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Speaking up with Yahoo: an Arabic e-mail novel

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Introduction

Rajā' 'Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni' from Saudi Arabia published her novel *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* in 2005. Three impressions have been published since. In this article I take the initial steps towards analysing this novel, which exemplifies a new novelistic style in the field of modern Arabic literature. This style has been brought to the fore by a woman Saudi author, a remarkable feat in itself, considering that expressions of modern literature in Saudi Arabian society are in their beginnings and that the voices of Saudi women writers up to the present have only been able to make themselves faintly heard.

“Commotion has spread throughout local circles behind which is an unidentified girl who every Friday sends “e-mail” to most of the Internet users in Saudi Arabia”, writes Ghāzī al-Quṣaybī on the back-cover blurb of the third edition of *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*.

The structure of the novel is meant to bring to mind an e-mail correspondence directed towards Arab readership generally and the Saudi Arabian audience specifically. This correspondence takes place within what the reader may well believe to be a Yahoo chat-room, where the narrator provides a weekly instalment on Fridays about the current events in the lives of four young Saudi women. Hence, *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* projects an illusion of reality and also explicitly sends a message of impact on Saudi society.

I heard that the city of King 'Abd al-Azīz is attempting to screen off the e-mail sites through which I send my weekly letters... ('Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni', 97).

سمعت أن مدينة الملك عبد العزيز تسعى لحجب مواقع البريد الإلكتروني التي
أبعث رسائلها الأسبوعية من خلالها... (عبد الله الصانع، ٩٧).

The letters in traditional epistolary writing chronicled an ongoing process. Similarly, the chapters of *Banāt al-Riyāḍ* tell about a period in the lives of four young Saudi women whose cover names in the novel are Qamara, Sadīm, Lamīs and Mashā‘il, who is called Michelle. This technique of giving the heroines cover names enhances the sense that we are being faced with real scenes from the lives of these four Saudi women, whose “real” names are not disclosed.

Finally, all translations from Arabic into English in this article have been presented by the author of this article.

The structure of the novel

Each chapter is introduced with the formal headings which we find in e-mail messages, such as the addressee, sender, date and subject.

The chat-room address is followed by a vignette consisting of a quotation from a poem, the Quran or a saying by a philosopher or a renowned author or poet. Thereafter, the narrator proceeds to speak directly to the reader, commenting briefly on the events of the previous chapter, wishing her readers a good holiday or giving some other frame to the chapter at hand.

After these structural items, a summary of previous events may appear. A result of this construction is that the frame of each chapter, including the e-mail address of the chat-room, the vignette and the summary, emphasises the feeling that what we proceed to read below is a piece of fictional writing in the form of instalments, as if it were a serial for a magazine.

The traditional epistolary novel is a type of first-person narrative, and the effect of drawing attention to the existence of the author behind the text usually contributes to an illusion of drawing attention to the “real” author of the correspondence. The narrative of *Banāt al-Riyāḍ*, however, is adapted to what we usually associate with a traditional novel in which a narrator tells the story in the third person. The frame then, consisting of the e-mail address, the vignette and the summary, may give us the sense of being pasted onto the opening pages and may even sharpen the breach between what we regard as e-mail formalities (the correspondence) and the actual stories of the individual girls (the narrative).

Each chapter is introduced with an e-mail layout as exemplified by Chapter two below.

To: seerehwenfadha7et@yahoogroups.com

From: “seerehwenfadha7et”

Date: 20/2/2004

Subject: # البنات يحتفلن بقمرة على طريقتهن #
 [The girls celebrate Qamara in their own way]

After this formal e-mail heading, we find the vignette which we take to set the tone of the chapter at hand.

Either life is a challenge and an adventure, or it is nothing at all.
 Helen Keller

إما أن تكون الحياة تحدياً ومغامرة، أو ألا تكون شيئاً أبداً.
 هيلين كيلر

Thereafter, the third formal item is presented, which includes some personal words directed to the readers in front of their screens. This part may also give a brief summary of former events.

To begin with, a short letter to all of the brothers, Ḥasan, Aḥmad, Fahd, Muḥammad and Yāsir, who made me happy with their serious contributions. No, we can't get to know each other.

After I have put on my gaudy lipsticker, I will carry on from where I left off (‘Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni‘, 22).

في البداية، رسالة صغيرة لكل من الإخوة حسن وأحمد وفهد ومحمد وياسر، الذين أسعدوني بمدخلاتهم الجادة: لا... ما يمكن نتعرف.
 بعد أن وضعت أحمرّي الصارخ، أكمل من حيث توقفت (عبد الله الصانع، ٢٢).

