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REPRESENTATION OF WORKING WOMEN IN ZOE FERRARIS' *CITY OF VEILS*

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ABSTRACT: *In the struggle between communities and nations for dominance, issues pertaining to women's lives may be politicized to fit a particular paradigm. Gender may be linked to nation when it comes to representing the veiled lives of Muslim women in the Middle East. The literary market may spur the native fiction writers to gaze into the lives of women as exotic objects of study. This paper investigates Zoe Ferraris' City of Veils to examine the possibilities of embedded politics of representation in the narrated experiences of working women in Saudi Arabia. Ferraris' approach has been restrained seeking agency for Saudi women as she blurs the private/public space boundaries allowing women a movement from non-space to recognition. Though there are signs that Ferraris links gender and nation to highlight the struggle of women in Saudi Arabia, her narrative avoids the trap of labels like "westernized," "oriental gaze," influenced by "western cultural invasion."*

KEYWORDS: Murder mystery, Representation of working women, Women's agency, Oriental gaze, Cultural imperialism, Islamic identity

INTRODUCTION

City of Veils is outwardly a murder mystery unravelling in a world of crime, hate and oppression just next door to the holy pilgrimage sites. But the outward façade of murder mystery reveals the deeper authorial desire to pinpoint what she feels is problematic in the contemporary Saudi society through a clever interaction of her male and female characters, like, women's emancipation, freedom of speech for citizens, social resistance to change, a simmering discontent among Saudi women against policing their lives, and the lack of basic human rights for them. The story revolves around the murder of a woman, and the lives of four Saudi and one American woman get entangled in it. The omniscient narrator looks at the situation and the world around, at times through the eyes of the American lady, but mostly as an independent observer, especially presenting an engaging gaze into the lives of working women and the challenges they face.

City of Veils: in brief

The novel is set in one of the most prominent cities in Saudi Arabia, i.e., Jeddah. It gains more significance because of the fact that Jeddah is the gateway to Mecca and Medina, for Hajj pilgrims. The dead body of a woman bearing injury marks is found washed ashore. Inspector Osama Ibrahim is given the charge to investigate the murder. He is to be assisted by Katya Hijazi, a forensic scientist. The body is recognised to be of Leila Nawar, a young woman interested in making short films on women's emancipation. Leila is found to have befriended three male westerners – Eric Walker, Apollo Mabus and Jacob Marx; two of them were white, while Apollo Mabus was originally from the Middle East but settled in the US. The murder of

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Leila is linked to her friendship with these three men. During the investigation process, several disturbing facts come up before the readers. For instance, Apollo Mabus was involved in a revisionist historiography of the Qur'an [a dangerous project indeed] based on an old manuscript found in Yemen. Leila had promised to help him make the issue public. As Leila disappeared after her murder, Eric Walker thought Mabus was responsible for it; he fought with Mabus and Mabus accidentally killed Eric; Jacob discovered this killing, and as he threatened Mabus to bring him to justice, in self-defence Mabus killed Jacob too. Leila's brother Abdulrahman was an influential businessman but he didn't like her outgoing nature and they often fought over this issue. Abdulrahman's shop assistant Fuad was a filthy, dishonest man and Leila found him stealing from her brother's shop. Leila needed money for her filming projects and her brother was reluctant to help her, so, she tried to blackmail Fuad. Fuad was enraged how a woman could challenge him, a male! They had a fight over this, and in a fit of rage Fuad killed her and dumped her body at a pier outside the city limits.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The major thrust of the present study is to look for possible traces of American gaze into the lives of veiled Saudi women in *City of Veils*. So, the researchers, in addition to analysing the novel from the perspective of the politics of representation of veiled Muslim women, have also taken into account the representation of Saudi women by new generation Saudi women writers. Saudi women writers' gaze into the experiences of veiled Muslim women is more 'westernized' than that of Zoe Ferraris. For instance, Badriya Al-Bishr in *Hind and the Soldiers* (2011) and *Love Stories on al-Asha Street* (2013) is really provocative in her portrayal of Saudi girls. In an interview with Christopher Dreyer, "Anything You Write About Is Made a Scandal, Even Love" Al-Bashir admits that she believes women of Saudi Arabia have the right to love and such an emotion need not be politicized. Seba Al-Herz (*The Others*, 2009, Originally published in Arabic, titled *Al-Akharoun*, 2006) is another advocate of 'free love' for Saudi women. In fact, the new generation of Saudi women writers has started portraying young Saudi girls in astonishing colours, giving a severe jolt to the religious establishment in the country. Samar Al-Muqrin's *Women of Vice* (2008), Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* (2007) and Sophia Al-Maria's *The Girl Who Fell to Earth* (2012) are cases in point.

