

**Women Empowerment in Saudi Arabia:
Substance and Contradiction**

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Declaration

I, Srirupa Mukherjee, do hereby declare that my M.Phil Dissertation work “Women Empowerment in Saudi Arabia: Substance and Contradiction” is a Bonafide work of mine and has not been submitted partially or fully for any other Degree or Diploma course till date.

Signature of the
researcher

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CONTENTS

1	Introduction	1-9
2	Status and condition of women in Saudi Arabia	10-29
3	Literature on the status and condition of women in Saudi Arabia	30-53
4	Islam and Women's position in Saudi Arabia	54-71
5	Impact of reforms initiated by Mohammed Bin Salman	72-92
6	Conclusion	93-97
7	Bibliography	98-106

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The most conservative religious orthodoxies of the Middle East, Saudi Arabia has secured an all-time high rank with regard to gender discrimination in the country. The state' institutionalized patriarchal norms and practices have granted women in the country a highly unequal status compared to the male members of the country. The state has given women of the country a fixed image as responsible mothers, daughters, and wives, whose sole duty lays in maintaining the purity of the nation. Women suffer exploitation in social, economic, and religious spheres through the imposition of religious norms and cultural traditions that restrict them to search their own identity behind the generalized image given by the State. Women have been the victims of political agendas that drive the state to look upon the issue of gender inequality as an instrument to serve their own interests.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman announced a national transformation project to structurally overhaul the Saudi State. His "Vision 2030" project included a series of reforms for relaxing some of the restrictions on women and thus ensured them to stand on an equal footing with men in gaining employment opportunities. His vision included sweeping changes in social and cultural spheres like allowing women to take part in cultural programmes including music concerts, and also permission to enter movie halls and soccer auditoriums. The ban on women's right to drive vehicles has

also been lifted as a part of the reform agenda. This reform drive emphasized on women's role in contributing to the economic sector and provided equal opportunities to women so that they can develop their talents and contribute to the productive capacity of the country.

Now, the question remains as to how far these reforms and minor changes can lead to gender equality in a country where women's basic right to voice their own opinion are severely repressed. Their lack of freedom with regard to speech and mobility has denied them any existence of their own individual identity. In such a situation, a limited number of reforms can barely cause any difference in the overall status of women in the country. But, the response to the reforms initiated by Prince Salman has been overwhelming on the part of the women of the country. Therefore, it becomes extremely important in this context, where women have remained the marginalized section of the society and experienced religious, cultural and economic barriers to improving their condition, to look for the change, if at all change is taking place and in what ways is the change impacting on women's condition and status in the country. The study aims to bring into light the contradiction that surrounds the much-hyped agenda of uplifting women through Prince Salman's reform drive. It seeks to find out what remains underneath the Prince's agenda of introducing liberal reforms for women in the country.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Equality between the sexes is a legitimate demand which is nonexistent until now in Saudi Arabia. Treatment of women as inferior to men and suitable only in maintaining a role of 'virtuosity' to pass on their values and morality to the next generation and ingrain in them religious values and traditions is continuing for decades. The State co-opted religious nationalism in its nation-

building project, which has played a major role in discriminating between men and women on the basis of gender. But, with the introduction of the 'Vision2030' project, the changing role of the state towards empowerment of women has come up in a significant way in this orthodox nation. The stereotypical image of women as protectors of Islamic tradition has given the State a homogeneous force to reinscribe the patterns of authoritarian rule among the members of the country. Thus, the existence of the reforms has apparently made women in the country to change their understanding of the State. Women have started believing in the intentions of the State which is now prepared to give them a role in engaging in economic activities.

This change in the discourse of the State from conservative to modernist has immense significance in a country whose violation of human rights remains at an all-time high. The socio-religious-cultural dimensions need to be explored to ascertain the strategy of the State behind this transformation and for this, a thorough understanding of the roots of such developments is needed to analyze the historical transformations Saudi Arabia has undergone. With regard to women's status in the country, the State has followed the religious norms, which is enmeshed in contradictions. On one hand, the sole guidance of the religion, Quran has talked in favour of giving women their right to acquire knowledge, on the other hand, the strict religious norms of sex segregation and the male guardianship system has made it extremely difficult for women to hold respectable position in society, on an equal footing with men in terms of gaining education and employment opportunities. From the social to the political and economic spheres, women have met with extreme forms of exclusion in a country which gives women high regards for preserving their noble status in the country. The reality is that women in Saudi Arabia are in dire need for recognition as individuals and not burdened by the status imposed on them by the state. Therefore, it becomes all the more significant to find out the strategy of the state to liberate women with a vast

array of reforms, which has, so far only utilized gender as a political leverage to ensure its own legitimacy across the world.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The review of literature seeks to explore the avenues which might prove useful in the development of the rationale of the present study. Because of the contemporary nature of the research undertaken, the availability of literature is less on this particular topic. The study mainly focused on the areas which seek to unravel women's actual condition in Saudi society. The nature of women's exploitation and the political repercussions it generates has been portrayed with the help of the emerging feminist discourse on women's status in Saudi Arabia. Madawi Al- Rasheed's book "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia" helped to explore the historical process the state went through to gain an idea regarding the treatment of women before the emergence of Saudi Arabia as a contemporary nation-state. The book has also focused on the interconnection between religion, politics, and society which the state consolidates to perpetuate women's condition in the country. Also, Saddeka Arabi's "Women and Words in Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Literary Discourse" expresses the use of literature by contemporary Saudi writers to reveal the rules of cultural discourse that confirms women's subordination in Saudi society. Manal Al- Sharif's book "Daring to Drive" unveils the blatant reality that helps to discover women's subjugation in the society and made her in the process a women's rights activist. Jean P. Sassoon's "Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia" provides rich insights on the differential treatment between men and women in the Saudi Kingdom, and eventually tries to explore how even Saudi princesses are not spared from the misogyny that the Kingdom practices in everyday lives. These literary pieces provided valuable insight on women's status and

condition covering the historical periods to the contemporary era. The book “Human Rights in Islam: The case of Saudi Arabia” by Prashant Kumar Pradhan has been immensely helpful in discovering the tenets of Quran and the tendency among the religious authorities in enforcing cultural norms in women by interpreting Islam. Another book, “Feminist Voices of the Middle East A Study of 21st-century Female Writers” by Bharati Karnik has invoked deep concerns about the status of women through feminist voices emerging in the country. The reflections of reality in the writings of these feminist novelists have immense significance in assessing the condition of women in Saudi Arabia.

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation is in the nature of qualitative research. The study requires historical interpretations, observation and in-depth analysis of the status and condition of women, which is an area of historical knowledge. Extensive use of secondary sources, including books, journal articles, feminist literature and publications on the internet has enriched the study. It has not been possible to draw on interviews of Saudi women even through email or skype given the multiple restrictions which are in place. As such the dissertation is based on a few government and international agency reports from primary sources and rich secondary sources centered on analysis and interpretation.

CHAPTERISATION

FIRST CHAPTER: INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the topic of the dissertation combining all the significant areas of the study. The chapter outlines the objective of the study to assess the significance of the research work. It directs attention to include the literature review which constitutes a vital aspect of the study, focusing on the literature that helps in gaining a clear perception regarding the study and then elaborates the methodology used in the dissertation. Lastly, it introduces a brief summarization of the chapters to gain an understanding of the topic of the dissertation.

SECOND CHAPTER: STATUS AND CONDITION OF WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA

The chapter, 'Status and Condition of Women in Saudi Arabia' focuses on finding the implications of the historical transformation of the State on women and how the factors of politics, religion, and society are entangled with one another, enforcing restrictions for women in turn. The state has played a pivotal role in institutionalizing the conception of gender through constant bargaining with the religious forces in society. By politicizing the theme of Women's empowerment since the establishment of the contemporary state in the 1930s, the state has guaranteed its authoritative image in and across Saudi Arabia. It connects the events which urge the state to look for women's emancipation propaganda, with the historical periods so as to reveal the state's attempts on ensuring its legitimacy through the mechanism of women's empowerment and lastly, it expresses the events of the contemporary era to draw attention on the recurrence of the state's project to politicize gender.

THIRD CHAPTER: LITERATURE ON THE STATUS AND CONDITION OF WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA

The chapter, 'Literature on the Status and Condition of Women in Saudi Arabia' focuses on the female voices who use literature as a medium to express women's grievances, their aspirations, and desires. Women in Saudi Arabia lead their lives in the fear of indignant torture and exclusion by the male members of society. The literary pieces, combining both fiction and non-fiction genres try to portray the reality which remains hidden under the veil society imposed upon them. The female voices want to make people aware of the corruption and malpractices with which the Saudi authorities indulge with regard to its treatment of women. Thus, to expose the harsh reality of an authoritarian state, they seek to take refuge in literature, as the best weapon to criticize the societal norms and the influence of religion in women's lives, without having the fear of expulsion from the country. Their writings also invoke cosmopolitan fantasy in which the characters of the novelists immersed themselves, only with the aim to break the patriarchal norms of society which restrain their urge to seek their own individuality. These literary fictions help to ascertain the status of women in the country from the twentieth century to modern times.

FOURTH CHAPTER: ISLAM AND WOMEN'S POSITION IN SAUDI ARABIA

The fourth chapter 'Islam and Women's Position in Saudi Arabia' has explored the multiple barriers of society in the name of religious norms, customs, and traditions which act as a barrier to women's emancipation in the

country. The influence of the religious authorities in interpreting the Holy Quran and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad has restricted women's role in the private sphere as housewives, mothers, and daughters. Venturing out in the public domain for gaining their rights and position in the society has been strictly criticized, which resulted in the enforcement of the male guardianship and the sex segregation system. Gender equality has never been supported in Saudi Arabia, and through minor changes till now, though the State has attempted to create a balance in the situation, the religious authorities have always remained rigid in their stance towards women, The Quran mentions the right of the women to acquire knowledge, but the restrictions upon women in terms of their mobility and appearance, through the veil system ensure discrimination with regard to their rights in the country. Therefore, this chapter seeks to reveal the contradictions in the Islamic law which on one hand talks about treating women equally, treating mothers and daughters of the country with great respect and care, and on the other hand justifies the social ills of the country, polygamy and thus ensures subordination of women in this male-dominated society.

FIFTH CHAPTER: IMPACT OF REFORMS INITIATED BY PRINCE MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN

The final chapter discusses Prince Salman's emphasis on transforming Saudi Arabia through his vision towards increasing the participation of women in the workforce. Gender equality has been on the talks as the reforms relax some of the cultural norms that deny the presence of women in the public sphere. However, the focus of the reforms in ensuring women's employment opportunities reveals that it is the need of the hour to engage women in the economic sectors as the Saudi state wants to direct its attention to the post-oil economy. Therefore, how far these reforms can contribute to changing

women's inferior status ingrained in the socio-cultural system is the focus of the chapter. Gender issues have always been looked upon for positive action when the state wants to ensure its legitimacy in the world. This new set of reforms are merely a recurrence of the state's attempt to politicize gender to seek its own agendas, or in this situation, revitalizing the country's economy with women's participation in the context of falling oil prices has been the main intention on the part of the state to engage women in the country's workforce. The implementation of these reforms also poses certain challenges to bring gender equality in the authoritative country of Saudi Arabia needs vast structural changes and the country has remained silent in allowing these structural changes. Even, Mohammad Bin Salman has deliberately aimed to execute those who talked against the repressive norms of the country. This makes it clear that the Saudi state is still not allowing anyone to challenge the authority of the state, and thus gender equality in such a situation remains an unrealistic proposition.