This kind of an introduction, patterned on an e-mail style message and directed to an audience of individuals sitting in front of their computers eagerly anticipating the events of the four Saudi women to appear on their screens, is then followed by the narrative.

After Qamara's wedding, her girlfriends added the small clay boxes on which the names of the bride and groom had been inscribed to the other souvenirs which they had received at the weddings of their companions. Each one wished that the souvenir of her own wedding would be added to the rest of the souvenirs, sooner rather than later, so she wouldn't die of self-pity (‘Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni‘, 22).

بعد زفاف قمرة، وضعت صديقاتها الجرار الفخارية الصغيرة التي نقش عليها أسماء العروسين كتذكارات إلى جانب التذكارات التي وزعت عليهن في أعراس زميلاتهن، وكل منهن تتمنى أن يضاف تذكارات زفافها إلى جانب بقية التذكارات عاجلاً غير آجل كي لا تموت بحسرتها (عبد الله الصانع، ٢٢).

The women

Qamara

Qamara's wedding takes place in chapter one. Here we learn the name of her husband Rāshid and become acquainted with her three friends Sadīm, Lamīs and Michelle. Qamara has been fostered in a strict tradition and her marriage has been arranged by the couple's families. Later on in the story, the reader learns of the negative outcome of this wedding. Eventually, it is revealed that Rāshid has a Japanese girlfriend named Carrie, residing in Indiana, the state in which he studied for his Master's degree. Eventually, Rāshid divorces Qamara in order to be with her.

Qamara is portrayed as the most conservative of the four women. When she learns that her story has been exposed through e-mail correspondence in a chat-room on the Internet, she is furious and threatens to cut off her contact with the author. Qamara, who is trying to establish herself as a caterer for weddings, is afraid that she will lose customers if it becomes known that she is one of the four women behind the stories which have been made public on the Internet.

Sadīm

Not long after Qamara's wedding, Sadīm is engaged to marry Walid. After the formal procedures have been completed, Walid is permitted to visit his bride-to-be and the first visit takes place on the evening after the engagement dinner. On this occasion, he presents Sadīm with a cellphone of the latest model on the market. Thereafter, a string of romantic conversations and long meetings in Sadīm's family home take place between the couple. These meetings increase in emotion and passion and one evening Sadīm wishes to receive her fiancé's full attention and to this end exposes her womanliness – *unūthatu-hā* –# to a higher degree than she has done before. The following morning, Walid leaves Sadīm, not to return to her any more. The engagement is broken off and Sadīm is left broken-hearted, not understanding why her fiancé has spurned her. This experience prompts her to study Freud in order to learn the psychological factors which led Walid to break up with her.

Sadīm recuperates from her sorrow by travelling to London and taking up temporary apprentice work in a branch of the HSBC bank there. In London, she becomes acquainted with the man of her dreams, a Saudi man named Farrās. This man epitomises the perfect gentleman: he is handsome, well-versed, polite and considerate and

adheres to what Sadīm considers to be a well-balanced and modern Muslim lifestyle. He has a Ph.D. in political science and holds an important position in the Saudi administration. This couple continue seeing each other after their return to Saudi Arabia. Sadīm and her girlfriends have no doubts that this couple will marry. But Sadīm's dreams are thwarted again. Farrās marries a woman who is compatible with his social position, a woman who has not been engaged prior to her marriage to him. Later, he realises that his passionate feelings for Sadīm have not faded. He offers to take her as his second wife. Sadīm declines the offer and disappointed and having lost her respect for men, settles for her cousin Ṭāriq. She feels no passion for him but, on the other hand, she is certain of his love for her.

Lamīs

Lamīs' story is one of success. She is as intelligent as she is slender and pretty and goes on to study medicine after secondary school. She takes advantage of the experiences of her girlfriends as well as her own relationship with 'Alī, the handsome brother of her Shi'ī friend Fāṭima.

Lamīs, both of whose parents are scientists, emerges as open-minded and without prejudices. We learn that she is certain that none of her girlfriends would pay any attention to whether her new best friend, Fāṭima, was "Shi'ī, Sunnī, Ṣūfī, Christian or even Jewish" ('Abd Allāh al-Ṣānī', 147).

In the end it, becomes apparent that social limits are not easily exceeded. The police arrest Lamīs and 'Alī while they are sitting in a café. Lamīs is released and returns to her family humiliated while 'Alī is treated severely by the authorities. She feels sorry for him and the narrator explains that Lamīs' thoughts about him were that "[H]e was a nice guy. Frankly, if he hadn't been Shi'ī, she would have fallen in love with him ('Abd Allāh al-Ṣānī', 161)."

