discusses social issues that are strange and unacceptable to the nature of a community that used to be very patriarchal and tribal in dealing with gender and marriage. The novel is not banned because of religion but because it discusses and argues against taboo topics that no one before had dissented with or condemned. Abu-Nasser writes that Abdel Karim Al-Bukhari stated in an *Al Riyadh* article that “he hadn’t read the book but nonetheless the title to be hurtful the girls in our country” and that Alsanea should “issue an apology to the girls of Riyadh” (4). This indicates that Saudi society has double standards in terms of women and marriage. They like to lead a double life because they care about reputation and social image more than religion, because religion welcomes and accepts love and gender equality that patriarchal society tries to deny behind the wall of politics and media. This interpretation of Alsanea’s banned novel is supported by a Saudi woman journalist, who wrote that:

It is our tradition not to talk to about the ills of our society. We know there are problems in our society, but the general reaction is to keep quiet. We have been taught from an early age that if we talk about the ills of our society, people will laugh at us...And we are not really perfect, we should pretend that we are. (Wahab 5)

Noura Al-Qahtani addresses the strict role of Saudi women in society before 2011 in her study “Defying Convention: Saudi Women Writers and the Shift from Periphery to Center.” Education for Saudi women started in 1959 in Jeddah, only one city in the Kingdom, which makes the voice of Saudi women writers and critics arrive late on the scene, and thus affects the publication’s time and place. Most ancient Saudi female writers were known outside the

Kingdom but not nationally. Most Saudi female writers discuss topics in their literary productions that deal with "sensitive issues in that society" (Shboul 204). According to Al-Qahtani, literature "has traditionally been seen as a predominantly male centered position" (26). By the 1980s, the number of female university graduates had increased, but women worked only in the banking and educational sectors. Later, during the reign of King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz, the situation of Saudi women changed dramatically. Starting in 2011, women could travel to the US and UK to pursue higher education and work in the Kingdom Consultative Councils among male ministers and politicians. Thus, women's literature in the 2000s began to rebel against gender segregation and silence, especially concerning marriage, which is considered one of the community's greatest social problems since it considers love or differences in tribe or nationality hindrances. Al-Qahtani comments on the goal of the majority of Saudi female writers during that period:

this new generation of Saudi women writers often depict their protagonists as educated and intellectual women, seeking self-expression through their writing which liberates them from social and cultural constraints. These writers not only expose the many contradictions and forms of discrimination in Saudi society, but also directly criticize its social and political frameworks. In doing so, they have produced a new discourse of [defending women's rights]. (29)

For her part, Alsanea negotiates Saudi women's struggle in dealing with social conflicts and hypocrisy, especially in relation to men in marriage and relationships. In each chapter of her novel, she shows how her society tries to justify baseless conflicts between genders under the guise of religion. She starts each chapter with a speech from the prophet Mohammed or a verse from the Quran and then reveals a habit or behavior that contradicts the morality of religion. She declares in *Arab News* that her goal in writing the story of four women was to show how marriage and gender are constructed in the culture of that time. She writes: "The novel is based on events I've heard about; they have added authenticity to the novel" (Wahab 3). The novel tells the story of Sadeem, Gamrah, Lamees, and Michelle. They come from upper-class families and experience different marriage stories that capture the stance of women at that time. The other interesting thing is that the novel is written from a first-person narrator's perspective, in the character of an individual who sends a weekly email to discuss what she describes as marriage and love "scandals" concerning her female friends. What does this type of narration mean? Why did the narrator choose to tell the stories over the internet?

In 2005, when the novel was written, Saudi writers, especially young women, could not write or publish freely since stories about women in love and marriage were considered taboo. So young women found an outlet in blogs and emails to write, receive reviews, and answer questions without being caught by their parents or other relatives, which would affect the whole family's reputation, especially with regard to marriage. This is also the case with Alsanea herself. Commenting on her friends' reaction after the publication of

her novel, she tells the *Los Angeles Times*: "they don't want to hurt their marriage prospects by associating with a bold friend" (Abu-Nasser 4). So technology permits two things off-limits for Saudi women, as the novel emphasizes. First, it gives them the chance to "write freely in cyberspace in contrast to the restrictions placed on their freedom within the public sphere of their own society" (Al-Qahtani 4). This helps them articulate their opinions freely without having their identities diminished by other men or uneducated primitive women, which leads Alsanea to make the novel's narrator appear under a pseudonym and a vague identity. Also, it is not only the narrator who communicates through the internet with the audience, but the four female characters with the men they love or intend to marry, away from the eyes of the public since face-to-face meetings between lovers are not allowed before marriage. Malena Wartous comments on this form of communication between genders at the time of the novel: "cell phones and internet chatrooms play a key role in this culture, allowing men and women to interact directly" (Wartous 4).