Chapter 2

STATUS AND CONDITION OF WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Saudi Arabia has been regarded as one of the most sex-segregated countries which continue to discriminate men and women on the basis of gender to date. According to the global gender report of 2018, it ranked 141 among 149 countries of the world.¹ Saudi Arabia's characterization of women involved a lot of generalizations regarding women, giving them the responsibility towards making it a pious nation in the world. The fixed image of women as the housewives, mothers or daughters, entitled to become the symbol of purity has to be explored by taking into account the historical developments which molded Saudi Arabia's exclusionist view towards women of the country. Saudi women's subordination in the political, economic and social sphere involved the diversity of factors deemed important for the analysis of the status of women in Saudi Arabia.

Effect Of The Transformation Of The Religious State On Women:

The Saudi state, with the changing and evolving political context and agendas of historical periods, has utilized the religious revival movement's transformation into Wahhabi religious nationalism project, which eventually shaped the contemporary status of women in Saudi Arabia. In the eighteenth century, Wahhabiyya emerged as a religious revivalist movement, with an

¹“ The Global Gender Gap Report 2018”, Accessed on 2 December ,
https://www3.weforum.org>WEF_WEF_GGGR_2018

objective of the cleansing of faith from impurities and a return to authentic Islam.² From the very beginning, it entangled itself with the project of enforcing Islamic law through the application of the doctrine of commanding right and forbidding wrong.³ Central to this project was the status and rights of women, their religious duty and ritual practices. Women were seen as important pillars for the return to an authentic religious tradition among a stable community. The first Saudi Wahhabi state emphasized the centrality of two female characters who were binary opposites, the Al-uyayna adulteress who threatened the Islamic state and the Deriyya pious sympathizer, who promoted morality and piety.⁴ Thus, the state contributed in its own way in constructing gender roles, establishing a clear separation between two opposite patterns, approving the promotion of morality in one hand and strongly negating the other for spreading tawhid and fighting blasphemy. The Saudi polity of the eighteenth century reflected the concern and interests of a sedentary society that was plagued by internal dissent and fragmentation. Wahhabi ideology, therefore, played a pivotal role in uniting the state. Following the Egyptian invasion in 1818, in the nineteenth century, the weak state made a vigorous attempt for ‘officialization’ of commanding right and forbidding wrong to ensure that the doctrine is respected and supported.⁵ The strategy was to gain legitimacy at a time when warfare against religious innovators could not be carried out. The Saudi state in the twentieth century coopted the historical legacy of Wahhabiyya and witnessed its transformation into Wahhabi religious nationalism. It necessitated the exclusion of Saudi women by virtue of its universalist and homogenizing rhetoric, giving women a fixed role as to maintaining the purity of the pious nation, so as to portray it

² Doumato, Abdella Eleanor(2000) “ *Getting God’s Ear: Women, Islam and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf*”, New York: Columbia University Press.

³ Cook, Michael(2002), “ Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought” , Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴ Al-Rasheed, Madawi(2002), “ A History of Saudi Arabia”, New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Cook, Michael(2000), “ Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought”, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

as a form of unity in the absence of Saudi or anti-colonial nationalism. The modern state's institutionalization of the perceptions of gender rendered the subordination of women in Saudi society inevitable.

Treatment of Contemporary Saudi state towards Women:

The establishment of the contemporary Saudi state, three decades after the conquest of Riyadh in 1902 prompted the Saudi leadership to use the doctrine of forbidding wrong as a mechanism that ensured the emergence of a unified high culture based on common religious practice, rituals and law. Reference to women's appropriate behavior and its role as a portrayal of dignity and righteousness continued to occupy a crucial space for state consolidation. In around 1902, Abd al-Aziz ibn Saud, the ruler of Saudi Arabia attached importance in constructing gender as an integral part of the political unification of Saudi Arabia, the role played by women or in this case the new ruler Abd al-Aziz ibn Rashid's representative Ajlanibn Muhammad's wife, who supported and contributed to the success of the capture of Riyadh by providing necessary information, deemed important for the state.⁶ Thus, the foundation of Saudi Arabia has been linked with the celebration of women who served as exemplary figures, supporting the monarch and encouraging him to help in achieving its desired objectives. Another name in this regard was of the ruler Ibn Saud's sister Nura, who later became a source of support and courage for embarking on the journey to reestablish their family's rule over Saudi Arabia after the family's exile in Kuwait following defeat in 1891.⁷ The Saudi Kingdom glorified those women who turned to be the role models for the next generation to create such devoted, women who value their

⁶ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2004), "Political Legitimacy and the Production of History: The Case of Saudi Arabia" in Lenore Martin(ed.), New Frontiers in Middle East Security, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999,.

wisdom and sacrifice for making women the symbol of morality in the whole nation. Women, who do not match these criteria were strictly controlled and manipulated to bring them into the fold of religious nationalism project of the State. However, women were treated as an auxiliary force who were cherished in times of exile, displacement, rivalry, and political strategies, as the virtuous women confirm the state's vision of women.

Modern Saudi State of 1932 and its Women:

The foundation of the modern Saudi State of 1932, following the struggle between two foreign powers, the Ottomans and the British, on the eve of the First World War, witnessed the lack of 'national culture' because of the political and cultural fragmentation of primordial identities.⁸ Thus, the Saudi state transformed the eighteenth-century Wahhabi religious revival into religious nationalism, in order to homogenize religion against cultural diversity and fragmentation. It also provided the justification of the emerging state in the name of promoting the ethos of a Muslim nation. The modern state regarded the conquest leading to political centralization as a masculine affair, therefore, focused on the role of men in combining chivalry, diplomacy, and piety to bring about a historic break from the age of blasphemy, religious fragmentation, and cultural diversity.⁹ Women were accorded with special significance in the project of nation building, considered as a pillar for upholding morality and virtue, as prescribed by the doctrine of Wahhabi religious nationalism. Women were denied space in the public sphere. It reflected that the newly emerging Islamic state articulated gender roles suitable for the purity of the emerging political and religious community. The national narrative of the state propagated contradictory images of women as it

⁸ Anderson, Benedict(2006), "Imagined Communities", New York: Verso.

⁹ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

constructed both acceptable and rejected gender roles.¹⁰ While on one hand, the state concentrated on the perpetuation of a social order in which pious women were celebrated, on the other hand, women who were believed to threaten its integrity and morality were subject to control, and subjugation under the State's religious nationalism propaganda. Gender relations and the status of women in Saudi Arabia became hostages to the political project of the state to ensure its legitimacy through the mechanism of religious nationalism. Women were clearly the victims in the hands of two powerful institutions, the state, and the religious nationalism, in the twentieth century. The changing dynamics between state politics and universal religious nationalism continued to haunt Saudi women in the decades that followed the establishment of the modern state. Women were integrated as fundamental symbols in this fusion of religion and nation.¹¹

Influence of Religion on Women's Education:

Since the 1930s, the priesthood of Saudi religious nationalism was not only preoccupied with women's public morality but also with their private purity, ritual performance and religious compliance with prescribed Islamic teachings and preaching. Religious education in schools and in media forums has ensured that even in the intimate confines of home and family, the state's vision gets prioritized. This informal schooling for both the sexes at first took place in the Kuttab, a class of Quran recitation for children, which was usually attached to the local mosque. The teaching for girls also took place in private tutorials, which usually occurred in the homes of professional female Quran

¹⁰ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(1997), " Politics in an Arabian oasis", London: I.B Tauris.

¹¹ Altorki, Soraya(1986), " Women in Saudi Arabia: Ideology and Behavior among the Elite", New York: Cambridge University Press.

readers.¹² This religious teaching mainly focused on praying and following the rules of behavior of the Muslim community, thus involving memorization and not necessarily reading. Education for girls stopped at puberty, “when strict seclusion at home began and veiling in public became mandatory”¹³. Several writers, journalist, and poets called for educating the girls in their books, including the Hijazi writers, Muhammad Awad, and Ahmad Sibai, who expressed in their essay the need for women’s individual identity and the necessity to be educated.¹⁴ But it was not before the state’s education narrative to project itself as an agent of modernization, that the need got recognized. To be able to project itself as a progressive and modern development agency, the state indulged in the sphere of education of girls amidst fierce social and religious opposition. Thus, to resolve the contradiction, the state introduced Girls’ state schools in the 1960s and put the institution under the control of a separate body, supervised by the highest religious authority, Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Ibrahim.¹⁵ It needs to be mentioned that earlier Saudi Arabia created a Ministry of Education in 1954, headed by Prince Fahad, but the ministry was not concerned with the education of girls. Also, the initiative of opening the General Presidency for Girls’ Education in supervising the schools, teachers and the curriculum, only ensured the enrollment of 2 percent of girls at that time.¹⁶ The shift from holding onto tradition and religious values with regard to women to being keen to be seen as a champion of development and modernity has been carefully orchestrated under the slogan of remaining faithful to Islamic principles. The state clearly declared that ‘the purpose of educating a girl is to bring her up in a proper Islamic way so as to

¹² Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2002), “ A History of Saudi Arabia; Gender, Politics and Religion n Saudi Arabia”, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹³Altorki, Soraya(1986), “ Women in Saudi Arabia: Ideology and Behavior among the Elite ”, New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁴ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), “ A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia ”, New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁵ Haya Saad and Simmons, Cyril(1991), “ The Education of Women in Saudi Arabia ”, Comparative Education, Vol. No .27(3), pp.141-150

¹⁶ Ibid.

perform her duty in life, be an ideal and successful housewife and a good mother, ready to do jobs suitable to her nature such as teaching, nursing, and medical treatment.¹⁷ Saudi state actually tried to reconcile women's role as the reproducers of the pious nation by combining development with the religious nationalism, by giving religious scholars complete control over girls' education. The difference in the curriculum content of both boys and girls only ensured the gender differences further. Thus, the Saudi state's motive to establish itself as an agent of modernization revealed how the state used women's education to glorify its image in and across the nation, rather than showing signs of real development in this regard. Though the beginning of girls' education has been attributed to the contribution of King Saud, and later King Faisal and his wife Iffat, they have also in a way contributed to view women's education as an agenda to win the political battle between the two Saudi brothers over the throne in the 1960s.¹⁸

Oil Boom And Its Effect On Saudi Women

In the 1970s, after a decade of the beginning of girls' education, the literacy rate of men being 15 percent and that of women being 2 percent is indicative of the fact that girls' education rarely had any effect in changing the status of women in Saudi Arabia.¹⁹ The oil boom in the 1970's the country's vast oil wealth significantly altered the dimensions of State's approach towards women. As the exposure of oil wealth gave Saudi men, the opportunity to acquire education abroad, state and the religious authorities perceived this as a threat of men undermining the purity of the nation by marrying out. This phenomenon increased among both the elite and the lower classes of the cities,