In her final year in medical school, Lamīs becomes acquainted with Nizār. This man's gentleness, good manners and spontaneity attract her. However, her girlfriends' hastiness to get involved with the first man that appears on the scene and their bad luck in their relationships prompt her to set up a list of principles to safeguard her from behaving rashly.

I will never acknowledge my affection for him (if I fall in love with him) before he expresses his affection for me. I will never change my personality for his sake. I will never close my eyes to any indication of danger! I will never live in an illusion. If he doesn't express his affection for me before at the very most three months and inform me

clearly about the outcome of our relationship, I will end the relationship myself (‘Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni‘, 227).

لن أعترف له بحبي (إن أحببته) قبل أن يصرح هو لي بحبه لي أولاً. لن أغير نفسي من أجله. لن أغمض عيني عن أي مؤشر للخطر!! لن أعيش في وهم. إن لم يصرح لي بحبه خلال مدة أقصاها ثلاثة شهور ويخبرني بوضوح عن مصير علاقتنا، فسوف أنهى العلاقة بنفسني (عبد الله الصانع، ٢٢٧).

With guidelines such as these Lamīs, circumspectly takes up collegial companionship with Nizār.

As it turns out, Lamīs had not expected her strategy of patience and detachment to be so demanding. She decides to divert from its principles, should Nizār not come around and express his love for her when the third month is nearing its end. But Lamīs’ steadfastness is rewarded and she is united with her beloved Nizār, at their wedding on the fifth of the month of Shawwāl, in a very happy marriage.

Michelle

Mashā’il al-‘Abd al-Raḥmān, who is called Michelle, joined the group of three in the intermediate level of school. Her mother is American and her father a prominent Saudi business man. She has lived with her family and studied in the United States of America. Her Arabic is not good enough to follow the written narrative of the stories of the four girls on the web. She had wished to continue her studies in America, but her paternal aunts have impressed on her father that if she were allowed to study by herself abroad, people would begin to spread negative rumours about her. This would make it impossible to find a husband for her when she returns to Saudi Arabia, they told him. On account of this, the whole family has now moved back to Saudi Arabia.

In Riad, Michelle falls in love with Fayṣal, who also returns her feelings. When Fayṣal tries to open a conversation with his mother about his attachment to Michelle, she immediately closes any discussion about the possibility of her son’s betrothal to a girl whose mother is American. She feigns a heart attack and lets her miserable son Fayṣal weep helplessly at her feet. So, Fayṣal wept over the loss of his beloved “Michelle, who had the beauty of the Najd and an American personality, and who would never become his (‘Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni‘, 111).”

Outraged by the norms of Saudi society and injured by Fayṣal’s and his mother’s behaviour towards her, Michelle persuades her fa-

ther to let her study in San Francisco, where she has maternal cousins. Michelle gets over her sorrow at losing Fayṣal. But her close friendship with her American cousin Matti and later, while working at a television station in Dubai, her warm friendship with a colleague there cannot compare with the emotions she once had for Fayṣal.

Between speech and writing

When American novelists began using *skaz*, designating a type of first-person narration that has the characteristics of the spoken rather than the written word, this was one way to free themselves from the inherited literary traditions of England and Europe. Mark Twain set an example by uniting a vernacular colloquial style with a naive, immature narrator, an adolescent boy whose vision of the adult world had freshness and honesty. Later, this narrative style, giving an illusion of speech rather than writing, was carried on by J. D. Salinger (Lodge, 18–19).

The narrator of *Banāt al-Riyād* fits her story into the structural frame of an e-mail. She addresses her readers in writing on the computer screen. However, e-mail correspondence has blurred the borderline between speech and text because it combines features from telephone communication with those of letter writing (Mogren, 1).

Some stylistic features of *Banāt al-Riyād* call to mind a more relaxed presentation than that which we normally would expect in a piece of Arabic literature. Consider the following lines from a correspondence in which the narrator responds to a reader who is trying to guess whether the narrator herself is one of the four girls whose stories are being told. This reader guesses that the narrator cannot be Michelle, since her English would not be good enough to match Michelle's competence in English. To this the narrator responds:

Really, accusations come while you're asleep. Yū get akyūzd wāyl yūr aslīb! So you won't say that I don't know English. What really made me laugh was the e-mail from Haytham from Medina in which he criticises me for being biased for the "Bedouin" girls of Riad and neglecting Tamīs' character, I mean Lamīs', the Mazola sweetie... Come on, don't get mad with us, our Abu Haytham, our honey: "Abu Haytham Honey...". What d'you want us to do, Abu Hayāthim? Bedouin! ('Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni', 45).