Madawi Al-Rasheed, a Saudi critic, expresses surprise as well as satisfaction at this development. Madawi's article "Deconstructing Nation and Religion," in *Novel and Nation in the Muslim World: Literary Contributions and National Identities,* (2015: 133-151) and his book *A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia* (2013) explore the political potentials of such daring acts for Saudi women. Mashael Al-Sudeary's "Rethinking Muslim Woman's Agency in Modern Literature" (2012: 69-81) on the other hand, takes a different stand arguing that writers like Salman Rushdie (*Midnight's Children*, 1981) and Azar Nafisi (*Reading Lolita in Tehran*, 2003) have rather denied agency to Muslim women by uprooting them from their private spaces. Betrayal in various forms can become a strong subversive act, and Leslie Bow (2001) studies the legitimacy of betrayal in the narratives of Asian American women. Zoe Ferraris also employs betrayal as a subversive act, albeit in a covert manner. The same way, we have taken into account Frantz Fanon's idea (*Black Skin White Masks*, 1986) of negative action as a desire for self-expression. Economic emancipation of women is the first step towards political emancipation, and to support our argument, we have surveyed Homa Hoodfar's *Between Marriage and the Market: Intimate Politics and Survival*

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in Cairo (1997) to investigate how far Zoe Ferraris' working women have benefitted from their self-styled economic emancipation in Saudi Arabia. The condition of women in Kuwait bears resemblances to the condition of women in Saudi Arabia, therefore, Ishaq Tijani's *Male Domination, Female Revolt: Race, Class, and Gender in Kuwaiti Women's Fiction* (2009) has been quite helpful in contextualizing the anger Zoe Ferraris' heroines express now and then.

METHODOLOGY

The present study is basically a text-based research. The study involves a thorough analysis of major primary sources chosen. The research also employs insights from postcolonial literary theory to examine the implied gender-nation linkage in the novel, and for a comparative study of representation of Saudi women, the novel has been put in contrast with a few narratives on similar themes by Saudi women writers.

DISCUSSION

Peer-group Socialization

Katya Hijazi and Leila Nawar are victims of contradictory orientations in their socialization at home and at the workplaces; both had especially experienced conflicting socialization at home too. At home Katya's mother believed in her daughter's capabilities and encouraged her to do something different in life. Her mother showed no inclination towards outward show of religiosity. As Abu (Katya's father) began "praying five times a day and following all of the niggling Wahhabi rules that seemed, to Katya's mother at least, nothing more than an outward show of religiosity" (65) and he insisted that "Katya and her mother wear burqas when his friends came to the house" (Ibid.), she reminded him that they were Lebanese. But that only "made him angry" (Ibid.), "I'm *Muslim*", he'd say (Ibid.). Katya's father wished to instill in her the notions of feminine modesty, notions like the thoughts Nayir had about women, "*Close the door, lower the veil, shut the mouth*" (27). In fact, it was gender socialization inculcating in them 'male' and 'female' roles in society, but somehow they escaped the onslaught, unlike Katya's friend Donia who succumbed to the pressure, "having been subject to the abuses of seven older brothers, she was shy to the point of obstinacy" (65) and she only "liked to cook," and "keeping a clean house." Her emotions were also subdued, "She expressed emotion rarely. Most of the time Katya had to strain to hear her voice" (65). Katya used to pity her. She revolts under such conditions. When Katya invites Nayir to her house but her father tries to force his will on her to not meet Nayir, she enters the *majlis* in her regular clothes, and feels triumphant as, "She could almost hear their thoughts. *Why isn't she wearing a cloak? What does she want? This is ridiculous*, she thought" (66). On the other hand, at her workplace Katya is oriented by her senior colleague Adara towards blurring the line between gendered public spaces through dedication to her work, "They [*men*] don't trust us to do our jobs," says Adara, "and that's the problem. One little mistake on my part justifies all their biases against me. The good news is that the pressure has turned me into the best examiner in the building." (37) Adara's socialization also reflects advice on domesticity at home as "she had never grumbled about her long hours at work, not at three months when she couldn't eat, nor at seven when her ankles looked like pears. Even in her gestures, nothing spoke of complaint," (37) but she too had overcome it and her "face was firm and determined, clean of all makeup and *never hidden*

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behind a burqa" (38). Peer-group socialization helped Katya negotiate the restricting boundaries in the public space. Not only her current boss, Osama Ibrahim, disliked treating women as non-existent but also her previous boss "had taught her not to wear her burqa unless she absolutely had to, so Katya kept it resting on the top of her head" (39).