¹⁷ Alsuwaida, Nouf(2016), " Women's Education in Saudi Arabia ", Journal of International Education Research, Vol. No. 12(4), pp. 111-118.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Hamdan, Amani(2005), "Women and Education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and achievements", International Education Journal, Vol. No.6(1),pp.42-64.

reflecting changes associated with the new oil economy and its impact on social life. Thus, educating women became a necessity to prevent the moral corruption of the nation. Oil wealth also brought about a serious increase in the amount of dowry that men paid to acquire a Saudi wife. Consequently, men who could not afford the huge cost of weddings preferred to marry outside as in other Arab countries, such as Yemen, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria.²⁰ Seeing the visible danger of the country, the religious authorities modified the range of dowry, so as to protect the women's honor from remaining unmarried, which leads to moral degradation, thus looked after by the religious authorities. This shows how the religious authorities concern remains the prevention of any threat towards the basic pillar of national purity, namely women, and not the improvement in the status of women in any way. Even, the emergence of the oil industry, yielded a drop in the proportion of women in the labor force, as it perceived it as the male domain, thus inhibiting women's economic participation in the society to a great extent.²¹ Apart from working in the educational sector, women's employment opportunities were reduced drastically. Women's exclusion from this emerging but dominant economic sector reveals the state's intention to treat women as the marginalized section of the society. As there was no urgent need for women to participate in the economy of the society, and also lesser opportunities to work in the educational domain and with the minimum salary offered to them, women began to concentrate in managing the domestic affairs. Thus, paying attention to all the needs of their husband in order to give them a comfortable home, women gladly took the title of domesticated women in need of the protection of their honor by the breadwinner of the family.²² Even, this showed how the patriarchal structure of the society succeeded in making

²⁰ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

²¹ Baki, Roula(2004), "Gender segregated Education in Saudi Arabia: It's impact on Social norms and the Saudi labour market", Education Policy Analysis Archives, Vol. No.12(28), pp.1-12.

²² Hamdan, Amani(2005), "Women and education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and achievements", International Education Journal, Vol. No.6(1), pp.42-64.

women dependent upon the hired domestic workers, hired by their elite husbands to handle the household work. Women's role became limited to a good housewife, a supervisor of the household works, and a good companion. Therefore, the combination of education, new wealth and imported domestic labour contributed to the creation of a class of educated but unemployed Saudi women. Though the state had to educate women to maintain women's purity, it excluded women from contributing to the emerging economic sector, thus confirming their subordination in the patriarchal structure of Saudi society. Another factor has to be brought in light, which portrayed the control of religious authorities over women to a large extent. After the oil boom of the 1970s, women were beginning to be seen more in public spaces as a result of their education, making them seek alternate roles in public space. Unfortunately, it made them hostage to abuse in public space. The subjugation of women by men took an extreme form with the monitoring of female conduct by the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.²³ It consisted of the *mutawwa* or religious police who took upon themselves the duty of chastising men and women in the streets, urging them to conform to acceptable styles of dress and behaviour.²⁴ Through its religious vigilantes and police force, the state took it upon itself to assume a paternal role, in the name of guarding women's honour, which ultimately imposed restrictions on them and expanded men's control over their minute activities.²⁵ This portrayed how on one hand the state successfully constructed its image of educator, on the other, it remained faithful to religious principles. In times of rapid social change with the oil boom, the religious authorities ensured women's exclusion from the economic domain, while monitoring strict control over their conduct in the public sphere.

²³ Ross, Michael(2008), "Oil, Islam and Women", American Political Science Review, Vol No.102(1), pp. 107-123.

²⁴ Mutawwa- Religious police in Saudi Arabia whose duty is to ensure strict adherence to Sharia' law, notably in application to public conduct and dress.

²⁵ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

Effect Of Mecca Mosque Crisis On Saudi Wome

The Mecca Mosque siege of 1979 brought the religious establishment and the state closer, to face the immediate crisis of the country. The state aimed to create a strict moral order after being threatened by the alleged ‘moral corruption’ of the nation by the internal Islamist forces of the state. Therefore, it gave an upper hand to the religious scholars to regulate decisions on matters related to women, their public presence, and marriage. The religious authorities issued *fatwas*, to quote from the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet, in order to monitor women’s conduct in a traditionally male-dominated space.²⁶ It dealt with matters related to all things feminine. By controlling women’s behavior in society the state tried to balance the political situation causing a threat to its legitimacy across the world. Thus, the state’s determination to project itself as the fundamentalist Islamic state made women hostage to its political project and ensured their subordination in private, as well as public lives. The Higher Council of Ulama, a permanent council of the embodiment of religious nationalism, remained faithful to the radical, highly Puritanical view of Islam known as Salafism, expressed through the issue of fatwas or religious rulings.²⁷ The fatwas dealt with a variety of issues related to women, expressing an obsession with regulating all things feminine. The motive remained the distinction of Islamic women from the Westernized women, who lack morality and their influence of modernity can be a cause of great harm for the nation. Thus, the fatwas dealt with women’s fixed code of dress in the public sphere, introducing black abaya to cover their bodies, creating physical boundaries for women. Women’s secondary status in the public sphere has also been looked after by maintaining a strict sex

²⁶ Fatwa- A ruling on a point of Islamic Law given by a recognized authority.

²⁷ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2002), “A History of Saudi Arabia”, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

segregation system, therefore limiting opportunities for women in leading public roles from 1980 onwards. Their invisibility in the public sphere has been viewed as a visible token of state piety, which women, in particular, were doomed to represent. As the 1980s also saw the rise of ‘new businesswomen’, who appeared as the owner of small businesses, catering only for women, the fear of the trappings of modernity raised in the minds of the radical religious scholars.²⁸ Thus they tried to restrict the immoral conduct of women by applying strict regulations on their mobility and travel in public places. The religious scholars attempted to regulate women’s travel for education and work by means of their insistence on the role of the male guardians who would ensure that women abroad continued to conform to the lifestyle prescribed for them at home. Even, women had to be represented by their guardian in the court and the making of decisions in the private, as well as the public sphere. Even, driving for women was not allowed without the presence of a *mahram*²⁹. In the social spheres also, the discrimination continued. Marriage and polygamy were considered as essential for maintaining the religious purity of the nation. The patriarchal system ensured that men could marry up to four times, as polygamy has been considered as the best system in which men can be sexually satisfied with their wives only, and not seeking pleasure in the outside, which can harm the piety of the pious nation.³⁰ Women’s right to reject such a system has not been given any importance, as it has been sanctified by the religious principles. Even, the religious authorities termed this the best option available to women in order to protect their honor and dignity in the nation. Men have also been given the right to terminate the union of marriage, as per their wish, denying women the right to seek divorce

²⁸Doumato, Eleanor Abdella(2003), “ Education in Saudi Arabia: Gender, Jobs and the Price of Religion”, in Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Marsha Pripstein Posusney(eds.), Women and Globalisation in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy and Society, Boulder: Lienne Reinner Publishers.

²⁹ ²⁹ Mahram- A mahram is an unmarriagable kin with whom marriage or sexual intercourse would be considered illegal in Islam.

³⁰ Al- Rasheed, Madawi “A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia”, New York: Cambridge University Press.

as the religious authorities rendered women as emotional beings, incapable of making rational decisions at the right time. With the approval of the State, the Committee for the promotion of Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong increased its raids on public places and even private homes in search of improper Islamic behavior. Thus, the surge in the 1980s in fatwas on women covering private and public spheres revealed a desperate attempt on the part of the state to re-fix the boundaries of the pious nation.³¹ Restrictions on women and control over their appearance served as important visible signs that reminded Saudis and the outside world of the distinctive Islamic credentials of its people and the state. The interplay of politics and religion necessitated the reinvention of women as pillars of religious nationalism, who became an easy solution to a more fundamental problem, pertaining to the identity crisis of the state.

Incident Of 9/11 And Its Effect On Saudi Women:

Since 9/11, the State's quest for cosmopolitan modernity gave women the visibility and platform to express their experiences of gender inequality. This was yet another project of the Saudi state to reverse its negative image internationally, as it wanted to divert attention from the political concerns of terrorism and the western world's allegations on Saudi Arabia being the breeding ground for such radical ideology. Thus, it invested its focus on the issue of women's cosmopolitan modernity, allowing them visibility both locally and internationally. To be able to portray itself as a protector from strict religious control over women, the state eroded the influence of the religious authorities to control women's lives. Instead, it allowed the media to attack the advocates of religious authorities who come up with 'radical

³¹ Doumato, Eleanor Abdella (1992), "Gender, Monarchy and National Identity in Saudi Arabia", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. No.19(1), pp.31-47.

interpretations' on gender in Saudi society.³² Gender became the most talked about issue, orchestrated by the careful strategy of the state to reverse its negative image in the world. The state portrayed itself as a liberal reformer who opened up media forums to discuss and share women's grievances to freed women from traditional restrictions imposed over them.³³ Two polar opposite images of women circulated in the country as a result of the initiative of the state. While on one hand, successful Saudi women's stories acted as role models for the nation and improved its image in the western world, the educated women talked about the social ills, including domestic violence, poverty, forced marriages, unlawful divorce and abandonment by male guardians, which seemed to present a 'reality-based' picture of society.³⁴ In both cases, the state gained. The presentation of women as high achievers became increasingly important for the state to avoid dealing with more pressing issues of political reform. In turn, the discussions on women's problems only made the educated women more reliant in the frameworks of state to provide protection and care for women who had been subjected to abuse and neglect.³⁵ In international economic and educational forums, as patrons of excellence, King Abdullah made Saudi women loyal to the king's decisions and role in society. Thus in elite women, the state found a source of support, who for their opportunity of visibility and gaining more rights, welcomed the new initiatives of the state, after the 9/11 incident.³⁶ One of the first initiatives of the state was to curb the influence of religious scholars and take away their control over girls' school. Following the fire incident in 2002, the religious authorities were accused of the death of innocent girls for not

³² Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2007), "Saudi Arabia Post 9/11: History, Religion and Security", Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. No.43(1), pp.153-160.

³³ Le Renard, Amelie(2008), "Only for Women: Women, the State and Reform in Saudi Arabia", Middle East Journal, Vol. No.62(4), pp.610-629.