The other critical topic that Alsanea discusses related to the Saudi culture of her time is the marriage of the four female friends. She uses many cultural idioms and old folktales that reveal the dilemma of marriage and women's struggle in pleasing the social reflection of patriarchy. One common saying that sums up how marriage goes in most Saudi families of that time is "the watermelon on the knife: either extra sweet or a dried-out, empty gourd" (Alsanea 66). So marriage is based on luck because it is very traditional, and there is not mutually open communication before marriage, and if it happens, it is affected by factors such as tribe, nationality, and the influence of the mother-in-law who gives her son endless advice on not diminishing his manhood in front of his new wife.

The novel starts with Gamrah's wedding and reveals in its depiction many cultural problems and gossip. Although the wedding is very luxurious, it is spoiled by the gossip of the older women commenting on the bride's dress, friends, and makeup. For most Saudi women at that time, weddings were a place to find brides for their sons and brothers. Here, the women look for a woman with the fairest skin, the sexiest body, and the most elegance, but who is also decent, polite, and avoids vulgar or bold dancing. All eyes turn to Sadeem, who walks very shyly behind her friend Gamrah during the procession.

The wedding scene gives a very detailed look into the culture and marriage customs of that time. However, my main concern is to dig deeply into Gamrah and Sadeem's tragic marriage story. Gamrah and her husband Rashi become victims of social restrictions on marriage, which leads them both to suffer endlessly. She is engaged happily to her husband and knows only one thing about him through her father: he is from a wealthy family and is pursuing a Ph.D. in Chicago, USA. She does not contact him before marriage because he does not ask for her phone number like her friends and sister's husbands. She sees this as a good sign because it means he is decent and shy. At the same time, Gamrah is asked by her mother to abstain and not be so easygoing. She

should be virtuous and firm, and not give herself to her husband from the first night because if she does, he will think she has a past and then will not respect her. It is the kind of advice given by old ladies to brides on their wedding night, so they will appear sedate before their husband's family, as described in the wedding scene:

At weddings, receptions and social gatherings where ladies meet, especially the old ladies looking to make a match, you must follow this strategy to the letter: —You barely walk, you barely talk you barely smile, you barely dance, be mature and wise, you always think before you act, you measure your words carefully before you speak and you do not behave like a child. (Alsanea 13)

Gamrah marries Rashid and does not allow sexual contact until the seventh night. On the seventh night, the sex scene ends in beating him, and he leaves the room. This indicates the pressure put on young women in marriage. She is asked to marry someone she barely knows, and then she lives between two conflicts: whether to show love and interest or to be virtuous and firm.

The other cathartic moment occurs when she moves with her husband to Chicago and discovers that he tries to avoid spending time with her. He likes to spend his time outside the home with his friend, as he claims, or in the library, while Gamrah is involved in domestic work, such as cooking and cleaning. Gamrah's fear increases intensely over time, and in the end, she is torn between Saudi culture and the modern American culture that her husband seems to like. So when she goes with him to the cinema, she takes off her hijab and coats to reveal her beauty and femininity to attract him, but he insults her by telling her that she looks uglier.

Gamrah is driven by her mother's old sayings that children strengthen the connection between a husband and wife. She stops taking birth control pills thinking it will help her marriage with Rashid. Shockingly, Gamrah realizes that what leads her husband away from her is a Japanese woman he used to be in love with before marrying Gamrah. She discovers this about Rashid by checking her laptop's pictures and seeing the lady on one of her home's sofas. This tragic story is representative of marriage stories in the Saudi culture of the time, where both husband and wife become victims of such traditions and rituals. Rashid is forced by his parents to marry Gamrah and not follow his love, the Japanese woman, because it goes against their culture's tradition. He marries Gamrah because if he does not, his parents will stop sending him money to pursue his Ph.D. studies.