Leila Nawar's brother Abdulrahman Nawar was a devout man, so, he was more interested in her domestication, to keep her to her private world of 'feelings,' and not to invade the public space of 'reason and masculinity.' "He didn't like her being out of the house, and he thought that filming people was inappropriate." (92) But on the other hand, she received full support from her cousin Ra'id and her friend Farooha. Abdulrahman "didn't like that she was doing it, and he wanted it to stop" (92), while Ra'id and Farooha kept her secret that her work was even something beyond her brother's imagination, that through her work "she pissed a lot of people off" (91) "Did her brother know about this?" Katya asks Farooha and Farooha frowned, "Are you kidding? No one knew but Leila and her cousin Ra'id. And me" (91). Her peer-group socialization had already emboldened Leila so much so that she didn't find it strange to make friendship with Apollo Mabus who was working on a Qur'an subversion project, and Eric Walker, an American man. Ferraris has succeeded in busting the myth of the "androcentric 'Enlightenment discourse'" as notes Ishaq Tijani (2009: 142)[1], based on the dichotomy of feelings, typified as a 'feminine space,' and reason, called a 'masculine space,' that women could easily be relegated to the domestic private sphere of 'feelings' so that the public realm of 'reason,' could be claimed for men. Katya's father, Nayir, Abdulrahman and Fuad personify the 'Enlightenment discourse' whereas, Katya's mother, Adara, Osama Ibrahim, Farooha and Ra'id inculcate the ideas of self-expression, and self-determination in their wards and peers, to let them stand for personal autonomy.

Women's Identity and Agency

The 'Enlightenment discourse' pertaining to the dichotomy of "feeling" and "reason," the one defined as a feminine trait and the other as masculine, can be extended to crystallize identities for exclusivity. Women's identity in Saudi Arabia as noted in *City of Veils*, for instance, is a consolidated bundle of traits falling into the category of 'feelings': religious, giving, self-sacrificing, passionless, sexless, desireless, motherly, happy in confinement, in conformity with religious establishment, and not in competition with men for public space. All these traits obliterate women's agency. On her second visit to Jeddah, Miriam dreads going out alone as she is reminded of her first visit to the city when "Men would notice that she was out alone, and they would stop her by whistling and even standing in front of her, blocking her passage. *They would tell her to go home*" (23). Home only is the place for women. Nayir is not happy that Katya could secure a job because she has to leave her home: "He hadn't congratulated her on the new job; his only concern had been whether she would be interacting with men or not" (Ibid., 32)

But, Ferrari's working women do not identify themselves with either the establishment or with the women who keep silent. Katya used to pity Donia because "Donia was meek and seemingly battered, the sort of woman an ultradevout household would naturally produce" (65). Katya had no hesitation in turning down a marriage proposal with a groom found for her by her father as "when she was forced to admit that the reason for Katya's refusal to marry was that the prospective groom was in fact a donkey" (37).The other factor in favour of Ferraris' heroines is that they are not mothers or grandmothers waging wars on traditions, but young, educated and vibrant employees in the kingdom struggling to recognize outlets for their personal

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freedom, individual choices in relationships and blurring the gendered identities, from within the system. They are in a constant struggle to identify themselves as non-conformists in order to typify as agents in social change, albeit non-westernized. There is a danger of reductionism in getting labelled as westernized, so, they retain their identity as Muslim women. For instance, the heroine in Samar al-Muqrin's *Women of Vice* "finds love on the streets of London when she meets her lover, whom she had previously encountered in the virtual world of email, text messages, telephone conversations and chat rooms" (Madawi Al-Rasheed, 2015: 144). And precisely for this reason al-Muqrin has to face criticism in Saudi Arabia.[2] But the Islamic identity of working women in *City of Veils* is not defined against, or in terms of, their immersion, part or complete, in western consumerism or western cultural influence. None of them, except Leila Nawar, speaks English; neither are they educated in western universities.

Although working women in *City of Veils* identify themselves as Saudi Muslims, but that doesn't hinder their moves that are otherwise not permitted to Saudi Muslim women. Ferraris' heroines go for the ideal choice that is, working from within the system for a change so that they cannot be accused of being westernized and agents of foreign cultural domination. Rajaa Alsanea employs the same strategy as a novelist, as noted by Madawi Al-Rasheed (2015: 141):

> Although Alsanea challenges many perceptions about her society, on her webpage she confirms her Muslim identity and commitment to her country. She informs audiences that she plans to return to Saudi Arabia and develop her own dental practice. . .[3]

Yet another example is *Al-Akharoun* / *The Others*, a novel written by Seba al-Herz (her pen name). The novel is criticized for its major theme is lesbianism, though it also treats the issue of marginalization among the small minority of Shi'ite Muslims in Saudi Arabia. Look at the portrayal of the first sensuous encounter of two girls:

> I undid a button and left the rest of the task for Dai's hand, and suddenly, what seemed like it would take endless time had truly happened, startling me and riveting me too. I hung onto the mirror, my flagrant nakedness sending me into a state of rapture I had never experienced before, a feeling of bliss at seeing myself desired like this, and escaping the laws mandated by my own body. (2009: 12)

Lesbianism instantly identifies a writer as westernized, and thus, Orientalized, an outsider, denied a legitimate agency in the Saudi establishment. Women lack agency in Saudi Arabia because they have no identity in the public space. In the private space their identity is intruded upon by national politics. Ferraris grants women of Saudi Arabia a choice for an agency, to have their identity in public as well as private space to call their own, and they exercise this choice within the Saudi system.

From Object to Subject

The intended narrative in *City of Veils* seeks a shift in perspective of women about themselves, from object to subject position. The predominant social narrative defines women not as a creature having independence existence but as *non-men*, not defined what they *are* but what they *are not*. Women are *not* what men are. The objective correlative of all emotions, desires, feelings, passions, even sexuality, is always man. Men have the audacity to chide a woman if she dares to expose her face (in other words, display her 'sexuality,' intruding into a male bastion), "Do you think you are so ugly," the last one had said [to Katya], "that no man will find your face appealing? Is that why you expose it?" *No*, she wanted to retort, *I just mistakenly*

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thought that when it came to sexuality, you had some self control" (39). Women should dress [modestly] not for their own sake, but for the sake of men so that men don't fall into the trap of sin because of an "immodestly dressed woman." So, it is for the sake of spiritual safety of men that women should not expose their 'tempting' bodies. The games of "cultural heritage" and "custodians of cultural particularities" are played upon women's subjectivities. The distinction of 'vulnerable' and 'luring,' that is, men as vulnerable and women as luring, embedded in the dichotomy of 'spirit' and 'matter' is a trope for women's objectification. The active 'spirit' rules the inert 'matter.' But, the trope may be turned upside down, at least in the private space, even if it is pervaded by public space morality. For instance, as regards dress, here it is Katya who is to decide what to wear when Nayir is coming to her house, "Nayir had never seen her in regular clothes before; He'd only ever seen her in a black cloak. But she *wasn't going to wear a cloak in the house*. That was one of her rules for the evening. She would dress as she always did" (64).

Again, Ferraris has been careful in treading this controversial path. Young women novelists throwing caution to winds, asserting their heroines' subjectivity through taking full control of their lives in matters of sexuality, passion, desire, choice, etc. are often ridiculed for their market-oriented outlook since such stuff from a closed-door set up is awaited. And though young novelists from Saudi Arabia represent new subversive voices, who freely delve into passion, bodily desires, and flagrant sexuality, thus demythicizing male activeness and agency, destroying the taboo around these notions always associated with these topics (Madawi, 2015), Ferraris, being an American, has been on her guard.[4] Her narrative does give a voice to the muted women, even to bluntly tell men their problem, "Your problem," she said, "is that you can't get a woman." She could see she'd struck a nerve, and it only emboldened her. "You think women should be your sex slaves. That's what Leila was to you, wasn't it? A pretty face. A cute, tight ass. Someone you thought you could fuck if you felt like it" (Ferraris, 2010: 187), but still her characters operate more in the intellectual realm.

Working women in *City of Veils* are active participants in the changes taking place in the Kingdom. The problem in Saudi Arabia, as opines the novelist Al-Bishr, is that they [women] are not allowed to be in the front line, so they change things from the second row (Al-Bishr, 2011). Ferraris' characters, even in the second row, are not shadows of their male counterparts, fixed forever in their suppressed life conditions; they are dynamic people interacting with their immediate environment, private and public, not being shaped by it so much as shaping it themselves. Ferraris' working women have "more courage, more anger and the same awareness, so they are taking part" (Ibid.). Whenever working women are given a chance, they are faster to act with grit and determination, even to the questions pertaining to religion, "This is what Allah said," Nayir replied, touching the printed Quran… Katya was quick to intervene. "But Majdi, just because the document is old doesn't mean it's *not*

full of errors. What you're saying raises the possibility that the whole text is full of human error. But then how can you know which parts of it are authentic?" (Ferraris, 86).They may not be happy with their present conditions, yet they are not groping in the darkness, but, like Liela Nawar, all of them are trying to find ways to improve their condition. Katya has even tested the boundaries of her life, by putting her engagement with Nayir at risk not resigning her job. Inspector Osama Ibrahim was impressed by Katya, "who had come to his attention recently for discovering the Bluetooth in Leila Nawar's burqa. He was impressed that she was working on a weekend" (88). Al-Bishr believes that this impatience of Saudi women to become the subject

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of the national narrative is an outcome of the suffering they have endured and their overall lack of rights (Al-Bishr, 2011).