³⁴ Sarkar, Naomi(2008), "Women and Media in Saudi Arabia: Rhetoric, Reductionism and Realities", British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. No.35(3), pp.385-404

³⁵ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

³⁶ Renard(2008), "Only for Women: Women, the State and Reform in Saudi Arabia", Vol. no.62, No.4,pp.610-629

allowing them to exit because they were not wearing their abayas in a proper way. This incident created a huge uproar in the country, resulting in international condemnation of Saudi Arabia for its religious radicalism. Thus, for presenting a positive image of the country, the state put girls' education under the Ministry of Education. In June 2004, the state dedicated one session of the National Dialogue forum to discussing women's issues.³⁷ Because of the division of women in their interests and demands from the State, it did not lead to any productive result. Women who supported liberal reforms and aspire for greater participation and visibility were countered by the women who prefer more traditional roles for them, thus threatening the former of destabilizing society and its authenticity. Therefore, the session resulted in some women personally meeting King Abdullah for ensuring their rights. This initiative allowed the state to remind the constituency that women's issues, together with a whole range of public affairs, are centrally controlled by a royal family with its own vision for the development of the country. King Abdullah announced a new initiative in 2008, to establish a women's university named after the ruler Ibn Saud's sister Nura, which held the capacity to educate 40,000 girls in computers, management, and pharmacy, engineering, streams which were previously not deemed as suitable for women.³⁸ Even in 2009, for the first time, a woman was appointed as deputy minister in the Ministry of Education to work under the minister, Prince Faisal Ibn Abdullah, the king's son-in-law. This was considered as a major step in engaging women in policy matters, thus praised by the local press. After this appointment, King Abdullah announced in 2011, that women will be appointed in the Consultative Council in 2015, and will participate in the municipal elections as both voters and candidates.³⁹ This change in the state's treatment towards women produced paradoxes as it carefully engaged in

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Meijer, Roel(2017), "Reform in Saudi Arabia: The Gender Segregation Debate", Accessed on 12 Dec 2018 <https://mepc.org/reform-saudi-arabia-gender-segregation-debate>

³⁹ Le Renard, Amelie(2008), "Only for Women: Women, the State, and Reform in Saudi Arabia", Middle East Journal, Vol. No.62(4), pp.610-629.

changing public opinion in favour of a better appreciation of its reforms in matters relating to women. The Saudi Arabian Women's Association (SAWA) launched in 2010 expressed the association's role in Britain to present a brighter image of the country and 'dispel vague and unclear images of Saudis in general'.⁴⁰

State's response in dealing with gender inequality:

The State carefully allowed elite women mainly princesses, entrepreneurs, artists, and academics greater visibility in well defined and protected surroundings such as chambers of commerce, international economic forums, educational forums, diplomatic circles, and the media.⁴¹ But ironically, it remained unreceptive to demands for the establishment of a ministry for women's affairs. Neither did the State allowed permission for independent non-governmental women's organizations defending women's rights.⁴² Women's human rights have been incorporated in the agenda of the State human rights organization, which reports directly to the king and the minister of interior, thus lacking the autonomy to protest and debate the order of the State. Even the employment of women in the charity sector remained under State control, sanctioned and promoted by the State as tokens of its progress and reform. It showed that women have been granted presence only in areas that never challenge the authority of the state. Since 9/11, the division of religious scholars with regard to the issue of *ikhtilat* also reflected the way state dealt with questions of gender inequality.⁴³ While mixing in the public sphere such

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Religion and Politics in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁴² Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁴³ Ikhtilat- It is a term used for intermingling of the sexes. The meeting together, mixing and intermingling of men and women in one place, the crowding of them together, and the revealing and exposure of women to men are prohibited by the Law of Islam.

as at work, debate forums and higher education were accepted by one group of scholars, the other vehemently opposed the practice of *ikhilat* in Saudi society.⁴⁴ Without taking any sides, the state observed the gender battle unless any of the religious scholars directly criticized the state's policies. The state allowed gender to become a central concern debated in the public sphere, which in turn, endeavored to silence any debate about political reforms. Thus, the emancipation of women, especially elite women, have been integrated into the state's political project to shed a well established negative image that is no longer confined to Saudi Arabia but has spread abroad with increasing globalization and international scrutiny of the gender-based exclusion and discrimination in the country. The State emerged after the crisis as the sole arbiter of women's rights, freedom, and participation in society.

Diversity Of Saudi Women In Their Rights And Aspirations:

For years, women have looked at the state to provide education, employment, and healthcare. Their demands required that the state must act as an active agent in mediating family disputes and marital problems. Saudi women willingly seek state patronage in order to compensate for men failing to live up to their expectations. This revealed women's perceptions to see the state as the ultimate provider, who in turn made their exclusion possible in the private and public spheres.⁴⁵ Expectations towards the king to act as an arbiter between religion and society on one hand, and their own interests on the other have become increasingly difficult as women adopt different aspirations from the state.

⁴⁴ Alwedini, Jawaher(2017), "Ikhtilat as Patriarchal Expression: Gender Segregation and the Influence of Fathers", International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies, Vol. No.5(1),pp.7-20.

⁴⁵ Doumato, Eleanor(1992), "Gender, Monarchy and National Identity in Saudi Arabia", British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.No.19(1), pp.31-47.

The liberal, Islamist and new religious women have resorted to different views and opinions regarding their status in society. Islamist women appealed to the king to gain more rights while remaining faithful to the Islamic tradition. Thus, they drew on Quran and religious interpretations to follow the norms of the tradition of the society, therefore wanting an elimination of ‘corruption’ and ‘Westernization’ in order to protect their interests as women.⁴⁶ They demanded that the sex segregation system, male guardianship should be maintained in order to protect their honor in society. Women’s unemployment in the workplace has been perceived by them as a result of mixing between the sexes. To safeguard the country against moral degradation, they called upon the king to increase the number of religious police for surveillance and monitoring of women’s immoral conduct in society.⁴⁷ The female Islamic activists also joined the religious authorities to protest against the practice of *ikhtilat*. According to their perspective, while it would provide new opportunities in education and employment, it would also create new conditions for exclusion.⁴⁸ They were simply concerned with the security of their marriage and family, thus they object the opening of the Saudi media to global and commercial influences that expressed an obsession over their beauty.

On the other hand, the liberal women looked to the state to curb exclusionary religious opinions and implement international treaties on gender equality. They pushed for greater flexibility that would enable them to enjoy wider employment opportunities, for which relaxing the prohibition on mixing between the sexes and the right to drive seemed a necessary action.

⁴⁶ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2007), “Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation”, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Alwedinani, Jawaher(2017), “Ikhtilat as Patriarchal Expression: Gender Segregation and the Influence of Fathers”, International Journal of Gender and Women’s Studies, Vol. No.5(1),pp. 7-20.

⁴⁹Explaining the low economic participation of women as a function of their inability to enjoy the freedom of movement, they demanded greater freedom of movement and less dependence on either the male relatives or foreign drivers for transport. These educated liberal women, mostly coming from a moderate background channeled their demands and grievances through the writing of fiction, so as to portray the gender roles that women play in the real Saudi society.⁵⁰ Another reason behind their hiding in an imaginative world remained to expose the reality which acted as a shield from harassment, imprisonment, and punishment. In the absence of a civil society organization, Saudi poet, novelists have utilized the platform for sending messages that remain censored in real life situations. The emergence of these women novelists in the twentieth century also had distinctive features, marking them different from the other. While beginning the feminist consciousness with their literature, the first generation writers focused on their limited roles as housewives or mothers or the teenager, the subtle language exposed grievances towards an unjust society. They ‘have chosen to wage peace than war, a process that is by far more demanding of self-restraint, of wisdom and of self-discipline’⁵¹. Instead, the second generation novelists have chosen to wage war against the restrictive norms of society and religion. They focused on the diversity of the local, in which women are no longer viewed as a homogeneous mass, but a fragmented category in which each element experiences society and tradition in different ways. Moving away from simplistic binary opposites such as male or female, free or oppressed to a more nuanced awareness of the complexity and diversity of women’s lives, they explored feminine persona in multiple contexts such as age, career, tribe, education, desire, and social class. The fictions of an even younger generation portrayed their heroines as immersed in cosmopolitan fantasy, who move

⁴⁹ Dekmejian, Richard(2003),“ The Liberal Impulse in Saudi Arabia”, Middle East Journal, Vol. No.57(3), pp.400-413.

⁵⁰ Arebi, Sadeka(1994), “Women and Words in Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Literary Discourse”, New York: Columbia University Press.

⁵¹ Ibid.

between home, college, private business, and shopping center like privileged youth anywhere today.⁵² They expose the taboo related to sex through expressing the heroine's sexual desires, with the aim to seek personal freedoms rather than social rights for themselves as a group. Launching into attacks on the rigid morality imposed in public places, they aspired to free themselves from its prohibitions. The role of the female journalists and columnists in creating bright images of Saudi women in the country has also to be taken into account, which has been promoted by the Saudi State for developing its modernist agenda. The role of the journalists has been controlled by the state, allowing them to portray the picture of Saudi society approved by the state beforehand.⁵³ Despite this growing literature, this did not culminate in any real change in the status of women as the novelists did not directly deal with the role of state and religious nationalism as frameworks for exploring the persistent gender discrimination in Saudi Arabia.⁵⁴ The third category included the religious women, who assumed the role of the guardian of the religious nation and defenders of the Islamic tradition. The institutionalization of religious education and knowledge since the 1960s and later higher education in religious studies developed a religious literacy among these women made them take up the role as religious preachers and activists, who emphasize on purity, authenticity and the preservation of gender roles. They defended male supremacy, sought men's protections and supported the exclusionary regime for women. These religious preachers entered the public sphere only as women preaching to other women, thus creating a parallel yet structurally inferior space for women in order to preserve overall male dominance.⁵⁵ Even the women activists' texts, often articles and short essays were grouped together under sections entitled 'for women' in many religious

⁵² Alsanea, Rajaa(2007), "Girls of Riyadh", New York: Fig Tree.

⁵³ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), " A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2006), "Contesting the Saudi State: Islamic Voices from a New Generation", New York: Cambridge University Press.

websites.⁵⁶ They redefined women's piety, rituals, role and place in society on the basis of their own interpretations of religious texts and entered the public domain with the acceptance that they can complement the role of male preachers but can never replace them. Their words were meant to be consumed by women only. After the 2011 Arab Spring, both these categories of women utilized information communication technology to spread diverse beliefs.⁵⁷ While the liberal women claimed for their demands and rights, the Islamic women criticized the actions of the former and urged the women of the country to adhere to their religious duties. However, all these categories of women, so far, have not been able to emancipate women as they looked for the state to resolve their inequality in a society that has continued to deny them their basic rights.