صحيح تجيك التهائم وأنت نايم! يو وقت أكيوزد وايل يور أسليب! حتى لا تقولوا إنني لا أعرف إنكليزي. ما أضحكني فعلا هو إيميل من هيثم من

المدينة المنورة ينتقدني فيه لتعصبي لبنات الرياض «البدو» وإهمالي
 لشخصية تميم، أعني لميس، حبيبة القلب مازولا ... بس لا تزعل علينا يا
 أبو هيثم يا غسل: «أبو هيثم غسل...». وش نسوي يا أبو الهيثم؟ بدو!
 (عبد الله الصانع، ٤٥).

By scattering dialect items and non-Arabic terms, especially English and French idioms and expressions throughout the text, the narrator strengthens the illusion that we are participating in an informal “kitchen-table” discourse with intimate friends rather than being confronted with a fictional, literary text.

The narrator sets the tone of the first chapter by introducing her story with a poem composed by herself and making mention of Nizār Qabbānī.

You spoke the truth, you did, Nizār Qabbānī, may you rest in peace,
 «may yū rist in bis» (‘Abd Allāh al-Ṣānī^٤, 12).

صح لسانك يا نزار يا قباني. رحمك الله «مي يو ريست إن بيس» (عبد الله
 الصانع، ١٢).

Michelle does not think highly of some of the girls from the rural areas outside of Riad who have joined the college where she and her friends are studying. To her mind they are unsophisticated, and she is especially critical of Lamis’ interest in these girls.

She gets acquainted with the most unlucky of these girls to make her beautiful, cultivated and sophisticated. She gives her a “kūmblit mayk ūfer”... (‘Abd Allāh al-Ṣānī^٤, 55).

تعرف إلى أقل الفتيات حظاً لتبدأ معها رحلة التجميل والتثقيف والتطوير.
 تعطيها «كومبلت ميك أوفر»... (عبد الله الصانع، ٥٥).

A magnificent Valentine’s day celebration with exquisite gifts from the boys to the girls causes a “scandal” at the college. Many of the gifts are confiscated by the management and the girls who dressed up in red or wore red accessories have to promise not to repeat this behaviour.

... and it became “a scandal”! Many of the gifts were confiscated and the girls who had worn red dresses or red iksaswārāt [accessories]

had to sign an agreement not to repeat this act the next year (‘Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni‘, 71).

وصارت «فضائح!» وتمت مصادرة العديد من الهدايا، ووقعت الطالبات اللواتي ارتدين ثيابا أو إكسسوارات حمراء تعهدات بعدم تكرار هذا الفعل في السنة ... القادمة (عبد الله الصانع، ٧١).

After Sadīm’s disappointing experience with Walid, she travels to London to spend the summer working at one of the branches of the HSBC bank there.

Before the aeroplane landed in Heathrow airport, Sadīm headed towards the lavatory. She pulled off her ‘*abā’a* and the cover over her hair, exposing a well-proportioned figure fitted into a pair of tight jeans and T-shirt and a face with innocent features, highlighted with a light rouge, a “*blāsher*”, a bit of mascara and a stroke of shining “*lib-glūs*” on the lips (‘Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni‘, 73).

قبل هبوط الطائرة في مطار هيثرو، توجهت سديم نحو حمام الطائرة وقامت بنزع عباؤها وغطاء شعرها لتكشف عن جسم متناسق يلفه الجينز والتي شيرت الضيقان، ووجه بريء التقاطيع تزينه حمرة الخدود الخفيفة «البلاشر» وقليل من الماسكارا ومسحة من ملمع «لب قلوبس» للشفاه (عبد الله الصانع، ٧٣).

Throughout, the narrator makes use of the English term “e-mail” in the singular and in the plural.

We are still at the beginning, dear ones. If you begin waging war against me in my fifth *e-mail*, what are you going to say about me after having read the *coming e-mail letters* [my italics] (‘Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni‘, 36)?!

ما زلنا في البداية يا أحباب. إذا بدأت الحرب علي في الإيميل الخامس، فماذا ستقولون عني بعد قراءة الإيميلات القادمة؟! (عبد الله الصانع، ٣٦).

A lot of *e-mail* letters come to me full of intimidations and threats: “By God, we’re going to put you to shame the way you’ve put us to shame! We know who you really are!...” [my italics] (‘Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni‘, 128).

إيميلات كثيرة تصلني مليئة بالتهديد والوعيد «والله لنفضحك مثل ما فضحتينا! حنا عارفينك أصلا! ...» (عبد الله الصانع، ١٢٨).