Betrayal as Subversion

Betrayal is a breach of trust. All the major working women characters in *City of Veils* are guilty of betrayal, in one way or the other. Katya betrays her father and her lover; Leila Nawar betrays her brother, her husband and even her nation by falling in love with an American ("Leila loved the Americans" [93]); Farooha betrays her family, especially her brother; Nuha betrays her husband, and Faiza betrays her boss. But theirs are not individual, personal instances of betrayal for personal gains as "the charge of women's betrayal, of infidelity, has been represented as intrinsic to feminine nature" (Leslie Bow, 2001: 3). Their betrayals are of a different order, acts of subversion of the repressive mechanism springing out of "strict borders between groups and individuals" (Ibid. 3). Katya betrays the trust of her father and her lover Nayir who believe that she works at a place where she doesn't have to meet men, but "if her father ever found out just how closely she was working with men, his reaction would be just like Nayir's. If both men had their way, she probably wouldn't be working at all" (Ferraris, 32). Katya betrays the trust of her office mates too making them believe that she was married, exactly like what Faiza had done. Faiza was fired from her job for her betrayal, "…Turns out she wasn't really married," the chief said. "One of the detectives in the department met a cousin of hers at a friend's house, and he put the matter straight" (Ibid. 87). Inspector Osama Ibrahim, who is sympathetic of such subversive necessities finds it hard to believe that a dedicated worker like Faiza was fired, "for such a small, stupid lie" (Ibid., 88) though Osama had been angry with his wife Nuha who had betrayed his trust by using birth control pills while on his face she always showed much eagerness for a second child. He lost his calm on "Discovering something like this—oh, he saw it so clearly" and which 'opened a terrifying chasm of fury and distrust" in his heart (Ibid., 72).

Women's betrayal is surprisingly and singularly intolerable, especially in Asian contexts, because, "As symbolic boundary markers for ethnic and national affiliations, women embody ethnic authenticity, patriotism, and class solidarity – and their repudiation" (Leslie Bow, 3). Working women in *City of Veils* do not overtly repudiate their national, ethnic and religious identity, but their covert, and maybe subconscious, act signify their refusal to go with the burdensome collective identification. Though they do not putatively threaten the "invisible cohesion of community" (Ibid., 3) by rupturing it at the seams, their betrayals "constitute subversion of another kind, a subversion of repressive authority that depends upon upholding strict borders between groups and individuals" (Ibid.). Betrayal to them is not disloyalty towards individuals but a sign of dissociation from belonging to a collectivity hinged upon gendered notions of loyalty, ethnicity, nationalism and collective identity. It also symbolizes their grasp of the subtexts that constitute the mechanisms of regulation of individuals for multiple loyalties, i. e., to nation, community, religion, culture, and so on.

Economic Independence as Emancipation

The economic question in the lives of Saudi working women depicted in *City of Veils* is supreme, maybe not for economic reasons but as the first step towards psychological emancipation. Katya Hijazi is not from a very well-to-do family and she has to look for a job to make a decent living for herself. When Katya secured a new job, "she'd been overjoyed – eager for the distraction and the independence" (32). Women's aspiration for economic independence is closely linked to an erosion of the boundaries between the public and private spheres, therefore, the national ideology projects women as satisfied-at-home subjects. But,

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Ferraris overturns such stereotypical notions about women in Saudi Arabia. First, women in Saudi Arabia do need economic independence. For Leila Nawar the economic question is supreme. She is always in need of money as the kind of work she does requires a regular supply of money and she cannot even share the secret of her involvements with any men in her life, because, her work involves heresy and her brother Abdurrahman is a devout man; her husband will also not support her and she has no other friend. "She knew that financial independence was the only thing that would make her a happy person, Leila being who she was. *Financial independence*." (Ibid., 93). She shares some secrets with her cousin Ra'id but that is of meager help. Nuha doesn't show so much desperateness for money, but she also wants economic independence. Adara is also in need of economic independence. Farooha needs a constant supply of money which her family cannot maintain for long, so, she works day and night, so much so that Katya felt pity for her, "*You spend all your time in your room. Your parents want you locked up here, and your brother threatens you if you so much as open your bedroom door. Aren't you longing to get the hell out?* (95). Second, jobs like working for the forensics department are quite challenging, that too going out with a police inspector for investigation, alone in his car, and then questioning the criminals to pin them down, is almost next to impossible in Saudi Society, but Ferraris' heroines Katya and Faiza demystified the supposedly 'male-job.' Ferraris has achieved in Saudi Arabia what Homa Hoodfar (1997) achieved in Egypt, that is, overturning the stereotypes about traditional Muslim women, Islam and the Middle East as regards the economic independence of Middle Eastern women. Homa's research focus was on "the nonegalitarian nature of the household and family and the definitions of economic activity" (1997: 4) and so seems to be the project of Ferraris, albeit fictionalized, if we take the examples of Katya, Faiza, Leila and Farooha. And that is only the tip of the iceberg. The truth is that "Saudi Arabian women are disadvantaged legally, socially and in their rights to be employed" as documented in the EU report 2016.[5]