Therefore, the multiplicity of factors needs to be taken into account to ascertain the status and condition of women in Saudi Arabia in contemporary times. The interaction between the state, religious nationalism and social and cultural forms of patriarchy that have been going on since the establishment of the modern state in the 1930s is present in the twenty-first century also. Similar trends of diversity between Liberal and Islamic women in their desires and aspirations have rendered their status in Saudi Arabia critical. This is being utilized by the Saudi State to manipulate the contradictions in the name of gender inequality, inherent in Saudi society to establish its own legitimacy in the world. It, therefore, leads to Sued Joseph's assertion that "no actor is more critical to the gendering of citizenship than the state. As such women have been caught between the conflicting demands of nation-building and state-building projects."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), " A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁷ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), " A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁵⁸ Joseph, Sued(2005), "Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East", Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Chapter 3

LITERATURE ON THE STATUS AND CONDITION OF WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA

Women Novelists: The Representers of Reality

The status and condition of women in Saudi Arabia is enmeshed in a contradiction that makes it difficult to ascertain the role they play in Saudi society. They have been kept under the veil of ignorance since decades. The State intentionally draws on the question of gender inequality to suit its agenda with the changing political context in and across the world. Women empowerment has been used as a political agenda to ensure women's loyalty in the authoritarian state. Therefore, in such a situation, where the state tries its best to keep women complied with the limited number of reforms in a highly sex-segregated country, the plight of women can only be brought into light with the use of literature that is growing since the twentieth century. This has been a significant platform to portray the injustices and human rights violations the women experience, but not allowed to protest in the Saudi Society. Literature gives these women the freedom to talk about their own opinion about the Society, its hollowness and in turn making the women in Saudi Arabia conscious about their own status and condition in the country. Through the medium of fiction, as well as non- fictions, women novelists, literary figures are exposing the dark reality of the Saudi society that otherwise remains censored in the state. More importantly, the inability of Saudi women to organize themselves in a feminist movement, establish their own pressure

group or mobilize as women have pushed them towards finding expression in literature as a platform to reflect the condition in which women live in Society.⁵⁹To protest the patriarchal rule of the state, women employ this mechanism to bring forward their own aspirations as human beings in Saudi Arabia. In the words of a Saudi novelist, the novel 'has become a loophole, it expresses what we dare not say and want to break the taboo.'⁶⁰ The following paragraph analyses the major reflections of literature to expose the real condition of women living in Saudi society, which in turn, reveals the dimensions of gender inequality in the country.

Reflection of Women's Condition in Jean P. Sasson's 'Princess: A True Story of Life behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia':

Jean. P Sasson, an American writer came to Saudi Arabia to work in the King Faisal Specialist Hospital in 1978 as an administrative coordinator in Medical Affairs and lived there till 1990. It was during her experience in the hospital, that she gathered her talks with women in Saudi Arabia. Thus, her literary piece, published in 1992, was based on a true story, detailing gender inequalities in Saudi Arabia, which evoked strong emotions and acceptance in the world. In the book, the author portrayed the character of Sultana, a Saudi born princess whose identity has not been revealed for her safety in this authoritarian Saudi regime. Though being born to a royal family, she was exposed to immense wealth and accessories to live a comfortable life, the harsh reality of her lack of freedom to speak her heart out or lacking any control over her life made her situation no less than living in a cage. ⁶¹Hidden

⁵⁹ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013) "A Most Masculine State", New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁶⁰ M. Oudina, "The New Saudi Novel Defies Taboo", <https://www.ennaharonline.com/en/culture/4oI3.html?print>.

⁶¹ Sasson, Jean P.(1992), "Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia",New York: William Morrow and Co.

behind her black floor-length veil, she thought herself as a prisoner, imprisoned by her father, her husband, her sons, and the country. The author's descriptions of how in her childhood Sultana and her brother used to get different treatment from her parents, making her brother feel superior to Sultana because he was the only heir of the family, revealed the starting point of her experience of gender inequality. Later, she realized that their choices did not matter at all for their own marriages, as Sultana's sister has been forced to marry an older person against her wish, only for the sake of maintaining prestige and furthering the business prospects. She also discovered how her brother bought a girl and raped her to satisfy his sexual pleasure, which was a common thing among men who were in positions of power and authority.⁶² Poor women in Saudi Arabia were left with limited choices to survive in this country. The author Elena Seymenliyska has accurately described the experience of women, which shed light on the condition of women in the Saudi kingdom.

“Although they share affection, confidences and an easy camaraderie within the confines of the women's quarters, they also share a history of appalling oppressions, everyday occurrences that in any other culture would be seen as shocking human rights violations:thirteen year old girls forced to marry men five times their age, young women killed by drowning, stoning or isolation in the woman's room, a padded, windowless cell where women are confined with neither light nor conversation until death claims them. Servants are forced into sexual servitude and severely beaten if they attempt to escape. By speaking out, Sultana risks

⁶² Sasson, Jean P.(1992), “Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia”,New York: William Morrow and Co.

bringing the wrath of the Saudi establishment upon her head and the heads of her children. In the barren, hopeless wasteland that is the life of Saudi Woman today, free speech is punishable by death.”

The fate of those underage girls who were married off to much older male has been described by the author through the character of ‘Sara’ her sister, who was sexually exploited by her ‘husband’, a cruel sadist. He unleashed her inner demon on the poor victim Sara who had no one to help her in Saudi Arabia, the flag bearer of female oppression.

“When Sultana was entering her teenage years, her sister Sara was forced into marriage. Only three years older than Sultana, Sara dreamed of studying art. However, these dreams died the day she was forced to marry a man more than twice her age and who already had several other wives. Sara was crushed emotionally by this marriage, made worse by the fact that she would not be allowed to see her mother and sisters the first few months of marriage. Before the time limit set by their father was over, Sultana and Mother got word that Sara was in the hospital. When they arrived they learned that Sara had attempted suicide. Sara’s husband was a sexual sadist who tortured Sara, leaving her desperate to leave the marriage any way she could. Her mother put her own well being at risk by insisting that Father arrange a divorce for Sara.”⁶³

⁶³ Singhai, Charu(2017), “Feminist Voices of the Middle East A Study of 21st Century Female Writers”, Gwalior: Jiwaji University.

Although Sultana herself was luckier than her sister, as she got to marry a person suitable in terms of age, her misfortune crippled in another form. As Sultana was suffering from breast cancer, and she could not bear children anymore, Sultana's husband expressed his desire to marry another wife. Behind this well-thought explanation was the existence of polygamy that makes men crave sexual pleasure from more than one wife, this Sultana understood very well. The evils of polygamy that plague the religious society has been illustrated by the author, to raise a sharp criticism of this social practice which disrespected women's position in society and thus, Sultana, her female character did not accept her fortune and went away from her home with her three children to fight her own battle of life.

Therefore, the author gave a vivid account of the social malice in her book which continued to haunt women's position in society. It expressed the oppressed lives of elite Saudi women, who lived every second of their life in sheer fear and in the shadow of suppressed desires. Her descriptions exposed how stifling life can be for women in a religious theocracy, even for those women who stayed at the helm of the financial and societal pyramid.⁶⁴ The Saudi establishment did not consider marital rape as a crime, even rendered sexual slavery as acceptable, which essentially reflected how the powerful men tortured and exploited the weaker section of women with their wealth and position.

Lives of Cosmopolitan women in Rajaa Al- Sanea's ' Girls of Riyadh':

The author Rajaa Al- Sanea in her book in 2008 promoted sophisticated, mobile elite women and their way of looking at life through the prism of

⁶⁴ Singhai, Charu(2017), "Feminist Voices of the Middle East A Study of 21st Century Female Writers", Gwalior: Jiwaji University.

society. Immersed in cosmopolitan fantasy, these women of Raja Al – Sanea portrayed their desire to search for excitement and contrasts rather than conformity in a male-dominated country. This specific genre of fiction authored by Raja Al- Sanea, a Saudi woman, created a stir in the society for it unmasked the hypocrisy ingrained in Saudi culture and religion, thus leading to its denouncement by the guardians of religious nationalism. On the other hand, the portrayal of women's urge to break the taboo in society in search of individuality, love, and desire made the novel a role model for liberal-minded individuals in the country. It told the story of four young women, Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle, and Lamees, who were though different from each other, were united in the search of their own individuality in a country where they faced an extreme form of exclusion.⁶⁵ The story unfolded in the form of email messages in the era of internet, which reached the viewers of the blog every Friday afternoon. The adventurous experiences of these girls became the center topic of discussion in a country where talking about women's desires openly is not considered appropriate. Rajaa Al- Sanea revealed that how the strict sex segregation prevailing in the country led the women of her story to talk with men in an online platform where love can blossom without fear and interference. It unveiled the tragic conditions of the conservative Gamrah's life whose husband divorced her without her consent and the romantic Sadeem's heartbreaks for choosing the wrong men in her life two times. She gave a detailed explanation to see the hypocrisy in society with regard to women's acceptance. Because she got close to her legally married husband, before the official marriage ceremony, she got divorced.⁶⁶ It portrayed the misogyny with which women deal in their everyday lives, and the way men consider marrying only those women who are chaste, even if it is only him, legally married husband, in the story, she allowed to give her virginity to. Even, her second choice eventually exposed the contradictions prevalent in the

⁶⁵ Al- Sanea, Rajaa(2007), "Girls of Riyadh", New York: Fig Tree.

⁶⁶ Sanghai, Charu(2017) "Feminist Voices of the Middle East A Study of 21st Century Female Writer", Gwalior: Jiwaji University.

society that can lead them to have an affair with a divorced woman, but not marrying her because she remains impure. Her other character in the story, Michelle, found it difficult to convince her lover to marry him because she was half American and Saudi cultural families never accept a bride of different origin. Last one, Lamees, because of the strict sex segregation system, got herself admitted to medicine, and fortunately, managed to find love on her way. The journey of these four girls to seek for love in a country where it is strictly forbidden made them aware of the contradiction that religion and Saudi culture imposed in society.⁶⁷ This, in turn, revealed the bending of laws by men and women in the country both to continue living a life with some enthusiasm. Though men and women were not allowed to meet in public place, they found ways to meet each other by letting the male act as the woman's guardian in shopping malls, restaurants or finding a suitable time when they would not get caught in the hands of the religious authorities.⁶⁸ The author posted these scandals on her blog and the Saudi government even tried to ban those and close all channels of communication. It attempted to portray the true picture of Saudi Arabia, riddled with contradictions. Jean Makdisi articulated the stories of these four female friends to reflect on women's condition in Saudi society.

“In these emails, she tells the stories of her four female friends, Gamrah Al- Qusmanji, Sadeem Al-Horaimli, Lamees Jeddawi, and Michelle Al- Abdulrahman. The girls belong to society's “velvet class,” an elite whose behaviour is normally kept hidden to all but themselves. Each week, the writer reveals new and thrilling developments, leading her ever-widening circle of eager readers to await Friday noon prayers breathlessly. Every Saturday morning, government offices, meeting halls, hospital corridors, and school classrooms

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Al- Sanea, Rajaa(2007), “Girls of Riyadh”, New York: Fig Tree.

metamorphose into arenas for debate about the latest email. Everyone weighs in. There are those who support this young woman and those who object to her. There are those who believe that what these girls are doing is perfectly natural (and also is no secret) and there are others who boil with rage at the revelation of what they consider to be the excesses that are going on around them in our conservative society. Whatever the outcome, there is no doubt whatsoever that these strange and unusual emails have created a furor in our society, which has never before experienced anything like this. It is clear that these emails will continue to furnish fertile material for exchange and debate for a long time to come, even after the emails cease to appear.”⁶⁹

It has to be mentioned that the modern lifestyle of these four women characters of *Raja Al- Sanea* focused on the detailed explorations of the daily lives of the Saudis which have been lived in secret.