Sometimes a statement or phrase is presented in English with Latin script, as in this example. After her unsettling experience with Fayṣal, Michelle goes to a therapist in order to recover from her sadness and feelings of inferiority.

There wasn't a *shizlūnj* [chaiselongue] for her to stretch out on to let go of the reins of her tongue, mind and heart. The doctor seemed aloof while treating her and was never able to answer her sad question, which would remain unanswered for the rest of her life: *what more could I've done or said to make him stay* (sic) [my italics] ('Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni', 130)?

لم يكن هناك شيزلونج لتتمدد عليه وتطلق لسانها وعقلها وقلبها العنان. بدأ الدكتور متحفظاً في تعاطيه معها ولم يتمكن من إجابة السؤال الحزين الذي ستظل إجابته مخبأة عنها بقية العمر: *what more could I've done or said to make him stay?* (عبد الله الصانع، ١٣٠).

Discussion and conclusion

The early epistolary novels by Englishwomen in the Western literary tradition usually hinted at resentment and depression about the female situation, and their plots suggested the vexation with which women internalised social norms. They usually also implicitly accepted the situation as inevitable. However, we also find that the epistolary novel enabled women to exercise agency in the act of writing letters since its pseudo-documentary method and structure, similar to certain soap-operas on television today, gave the writer an unprecedented power over their readers (Meyer Spacks, in Goldsmith, 64).

Considering that *Banāt al-Riyād* has been reprinted at least three times between 2005 and 2006, this novel may well have stirred the readership of Saudi Arabian society not familiar with the novelistic pseudo-realistic exposure of family matters. In the context of modern literature written by Saudi women, this book is all the more remarkable for its openness. Its touchstones are (1) the problem of the lack of female power, (2) the problem of feeling and (3) writing on the Internet as action.

Although this novel, similar to early Western epistolary novels, hints at resentment and dejection about the female situation, the four women, in their own ways, exercise agency. They illustrate women empowered to make their own vital choices in life, such as choosing their husbands and careers. Veiled reactions to the limited power and

freedom of movement which most Saudi women are obliged to settle for are expressed through the e-mail and chat-room medium provided by Yahoo on the Internet.

For instance, questioning the value of sincerity and envisioning a female character capable of play and of mastery through play are expressed in Lamīs' scheme to get Nizār. And Sadīm, wise from her earlier experiences, chooses a man who loves her and gives her freedom of movement although she is approached by Farrās, a man whom she loves but who will only have her on his own conditions.

As far as Qamara is concerned, she will not accept that her husband, Rāshid, has a mistress. Despite the fact that she holds on to traditional norms, something which increases the humiliation and sense of failure she must have felt at getting divorced, she decides to stand on her own feet with the help of her family and sets up a catering business.

Michelle, the girl who combines Saudi and Western/American culture, cannot get the Saudi man whom she loves and does not settle for the American cousin who loves her. Her fate opens a discussion on the problem of acceptance between cultures and societies. Michelle completes her education in the field of communication and embarks on a career as a television anchor at a television station in Dubai. Whether she marries or not is a question left unanswered.

Rajā' 'Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni' gives us an illusion of neglecting the high standards of form and linguistic style which is usually demanded in serious Arabic literary production. This comes as a result of the fact that e-mail correspondence has problematised our concept of letter-writing: it stands in between or combines letter-writing and telephone conversations and a style of its own has yet to be crystallised. The author is able to create an intimate atmosphere by using the possibilities offered by modern information technology in the form of e-mail correspondence in Internet chat-rooms. A linguistic style adapted to a kind of "kitchen-table" story-telling for individuals sitting in front of their computer screens evolves. And the illusion of using a narrative style that seems to be more faithful to actual speech than is usual in Arabic literature creates a powerful effect of authenticity and sincerity, of "truth-telling".

In summary, we suggest that the possibilities of female power reversal of fictional patterns may portray conceivable social reversals. Rajā' 'Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni's act of writing the stories of the four girls and publishing them on the Internet realises the possibility of a women exercising agency in Saudi society in an unexpected way. Of course, her influence is also restricted; with the same measure that she opens up the closed family circles of the characters to the public eye, she also exposes herself to criticism from her society. This cri-

tique is reinforced by two factors: her own female gender and the female gender of the characters whose lives are exposed in the e-mail correspondence.

Numerous Arab women authors such as Nawal El Saadawi in Egypt and Assia Djebar in Algeria have used their writing ability to establish themselves as subjects, to make their voices heard, ultimately aiming to change women's circumstances. Likewise, Rajā' 'Abd Allāh al-Ṣāni' from Saudi Arabia has taken advantage of her ability to use the computer and get on-line in a Yahoo chat-room to speak up.

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