Tension as Rupture

Working women's lives in *City of Veils* is fraught with the tension between their acquired identity and the desired identity – the tension between loyalty to the norms inherited from the mainstream cultural discourse and their desire to create a counter-culture of their own if the mainstream culture denies them legitimate agency. The tension symbolizes the existence of a larger rupture in the seemingly cohesive community, of the constant tension between the opposite camps in Saudi Arabia, one represented by Abdurrahman, Nayir, and Katya's father whose firm belief is that boundaries and restrictions are good for women as they keep them safe from exploitation. The other camp is of Osama Ibrahim, Majdi, and a few educated individuals who think that boundaries are negotiable since they are man-made. Moreover, the interests of private players in Saudi economy supported by the state apparatus weigh over Saudi religious nationalism, thus relenting pressure for cultural conformity on women.

Saudi religious nationalism relying upon segregation of private and public spaces and gendered roles (women's role at home and men's roles outside) need to strike a balance in allowing women work at lingerie stores since women's clothing should not be handled by men, although the religious establishment is not happy with women leaving home to work:

> When the Labor Ministry issued its new law – only women should work in lingerie stores – the religious establishment roared. The idea of male employees handling brassieres and thongs sent the imams into a lather, but apparently the threat of women

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> leaving off childraising and cooking to find outside work was even more depraved. (Ferraris, 2010: 51).

The state has to pose as a protector of public virtue, committed to safeguarding the public space from desire and passion, "…but it was really a bid to clamp down on one of the few places where men had access to women, where women could confer with men in whispers about their panty preferences and cup sizes and which of the dazzling variety of erotic "looks" they preferred in the bedroom" (Ibid.). But, the state also wants to transform the kingdom into a cosmopolitan fantasy world open for all, allowing private entrepreneurs to open glittering urban shopping malls and huge convenience stores where one could encounter semi-nude mannequins and flashy panty ads:

> The next window showed three manikins standing in a row. Behind them a neon green poster announced *Latest Syrian Thrills!* The manikins were wearing technology treats: a bra made of power cords, a cell phone covering each breast, a BlackBerry thong. It wasn't the ridiculousness of it that made him laugh, it was the knowledge that Faiza was standing beside him, staring at two computer mice strapped to the manikin's firm butt cheeks beneath a sign that read *Click Me, Baby!* (Ibid., 52)

The rupture caused by tension that we are speaking about is the self-realization, as Sophia al-Maria (2012) realizes, "I am that I am,"[6] and the capability for self-expression overcoming an ambiguous identity in the face of opposing forces, as does Rajaa Alsanea invoking a verse from the Qur'an as Epilogue to her novel *Girls of Riyadh*:

> '*Verily, Allah does not change a people's condition until they change what is in themselves*.' Qur'an, Surat Al-Ra'd (The Chapter of Thunder), Verse II.

Ferraris' working women take the responsibility for their actions if they display a shift in perspective, a paradigm shift from their Islamic identities.

Negative Activity as Desire for Agency

An activity is deemed negative within the paradigms of particular cultural practice, but negative action has its own motive, as notes Frantz Fanon (1952: 218):

> As soon as I desire I am asking to be considered . . . I demand that notice be taken of my negating activity in so far as I pursue something other than life.

Working women represented in *City of Veils* desire to be considered, as notes Fanon, albeit they are not as explicit as Gamrah, the protagonist in *Girls of Riyadh*:

> But on her wedding night she came out of the bathroom to find him...asleep. And although she almost could have sworn that he was faking it, a theory her mother dismissed in their last telephone conversation as "satan's evil whisperings' she agreed to devote all of her energy to 'leading him on,' especially since her mother had recently announced to her on the phone that the policy of withholding had decidedly backfired in this case. (Kindle edition, Location 275)

In an incident of similar magnitude and effect, a Saudi student at King Abdul Aziz University in Jeddah shocked a public student forum on *misyar* (traveller's marriage) by announcing that "like men, women too look for sexual pleasures (*Wakad*, March 4, 2010). Other girls supported

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her in private. (Quoted in Madawi, 2015: 139). We put this in contrast to Ferraris' protagonist Katya's reaction to misyar: "...*Almesyaf Zawaaj*, summer marriage. Katya groaned. The "summer holiday marriage" was a disgusting arrangement" (99). The contrast highlights the fact that Ferraris does not feel comfortable with scandalizing her working women as do women writes from Saudi Arabia, though the apparent negative activities in both the cases are aimed at demanding notice, autonomy and share in public space. None of the female characters in the novel suffers from ambivalence either about the agency of women in Saudi Arabia, or about the veil they have to wear or in their own capabilities to mold the circumstances in their favour.