“ Her girls are modern and ambitious, but they exist within a particularly rigid Islamic tradition. Gamrah juggles party planning work with Ramadan prayers; Lamees graduates in medicine, but decides to wear the hijab once married; Sadeem loses her lover to an arranged marriage. Only Michelle escapes the constraints of abhors, carving out a high-flying media career in Dubai. The Quartet remain within the faith, yet all four dream of marrying for love. *Pride and Prejudice* this is not. This is topical chic lit, even down to the requisite embossed dust- jacket, although one of glamorous black and gold rather

⁶⁹ Makdisi, Jean (2014), “ Arab Feminisms: Gender and Equality in the Middle East” . New York: I.B. Tauris.

than the British standard of baby pink. The diet of girl-longs-for-boy-palls, largely because many of the chapter endings are limp, the translation from Arabic is often clunky, and few characters possess a credible interior life.”⁷⁰

However, Rajaa Alsanea showed that life for those women who break taboos in a religious orthodoxy has not been easy. Their life exhibited a constant and painful reminder that they belonged to a society dominated by men and the religious laws which in turn placed innumerable restrictions upon them to ensure the patriarchal system of the country.

“And the trials faced by her alternately designer- and burqa-clad heroines are gruesome. Forbidden by law from driving or meeting unrelated men in public, the girls are denied a free choice in education, career or marriage by either overbearing parents or the baroque Saudi obsession with tribe and tradition. ‘Is her blood pure?’ croaks an evil mother-in-law, about to scupper Michelle’s chances of marrying her aristocratic sweetheart Faisal. Gamrah is married off to, then divorced by, an abusive businessman; Sadeem’s fiancé dumps her for ‘giving herself’ to him before their official wedding day. But the prescriptions that fence their lives round provide the novel’s rare moments of satire. In online chatrooms, Saudi men use one of two stock pictures: ‘a guy sitting behind his desk in a nice office with a Saudi flag behind him’ or ‘a guy making himself out to be a big strutting Bedouin’- and of poignancy- marriage, the unhappy

⁷⁰ Hardy, Roger(2007),”Girl Trouble”, New Statesman.,19 July 2007.

Gamrah's family warn her, is like 'the watermelon on the knife': either 'extra sweet' or a 'dried-out, empty gourd'.⁷¹

Most of those women who want a different life than the one prescribed by the government and the state, following the religious customs, the path for them have been a difficult one. They ended up in living double lives often flitting in and out of one according to their necessity.⁷² They also lived in continuous fear of getting discovered or having their secret pleasures revealed. Barred from all the little pleasures of life, they indulged in bending the laws, which further pointed out the futility of the Saudi customs and traditions in restricting their lives.

"The clumsiness is significant: despite its American borrowings, *Girls of Riyadh* deals with a profoundly different world. The love affairs provide occasions for some inimitably Saudi Kitsch: Sadeem's boyfriend tenderly chauffeurs over 'her favourite Burger King double meal' on Valentine's Day, Faisal presents Michelle with a Barry Manilow musical teddy bear doused in 'his elegant Bulgari scent' and wearing giant diamond earrings; after her divorce, Gamrah's family send her to Lebanon for a restorative nose job. But the details of day-to-day life in Riyadh are weirder, and more fascinating, still. Men still wear the traditional shimagh (headcloth) and thobe (robe), but they are now designed 'by Gucci, Christian Dior, Givenchy, and Valentino'. Boys 'number' girls in shopping malls and on the highways, throwing business cards or scraps of paper into car windows. On international flights,

⁷¹ Beresford, Lucy. "Lifting the veil on love in Saudi Arabia." *The Telegraph*, 9 July 2007.

⁷² Sanghai, Charu (2017) "Feminist Voices of the Middle East A Study of 21st Century Female Writer", Gwalior: Jiwaji University.

people queue for the bathrooms to change into or out of prescribed Saudi dress.”⁷³

Therefore, Raja Al- Sanea’s novel touched upon some significant themes of contemporary Saudi Arabia, its problems and struggles and the daily life quests of its citizens to struggle against a violent theocratic state which dictated their life and its ways. The broadcasting of the serial ‘Tash ma Tash’ portrayed the hypocrisy in the minds of the Saudi men, who did not support their women driving but allowed foreign drivers, mainly from Philippines and India to drive their women back home.⁷⁴

This feminist awakening of the 21st Century has shed light on the contradiction ingrained in Saudi religion and customs which forced them to live a double life at the cost of severe risks of punishment and humiliation from the religious police of the country. But the urge to seek for their own individuality won despite the whims of the authoritarian state and that is why this novel emerged as an inspiration to those liberal women who wanted to set them free and gain their individual rights in this patriarchal society.

Exploration of Women’s Oppression in Sami Alrabaa’s ‘Veiled Atrocities: True Stories of Oppression in Saudi Arabia’:

Sami Alrabaa, a journalist and an author who specialized in Saudi- Arab relations in the Kuwait University, in her book published in 2010, put together appalling incidents which expose revealing portraits of intolerance of Saudi men, resulting in social oppression of women in Saudi Arabia. Her ways of describing the incidents revealed how much women’s subjugation in the male-

⁷³ Aspaden, Rachel(2007), “Sex and the Saudis.” *The Observer*, 22 July 2007.

⁷⁴ Al- Sanea, Rajaa(2007), “ Girls Of Riyadh”, New York: Fig Tree.

dominated society. She narrated an incident where a deaf and mute woman waiting for her brother to pick her up from the shopping mall was arrested by the religious police and later was stoned to death without further investigating where the woman came from or her whereabouts.⁷⁵ The religious authorities looked down upon the woman as she did not belong to the influential section of society and treated her in the most inhuman way possible. They charged her with the crime of prostitution and passed on the matter to the Saudi Prince who remained in the position of utmost authority.⁷⁶ He did not seem to care and this negligence to involve with the matters of prostitution which the Saudi Kingdom consider as sin seemed to weigh more than the fact that the punishment costed one's life. This remained more clear from the author's use of expressions in her book.

“Women don't venture out to shop alone because they are afraid of being accused of 'trying to pick up a man'. A woman walking alone is either followed by strange men or is hassled by the Mutawas, the morality police. Middle class and upper-class women move around easily as they are driven by a chauffeur- either a male family member or a hired driver from the Philippines or India.”⁷⁷

This showed the Saudi Kingdom's apathy towards women who belong to a low class and exploiting them on the basis of their class. Not only this, but the author vividly explained how the Saudi Princes engage in marketing his pornographic films on satellite television channels. Her other report narrated an incident where innocent girls from weaker sections of the society were brought in Saudi Arabia to film pornography scenes with the exchange of

⁷⁵ Alrabaa, Sami(2010), “ Veiled Atrocities: True Stories of Oppression in Saudi Arabia”,New York: Promestheus Books.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Alrabaa, Sami(2010), “Veiled Atrocities: True Stories Of Oppression in Saudi Arabia”, New York: Promestheus Books.

money. The misuse of power and wealth have been reflected in the author's descriptions, which eventually resulted in the sexual exploitation of innocent women in the country. Corruption saw its ultimate form when a Saudi Prince used her women group to convince a woman to come to her house and ultimately raped her in the presence of her friend she trusted in. This incident narrated the power and authority of the Saudi Prince to the extent that for the need of money, being a woman herself she agreed to the Prince's agreement, resulting in another women's rape, the most serious human rights violations in the country. This explained how weaker sections of women have been manipulated to fulfill the Prince's demands and pervert urges. Even when, some of them dared to protest against the crime and file a complaint to demand justice, their testimonies were considered to be not trustable and instead they were met with punishment. "Theoretically, disputes and crimes are dealt with by Shari'a, the Muslim system of Justice. But, in practice, a prince from the ruling Al- Saud family makes decisions over what is legal or illegal, right or wrong, in all of the country's regions and provinces."⁷⁸ This explained the system of justice in the country which left little place for women to protest against their human rights violations. On the other hand, male belonging to the moderate families also exploited their female servants sexually, treating them with inhuman conditions and making to work them as much as they want.⁷⁹ This exploitation also included a foreign worker from the weaker section who came in Saudi Arabia to work and send the money back home. Sami Alrabaa explained the harassment faced by a foreign worker in her book. "When a car accident occurs that involves a Saudi and a foreign worker, witnesses are usually invented who 'testify' that the foreigner was at fault. Courtrooms trials and lawyers are nonexistent, so the foreigner is almost

⁷⁸ Alrabaa, Sami(2010) " True Stories Of Oppression in Saudi Arabia", New York: Promestheus Books.

⁷⁹Larson, Amelia Jayne(2005),"Maids in Mecca- Not quite...:An analysis of Saudi Arabia's Culture of Servitude", Accessed on 5 January, 2019, <http://hipporeads.com/maids-in-mecca-not-quite-an-analysis-of-saudi-arabias-culture-of-servitude/>

always declared guilty.”⁸⁰It showed how the Saudi Kingdom remained above law and engaged in manipulating the situation for securing their own interest. Another incident explained the situation of women in the country, where a young Saudi Woman from noninfluential family background was constantly followed by the Saudi Prince, who was alone with her foreign driver in the car. Unfortunately, it resulted in rape, and so that the Prince’s image remains unaffected, he blackmailed the victim by showing her photographs of her unconscious state. “Many Saudi men take advantage of the low status of Saudi women and hunt them down like animals. The princes of the country are above the law- they can do whatever they want and can employ any level of violence to get it.”⁸¹ Ironically, the orthodox religious ideology of the country successfully transferred the conservative values to the male members of society, which led the victim’s father blames the girl instead of for her modern outlook towards life and for going out alone with the driver. Women should remain at home to ensure their safety according to these patriarchal minds of society. They were merely treated as a sexual object if left alone in the public place. “After all, it’s easy for a man in Saudi Arabia to get a woman. Interest is publicly indicated and offers and negotiations begin. Overall, we have more women than men, especially unmarried men.”⁸²This reflected the mindset of Saudi men towards viewing women in the country, and consequently unveiled the reason for their exploitation in the country.

The author’s vivid accounts of shocking expose made it clear that in the wealthy Saudi oil kingdom, secular law did not occupy a place. Instead, Saudi prince indulged in reinforcing the religious practices that consistently succeed in ensuring women’s subordination in the country. The condition of women necessitated the exploration of reality which included the political, social and

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Alrabaa, Sami(2010) “ True Stories Of Oppression in Saudi Arabia”, New York: Promestheus Books.

⁸² Ibid.

economic explanations behind their oppression in the country.⁸³ The perpetuation of violence among Saudi Women has been institutionalized by the state through its conservative religious dogmas and principles.