Abu-Nasser discusses how Alsanea tries to solve the plight of marriage in the Saudi culture in her time: "The Saudi writer, Raja Alsanea (1981) pleads for more freedom in relations between the sexes and extols the benefit of marriage for love rather than solely for convenience" (Abu-Nasser 28). Is love the only thing needed for this culture? If love helps, it will help the story of Sadeem and Michelle. Alsanea shows that society does not need love but a dramatic change regarding tradition, women, and men in dealing with relationships. Both men and women are given roles and stories by their parents, which they have to follow in order to find their marriage partners, even if they have already found the love they

were searching for. Such is the case with Sadeem and her husband Waleed, and between the half-American Michelle and Faisal.

Sadeem becomes another victim of the social construction of love and virtue. Although Waleed loves her and has a good reputation in society, she transgresses one of the roles considered taboo in the culture at the time. She trusts Waleed but prefers to have the wedding after her final exams because she cares about her academic achievements. Waleed cannot understand this request from her. He thinks she has priorities in life other than marriage, which increases his anger and which Alsanea interprets as jealousy. As a man, Waleed wants to control Sadeem by not letting her go beyond him academically and financially. To please him, Sadeem seduces him by wearing a transparent gown when he visits her one night following their engagement. *Melka* is a marriage vow through which both a man and woman are officially announced as husbands and wives. However, in some Saudi regions, in the author's context and time of writing her novel, it is believed that sexual intimacy should not occur before the wedding night, though it is allowed by religion. The author shows the contradiction of the culture of that time, where families use religion to reject some habits, especially men's, so they can control women. Consequently, Waleed scolds Sadeem's acceptance of his sexual desire, and thus, he leaves her. This leaves Sadeem with an endless stream of unanswered questions that reveal the hypocrisy of culture and time. Although Waleed loves her, he thinks she lacks the virtues that a woman should have, as described in the novel:

A guy will begin backing off from a girl and even trying to escape as soon as she seems available. Because he feels, Okay, I don't have to do anything to get her. She's no longer a challenge. He doesn't say this to her face. He doesn't let her figure out that he is in the wrong, no way! He makes her believe that she is the one who has problems, not him. (Alsanea 64)

Hence, it is not only the lack of love that ruins the marriage of both Sadeem and Gamrah but also tradition, folktales, cultural prediction, and expectations from both genders that fall under the unrealistic mask of religion. This is revealed again in the story of Michelle, born to a Saudi father and an American mother. She meets her lover Faisal at a shopping mall, and their love lasts for years. However, when she asks him to marry her, he disappears: his parents will not allow him to marry her because her mother is American. His parents describe her as not having "pure blood" (77). Here Alsanea shows how Islam is an anti-racial and anti-tribal religion, but how Saudi culture considers "pure blood" and tribal equality in marriage at that time. The depiction of cultural contraction in marriage and gender relationships that the novel is so vivid with led people in Saudi Arabia at that time to look at this novel as "scandalous because the characters are portrayed not as rebels but as representative members of their culture" (Wartous 5).

In conclusion, I find as a researcher and reader of both Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* many similarities in terms of the reciprocal relationships between the novels and their historical contexts.

Both novels, written at different times, have been described as morbid and scandalous and caused a commotion in their societies. Many reviews describe how both novels are unhealthy because they came out at times when women were restricted to specific roles, but seeking freedom through texts from female writers can be considered a catharsis to the culture. The reviews that I found in newspapers about both Chopin and Alsanea helped me to understand the situation of women in terms of sex and marriage in both writers' context and time. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is a critique of the family structure and the expectations of the family in the late nineteenth century. Not only is the novel a feminist writing, but it is also a critique of society in its view that an individual is not free unless they rebel. Right from the start, it is obvious that Chopin is critical of the concept of family as expected in the late nineteenth century. Edna and Léonce Pontellier are both held to a particular standard by society, which makes them live difficult lives. Chopin is also able to see the other side of the divide and reveals how men are victims of the relationships that suppress women's aspiration to self-determination. Chopin uses formal literary devices to frame her critique, but also explicitly voices her opinion through the characters in the novel.

Likewise, Alsanea rebels against the construct of marriage and gender relationships in a society that deals with everything beyond the control of an individual's will and needs. She shows that love is not taken into account and respected at that time, but degraded by the tradition and cultural norms that both men and women become victims of, and which lead them both to suffer dysfunctional marriages and discontinued love relationships because of social opinions and the interference of their parents. Both novels reflect the eras they were written in, and their characters represent their environments as emphatically as the authors themselves voice a criticism informed by their skeptical outlooks on society.

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