Again, this is in sharp contrast to the oriental gaze even many new Saudi women writers suffer from, as notes Madawi Al-Rasheed (2015: 136):

> The evaluation of the new Saudi women's literature is dominated by the oriental gaze, still fascinated by the hidden lives of veiled Muslim women – their love, passion, and straight and queer sexuality – a gaze that yields fame, celebrity, and money through publication.

Ferraris may not be accused of oriental gaze, like, for example, Rajaa Alsanea can be whose novels provide an insider's glimpse into the closed-door world of Saudi women, their passions, sexuality, various frustrations and disappointments in their love-life, despite the obvious title of Ferraris' work!

The only problematic discourse Ferraris may not be free from is possibly the linking of gender and nation. There are some signs in *City of Veils* that the representation of working women in the novel is a representation of Saudi Arabia. Quite often one feels that it is the men in the novel who feel denuded if a working woman appears in public without her veil. What kind of shame is it? Is it the shame of a nation or national culture? Is it the shame that western representation of stereotypes of Middle Eastern women as tropes of nation, linking gender and nation is intended as a contrastive corrective of cultural deficiencies? Perhaps yes.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Blurring of private/public space boundaries

Zoe Ferraris brings out the difficulties of Saudi women to negotiate the gendered public and private spaces. The public space doesn't belong to women in Saudi Arabia as it is claimed by men. An individual, independent woman is in the category of a "non-being" in Saudi Arabia; it is only a socially gendered and related woman that has existence in the narrative. Her existence in only relative, not in itself. That is why unmarried women cannot work, and women have to be "claimed" by her male relative:

> She took her time standing up, righting her suitcase, adjusting her cloak, and making sure the burqa wasn't going to slip off her nose. She glanced at the door and saw a sign she'd missed before. It said in English ***Unclaimed Women.*** (21)

The major women characters in the novels can be fairly well compared to women characters in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, for instance Jamila, and Nafisi's characters in *Reading*

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Lolita in Tehran who inhabit the space of non-existence, neither within the private space nor within the public space.[7] But Ferraris has managed to blur the boundaries between private/public spaces, turning the non-space into a fresh avenue for possibilities. Public is always political, and the nationalistic discourse of religious and political establishment has politicized the private spaces too in *City of Veils,* but all the working women in the novel succeed in claiming both.

Suggestions for Further Research

Representation of women in fictional works, especially of veiled women of the Middle East, usually acquires political overtones with cultural dominance as a sub-theme. The present paper has been an attempt at investigating such a motive in Ferrari's *City of Veils*. For lack of time and resources, our scope has been limited to only one novel by the author. Ferraris has produced two more novels based on her experiences in Saudi Arabia: *Finding Nouf* (2008) and *Kingdom of Strangers: A Novel* (2012). Further research on representation of Saudi women in these two novels would produce a comprehensive understanding on the author's understanding of Saudi Arabia as a nation and its culture.

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NOTES

[1] Ishaq Tijani (2009), analyzing Fawziyya Shuwaysh al-Sālim's novel Muzūn (2000), notes that,

> Through the narrative of Muzūn's childhood, al-Sālim deconstructs the androcentric, 'Enlightenment discourse'—personified in the characters of Zuwayna and Umm Salmān—of "consign[ing] women to the 'private' realm of feeling, domesticity, the body, in order to classify a public realm of Reason as masculine." Zayāna inculcates in Muzūnthe idea of the necessity for women to struggle for "agency, personal autonomy, self-expression, and self-determination" in a male-dominated world. (142)

[2] Madawi Al-Rasheed calls this literature as Saudi versions of "Chic lit."