Madawi Al-Rasheed's 'A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics, and Religion in Saudi Arabia': Recognition of Women's role in the country through historical narrative:

Madawi Al-Rasheed, A Professor of Anthropology of Religion at King's College, London has made significant contributions in the sphere of Saudi history, politics and society, which remained her topic of specialization in Saudi Arabia. In this book published in 2013, the author has provided enriching accounts on how under the patronage of the state and its religious nationalism, women have become hostage to contradictory political projects that on one hand reinforce female subordination and on the other hand, encourage modernity. Thus, her narration placed supreme importance of the role of the state in using gender as an instrument to establish its own legitimacy in the world. Social norms and religious traditions compliment the role of the state in subordinating women but have not been able to go beyond the State's authority, who successfully integrated various facets of religious norms and principles in its nation-building project. Madawi Al Rasheed specifically took notice to observe the historical transformations that the state went through and related the implications with women's changing status in the country.⁸⁴ She explored the interconnection of gender, politics, and religion in shaping the persistent exclusion of Saudi women.⁸⁵ Wahhabiyya emerged in

⁸³ Paul, Aarts(2006), "The Saudi Enigma: A History/ Saudi Arabia Exposed: Inside a Kingdom in Crisis", The Middle East Journal, Vol. No.60(1).

⁸⁴ Geel, Van Annemarie(2014), " Review: A Most Masculine State : Gender, Politics and Religion by Madawi Al- Rasheed", Journal of Middle East Women's Studies, Vol. No. 10(3), pp 131-133.

⁸⁵ Al- Rasheed(2002), "A History of Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

the eighteenth century as a religious revival movement focusing its aim of removing impurities and a vision of returning to authentic Islam in the state. But the transformation of the religious revival movement into the religious nationalist movement was facilitated by the state to co-opt the project of religious nationalism in dealing with evolving political contexts and changing historical periods.⁸⁶The modern state of 1932 institutionalized the perceptions of gender in the ideology of Wahhabiyya, marking women as a symbol of the pious nation and defining its unity in the absence of Saudi or anti-colonial nationalism.⁸⁷She argued that Wahhabiyya as religious nationalism under the auspices of the state explains the reason why women have lagged behind in this part of the Muslim World and why gender equality has never been a project promoted by either political leadership or the Wahhabi Ulama.Here, religious nationalism got its place as a form of politicized collective representation, embedded in institutions, the purpose of which has been to create a godly community.⁸⁸As women became boundary markers that visibly and structurally distinguish this pious nation from other ungodly polities, the obsession with their bodies, appearance, purity, and sexuality reflected the justification of the process further. ⁸⁹She articulated the State's intention of projecting gender relations as a function of greater political projects, as the state changed its role as a benevolent educator in the 1960s to the ensuring the religious principles among women through the issue of fatwas in the 1980s. The Mecca Mosque crisis emerged as the urgent political project behind the change in the role of the State. Again, after the 9/11 incident, the emerging political crisis made the State change its portrayal of the ultra-conservative image of women into cosmopolitan women with a series of reforms initiated in

⁸⁶ Cole, Donald Powell(2014), "Struggle in Saudi Arabia",*Current Anthropology*, Vol. No.55(4),pp.494-495.

⁸⁷ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁸⁸ Roger Friedland(2001), "Religious Nationalism and the Problem of Collective Representation", *Annual Review of Sociology*,27,pp.125-52.

⁸⁹ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

the era. The author's depiction of events showed that the state carefully manipulated women into believing that the state remained the ultimate provider for the protection of women's condition. She adds that women's "passive resistance takes the form of claiming their half of this particular patriarchal bargain –protection in exchange for submissiveness and propriety".⁹⁰ Like other women, Saudis engaged both in resisting patriarchy and bargaining with it, whether they belonged to the Liberal, Islamic or nonpoliticized section of society. The author articulated that how all these categories of women make it a strategy to avoid confrontation with the state at a time when they have not gained society's consensus over the need to shake gender relations and move towards greater equality. While women remain divided into their aspirations and demands from the state, this diversity has in effect delayed reaching a consensus with regard to gender equality.⁹¹ Madawi Al- Rasheed explained that while in the post 9/11 period, Saudi Women have begun registering their voices in the local media as columnists and novelists, it would not have been possible without the state's approval which allowed greater media visibility for women to appear as an arbiter of women's rights in the country. Saudi women remain did not agree on the degree of emancipation they require the state to facilitate. Liberal women invoked contemporary international discourse on gender equality and aspired towards the elimination of all kinds of gender discrimination, while Islamist women sought the Islamic tradition as their reference point when they wrote on gender issues.⁹² The author's acute observation of this entire process revealed how the state carefully watched the gender battles in Saudi Society, leaning towards one group at one time and switching its patronage to other groups as its political agenda dictated. It became evident from her detailed explanations, that she

⁹⁰ Deniz Kandiyoti(1983), "Bargaining with Patriarchy", p.283.

⁹¹ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), "A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁹² Dekmejian, Richard(2003), "The Liberal Impulse in Saudi Arabia", Middle East Journal, Vol No.57(3), pp.400-413.

observed women's situation in the country and traced the historical engagement of the state in the gender question over several decades. The Arab Spring of 2011 involved a dramatic change in the State's policies towards women. Thus, on 25 September 2011, the day of the second municipal elections, King Abdullah's announcement regarding women's appointment in the Consultative Council and in the 2015 Municipal elections and other moves towards women's emancipation was the State's strategy to deal with the political pressure on an urgent basis. While the state needed the loyalty of women at this critical moment, women themselves hoped to extract more rights under the patronage of the state and the pressures of the ongoing Arab Spring.⁹³ Thus, the author argued that, in a state like Saudi Arabia, where the freedom of the civil society is curtailed by not allowing any women's organizations to operate outside state control, Saudi women were left with limited choices. Saudi women of all persuasions, therefore, looked for the state to increase its policing for men, and forced them to fulfill their obligations and responsibilities towards women. Madawi Al- Rasheed's characterization of Saudi Arabia, as a most masculine state necessitated a change to espouse its own feminization due to critical moments of historical crisis.⁹⁴ Her observation did not miss the fact that women in Saudi Arabia have begun to raise their voices against the oppression of the state through the medium of literature, and in turn, this could lead to move beyond state-sponsored feminism and achieve their dreams of becoming full citizens.

“What makes the book so rewarding and useful is, first, the thoughtful, richly detailed historical context it provides for understanding women's education, the regulations of women's bodies and sexuality, and the place of women in

⁹³ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2007), “Saudi Arabia Post 9/11:History, Religion and Security”, Middle Eastern Studies, Vol.No.43(1), pp.153-160.

⁹⁴ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013),”A Most Masculine State:Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia”, New York: Cambridge University Press.

business relations in Saudi Arabia over the span of several decades. But Al- Rasheed is also very attentive to both the state-centered mythologizing and religious discourse making that goes into the maintenance of gender relations, as well as the contestation over the boundaries of control...For now, her readers will be grateful for such a sympathetically critical guide to the way so many Saudi women live today.”⁹⁵

Madawi Al- Rasheed, has explored the women’s status in Saudi Arabia with her vivid account of the intermingling of politics and religion in Saudi society, ultimately controlled by the state. This work’s credibility lied in using religious nationalism as a framework for exploring gender in the country. Specifically, the way she observed the changing pattern of the state towards women, with the changing historical circumstances gave it an analytic character, which further helped in understanding the real condition of women in the country.

Picture of Women’s Condition in Manal Al- Sharif’s ‘Daring to Drive’:

Manal Al-Sharif, a women’s rights activist and also a co-founder of the “Women2 Drive” movement in 2011, put together her own experience in the country she grew up and faced extremely unequal treatment in comparison with Saudi men, in the book ‘Daring to Drive’, published in 2011. Her description of the making of an accidental activist revealed the unjust norms in the patriarchal Saudi society in a most courageous way. Born in Mecca in 1979, the year strict fundamentalism took hold in Saudi Arabia prior to the Mecca Mosque siege in 1979, Manal was raised to be religiously

⁹⁵ Laleh Khalili(2014) “A Review of Madawi AL- Rasheed’s A Most Masculine State:Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia”, *Women’s StudiesQuarterly*,42(3).

conservative.⁹⁶ The influence of extremist religion became visible at the time of the Mecca Mosque incident, when the school curriculum included religious lectures, by sheiks who frequently visited schools to give lectures via the public address system.⁹⁷ These religious lectures were overwhelmingly designed to arouse feelings of guilt or fear in the young Saudi students' hearts. Mostly, the religious teaching concentrated on proper maintenance of the Islamic norms, including timely prayers, obeying the veil system and ensuring a moral and virtuous life which can escape the dangers of God's condemnation from eternal hellfires. It denounced culturally and any kind of modern activities, which were inconsistent with religious principles. What remained the most striking part was that it successfully created so much hatred and fear towards modern lifestyle, that innocent student like Manal also started believing and in turn trying her best to draw the members of the family towards religious extremism. It changed the lively Manal who used to question everything before accepting, to a compliant person, always afraid of breaking any religious norm of the society. The author analyzed the situation to portray the control of religious authorities at that time.

“There was a suffocating control over everything. Independent thought was discouraged, visual, audio and print media were equally lacking in freedom. The censorship of books left no survivors. Political writings, historical narratives, even romantic novel – any type of book considered to conflict with the prevailing extreme Salafist doctrine was banned. Students in other countries might rebel against this madness, but the widespread illiteracy of our parents and the manner in which we were taught –dictation without discussion, memorizing and repeating without

⁹⁶ Narayan, Manjula(2017) “ Review: Daring to Drive by Manal Al- Sharif”,Hindustan Times, 28 July, 2017.

⁹⁷ Al- Sharif, Manal(2017), “Daring to Drive”,Great Britain: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd.

analysis or activism –molded and subjugated us in such a way that we became domesticated and tame.”⁹⁸

As Manal came from a humble background, her career ambitions were her first priority and she managed to enter King Abdulaziz University in spite of the family’s initial decisions to marry before. From the time that Manal got appointed to the Aramco Information Protection Division as a professional technical employee, the first female employee in the department, Manal’s close-ended view towards life changed.⁹⁹ Manal realized the pitfalls of male guardianship system which restricted Saudi girls from seeking employment opportunities without guardian’s approval. “Everything I was doing- living and working far away from my family without a male relative to monitor me – was socially unacceptable for a Saudi girl.” She was exposed to the restrictions on Saudi born women and the difference of treatment to her in the workplace. Unlike Saudi men, Saudi women were not allowed to apply for the homeownership loan or the housing allowance, nor could they apply for a scholarship program to study abroad. Also, women were not permitted to take jobs in the oil fields or refineries, they were only restricted to office work.¹⁰⁰ This discriminatory treatment towards women, though at first made it difficult for Manal to adjust, later her high spirits and courageous attitude helped her to settle in. Manal discovered later that his colleagues did not disclose her name and kept it a secret to their wives because they know that their wives would not feel comfortable and eventually feel insecure about a women’s presence in a male-dominated the workplace.¹⁰¹ The reason for their insecurity essentially reflected upon the existence of polygamy, which has been considered a religious obligation in Saudi Society. Women’s insecurity with their husbands, indulging in such indigenous practice exposed the

⁹⁸ Al- Sharif, Manal(2017), “Daring to Drive”,Great Britain: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Narayan, Manjula(2017) “ Review: Daring to Drive by Manal Al- Sharif”,Hindustan Times, 28 July, 2017

¹⁰¹ Al- Sharif, Manal(2017), “Daring to Drive”,Great Britain: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd.