> A new generation is writing about women as sexual agents rather than submissive victims of patriarchal society; they include Raja al-Sani (*Girls of Riyadh*), Samar al-Muqrin (*Women of Vice*) and two pen names, Warda Abd al-Malik (*The Return*), and Saba al-Hirz (*The Others*)...
>
> Over the last decade, the increase in the number of Saudi novels that deal with women as active sexual agents has been dramatic. In 2007, 55 novels (written by men and women) had sexual themes; that increased to 64 in 2008, and 70 in 2009 (2). Economies of desire, in which explicit sexuality is central, predominate. Many are shocked when Warda Abd al-Malik writes in The Return: "He took his clothes off and kept his long, stretched yellowish underpants. He didn't offer me a glass of water or a rose. I didn't see chocolates or fruits. I didn't hear a word or a whisper. He didn't caress me as I imagined. He just sat on top of me like a camel inflicted with leprosy." Saudi women, and Arab women in general, go in for elaborate "sexual" talk between themselves, and in private, that may shock western middle class women, who are far more reserved in discussing their own sexual lives with female friends (even if they have no qualms over exchanging information gathered from Cosmopolitan or Elle or popular television series dealing with explicit sexuality). [2014]

[3] Madawi further notes that

> She is, thus, a committed Muslim woman, who wants to work in her country and cause change from within. This narrative is too familiar in the context of Saudi Arabia. Working and challenging the system from within is the ideal choice. It avoids escape labels such as "Westernized," traitors" and "agents of foreign domination" and replaces them with commitment to Islam – but with a new cosmopolitan outlook.

[4] Madawi Al-Rasheed (2015: 136) notes that,

> While a previous generation of novelists wrote about lives constrained by history, geography and tradition, and may make strong allusions to sexual themes, the new novelists choose explicit language. The body, its desire, and passions, has become central to novels published since 2000. These new young novelists have indeed chosen to make war on taboos.

I'd like to add here that in general, Madawi Al-Rasheed has praised Al-Bishr's approach, as he writes:

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> Al-Bishr articulates how gender subordination is enforced by both men and women who collaborate to create a moral order that excludes and discriminate against women, especially the new generation with its aspirations for self-expression, choice, and freedom. Her main focus is on how female violence against the feminine is equally aggressive. The struggle of the *muthaqafa* is not simply against the will of men but also against illiterate mothers who were themselves subjected to the worst violence encountered by a girl on her wedding night. (Al-Rasheed, 2013: 194)

[5] The authors have reported that in Saudi Arabia,

> Women were first admitted to the Consultative Council (appointed, not elected) in 2013, when a royal decree instituted a 20% quota for women, and 30 women were appointed.700 There are no female ministers. One female deputy minister was appointed in 2009.701 Women have not yet been granted suffrage. A promise was made that they would vote in the 2009 elections, and in 2011, King Abdullah promised they would vote in 2015.
>
> Saudi Arabian women are disadvantaged legally, socially and in their rights to be employed, as their guardian must approve their employment, education and travel and oversee all legal interactions. The 'Global Gender Gap Report 2013' indicates that Saudi Arabia ranked 127th out of 135 countries. It is the lowest-performing high-income country in terms of the gap between women and men in economic participation and political empowerment. Saudi Arabian women are involved in business and may be owners or participate in family businesses and be part of informal business groups. (2016: 186)

[6] Adam Kleinman writes: In an episode near Mt. Sinai, Sophia suspends her journey; she actually just needs to go to the bathroom. Out of necessity, she relives herself at St. Catherine's Monastery. There, she encounters a plaque that reads, "I am that I am," which is the Hebrew god's explanation of his own identity. Sophia, who has never been able to describe her own identity without ambiguity, believes this statement echoes her own plight. Substituting herself for a god, Sophia must come to terms with the fact that she is ultimately responsible for her own boundaries.

(Adam Kleinman, **"***On Sophia Al-Maria's The Girl Who Fell to Earth."*

http://www.e-flux.com/journal/on-sophia-al-marias-the-girl-who-fell-to-earth/)

[7] Mashael A. Al-Sudeary (2012: 71) comments that,

> Rushdie's Jamila, in addition to many other female characters in the story, inhabits a place that is neither in the public or private realm but is a non-place that is invisible in its dimensions and frame, on the edge of humanity. Jamila's position is so precarious that the "silk chador" that covers her is described as not just a veil but as a 'curtain' that is as dimensionless as that which lies behind it (Rushdie, 1981, p. 435).

And here is her evaluation of Nafisi's characters inhabiting a non-space:

> Nafisi's escape from the private and public realm is to immerse herself and her students in fiction, which she claimed had the power to "color" their dreams. The problem with this was that instead of making her students active participants who fought to be able to realize their dreams, "It entailed an active withdrawal from a reality" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 11).
>
> …Though Nafisi describes her students in the second picture where they have taken off their veils in the private space of Nafisi's home as suddenly acquiring "splashes of color" and that they "Gradually, each one gained an outline and a shape, becoming her own inimitable self," this private space turns out to be as inert as any other
> public space (2003, p. 4-6).

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