restrictive social norms in the patriarchal society. “When women reach the end of their child bearing years, the man goes and finds someone younger.”¹⁰²Manal’s realization revealed the bare truth that plagues women’s lives in Saudi society. Manal eventually fall for a man in the workplace, with whom she decided to spend the rest of her life though they had major differences in looking at life. Her husband held a very conservative religious outlook and gave Manal strict advice on maintaining her veil properly, to comply with the Saudi custom and also to leave the job, as no religious man can allow her wife to work in a male-dominated workplace. Manal’s husband was just like most of the Saudi men in Saudi Arabia, imposing control and taking pride in return over their women. “Don’t walk quickly as a man does. Don’t talk in a loud voice, don’t talk to your workmates about anything except work. You will not make the next business trip on your you’re your brother will accompany you.”¹⁰³The treatment Manal received from her husband only reaffirmed the misogyny that is widespread in Saudi society. After a point of time, Manal faced divorce in her absence, which again shed light on the discriminatory condition that women faced for receiving their basic social rights. When she entered her new life with her son in the Aramco flat, problems started arising for her. Manal once faced tremendous humiliation as she was alone in the road and it gave Saudi men a chance to leer at her and made Manal regret that despite having her own car she could not drive and get out of this situation because of the women’s driving ban in the country. Manal then knew afterward from her colleague that there was no such legal traffic code preventing women to drive but only the Saudi customs and this gave Manal confidence to gather women through the social media and launch her campaign ‘Women2 drive’ in Facebook and Twitter later.¹⁰⁴ She posted a video on u tube driving alone, showing her courageous and bold side, and

^{cc} Al- Sharif, Manal(2017), “Daring to Drive”,Great Britain: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd.

¹⁰³ Al- Sharif, Manal(2017), “Daring to Drive”,Great Britain: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd

¹⁰⁴ Al- Sharif, Manal(2017), “Daring to Drive”,Great Britain: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd.

from then her life became miserable. Saudi Arabia has placed customs and traditions at supreme importance and the violation of these customs could lead to imprisonment, even stoning in public.¹⁰⁵ For Manal, it was imprisonment for some time, which she eventually escaped by making her father apologize to the Saudi Prince, the highest authority in Saudi Arabia.

Manal's experience while being imprisoned in Saudi Arabia made her realize the implications of being born a woman in such a sex-segregated country. Breaking a Saudi tradition could cost women in the country their own life without seeing whether they have committed a crime in the eyes of the law or not. The king made sure that Saudi society reinforces the conservative religious dogmas and principles among women. Any activity that has been considered as immoral by the religious police, became a matter of concern for the Saudi monarchy, who punished the convicted according to his own wish. This has been proved to be true in Manal's own experience which she articulated in her literary piece. "During Friday prayers at Mosque across the country, the Imams stood up and applauded my arrest. In fiery sermons, they denounced me as a bad influence on other women. They condemned me for corrupting the society and they accused me of blasphemy and seeking to destroy Islam."¹⁰⁶In Manal's case, her involvement with the foreign media made the Saudi authorities wary of her intentions and as a result, she got imprisoned without prior notice or an arrest warrant. As soon as the United States criticized Saudi Arabia for jailing a woman for driving, the Saudi Prince decided to set her free. Maintaining the conservative image of the country and its legitimacy in the Western World remained the State's utmost concern.

¹⁰⁵ Kumar, Priyanka(2017), "In search of Strong women",Accessed on 7 December 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/in-search-of-strong-women/>

¹⁰⁶ Al- Sharif, Manal(2017), "Daring to Drive",Great Britain: Simon and Schuster UK Ltd.

In a country where earlier women could not leave jail without the presence of their guardian or mahram and also could not represent themselves in court, explain the condition in which women lived, which recently met with a change, granting these rights to women. However, limited changes have not been able to alter the discrimination that women experienced with regard to men in the public and private sphere, denying them the right to make her own decisions with regard to her work, education, the choice of marriage and even for the basic requirements of mobility. This guardianship law reduced women to wards or even the property of their male relatives and the state. Not only it inhibited women's freedom but also rendered them helpless without her assigned male guardian.¹⁰⁷ Thus, Manal Al- Sharif's revealing account of her own experience has made it quite clear that though limited changes took place, Saudi women's emancipation did not gain conformity in the patriarchal structure of the society.

¹⁰⁷ Kumar, Priyanka(2017),” In Search of Strong Women”,Accessed on 7 December, 2018 ,<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/in-search-of-strong-women/>

CHAPTER 4

ISLAM AND WOMEN'S POSITION IN SAUDI ARABIA

The issue of the Status of women in Islam has always been controversial. At the center of this conflict remains the dilemma of Muslim Women's human rights- whether Muslim Women have rights because they are human beings, or because they are Muslim Women.¹⁰⁸ There are one half a billion women in the Muslim World living in a vastly different land, cultures, societies, politics, and economy. A large number of these women live in highly restricted boundaries created by social, political and economic spheres. It is of no doubt that Saudi Arabia occupies the role of the most fundamentalist country in dealing with women's issues in the Muslim world. The social restrictions and taboos imposed on them are being debated in modern times. But the irony is that the restrictions and the taboos imposed on women have been sanctified by the Holy Quran, the primary source of every Muslim's faith and practice.¹⁰⁹ Saudi Arabia therefore remains bound by the main source of their religion Quran, and also a collection of traditions in the name of Prophet Muhammad's daily practices, known as Hadith, which constitute the major source of guidance for maintaining religion in the country.¹¹⁰ Thus, issues relating to the status of women in Saudi Arabia have always been sought in the Islamic interpretations regarding women's role in the country, which holds supreme importance till

¹⁰⁸ Deitl, Gulshan(2014), "Human Rights in Islam the case of Saudi Arabia", Delhi: Jawarlal Nehru University .

¹⁰⁹ Kamguiyan, Azam(2018), "Islam and Women's Rights", Accessed on 2 January 2019, <http://centerforinquiry.org>

¹¹⁰ Doumato, Eleanor Abdella(2000), "Getting God's Ear: Women, Islam and Healing in Saudi Arabia", New York: Columbia University Press.

now. Debates regarding women's rights, their position in society, and their responsibilities towards the development of the country have worried conservatives and modernists alike. The presence of millions of expatriate workers, the scene of American women driving military vehicles during the Gulf War and the introduction of education for women in the country, among other factors, have put extreme pressure on the rulers to concede more rights to the women.¹¹¹ But the degree to which the rulers granted rights for women were far from satisfactory and this inevitably required the need to go back to the roots to explore the situation of women in Islam.

Islam's view on Women :

Islam regards women to be equal to men as human beings. From the Islamic viewpoint, women as human beings should be treated with care and affection. The position of women as a mother, wife, and a daughter is highly exalted in the Islamic tradition, which can be seen through its various principles.

As mothers, women enjoy great respect in Islam. The Quran advises Muslims to show love, gratitude, and consideration for parents, particularly mother's. The Prophet has taught his followers to look after their mothers and obey them. Disobeying parents, especially mothers, has been regarded as one of the greatest of all sins. The prophet's sayings remain significant in this context, which mentioned "Do not leave your mother unless she gives you permission or death takes her, because it is the greatest deed for your reward. Whoever kisses his mother between the eyes is protected from fire".¹¹² The Prophet has gone so far as to say: "Even Paradise lies underneath the feet of you mothers." The Quran reminds man that he must always keep in mind that it

¹¹¹ Kamguiyan, Azam(2018), "Islam and Women's Rights", Accessed on 2 January 2019, <http://centerforinquiry.org>.

¹¹² Aliah Schleifer, "Motherhood in Islam" (1986), Cambridge: The Islamic Academy .

was his mother who had borne him in her womb, suffered much on his account and reared him up after making all kinds of sacrifices.¹¹³

Both Quran and Sunnah gives importance to good treatment of wives. A cordial relationship between husband and wife is strongly recommended. The Quran says, “They (wives) are a raiment to you and you are a raiment to them.”¹¹⁴The Prophet laid great stress upon good treatment of a wife and said the best of you are they who behave best to their wives. A Muslim must not hate his wife, and if he is displeased with one bad quality in her, let him be pleased with one that is good. Apart from these recommendations, the Prophet set a good example as the model husband who treated his wives with loving compassion and due consideration.¹¹⁵

With regard to a woman as a daughter, the Quran referred to the Pre Islamic behavior at the birth of daughters. The Quran reads, “When if one of them receives tidings of the birth of a female, his face remained darkened, and he is wroth inwardly.”¹¹⁶This makes it clear that before the advent of Islam, daughters were very disfavored and sought after. Islam is against such cruelties and insists on equal treatment between the two sexes. The Prophet urges parents not to make any difference between male and female children, and to be kind to them, particularly young girls. It has been mentioned in Hadith that “If a daughter is born to a man and he brings her up affectionately, shows her no disrespect and treats her in the same manner as he treats his sons, the Lord will reward him with paradise.”¹¹⁷

¹¹³ Hamidullah, Muhammad(1992), “Introduction to Islam”, New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan.

¹¹⁴ The Quran, 2:187, Quoted by Al- Baqrah, <https://quran.com>Al-Baqarah>

¹¹⁵ ,Muhammad, Hamidullah(1992), “Introduction to Islam”, New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan.

¹¹⁶ The Quran, 16:58, Quoted by Surah An- Nahl, Accessed on 5 December 2018, <https://quran.com>An-Nahl>

¹¹⁷ Farooq, Umar(2013), “ Importance of Women Education in Islam”, Accessed on 2 December 2018, <http://www.studylecturenotes.com/social-sciences/education/399-importance-of-women-education-in-islam>

Women in Saudi religious orthodoxy:

In Islam, women have been given an idealized role as mothers, daughters, and wives in the Muslim societies of the world. Here, it is important to acknowledge that the relationship between Islam and women's rights have been and remains politically contingent in Saudi Arabia. While influenced by West, and by Islamic modernism, legal reform and voting rights, educational and employment opportunities, alters and broadens women's role in many Muslim countries, Saudi Arabia proclaims itself as an Islamic State governed by the Sharia law.¹¹⁸ The State has made sure that oil wealth and cheap foreign labor reinforce more traditional norms and values regarding a women's place in society and the family. Though Saudi Arabia has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women(CEDAW) in 2000, women's claim upon the universal realm of full citizenship remain fragile and can easily be sacrificed or clawed back in the name of cultural or national integrity.¹¹⁹ Women's involvement in education, employment, business, and family relations portray their role granted by the state in social, economic and cultural spheres. This remains extremely significant to get a clear picture regarding women's condition and status in Saudi Arabia.

Women's Education in Saudi Arabia: Constraints and Opportunities

The Quran, the main source of religious guidance among Muslims, advocate the rights of women and men equally to seek knowledge. It also says, "Allah will exalt those who believe among you and those who have the knowledge, to

¹¹⁸ Sharia Law- A set of Islamic canonical law based on the teachings of Quran and the traditions of Prophet Mohammed.

¹¹⁹ Anwar, Zainah(2011), "CEDAW and Muslim Family Laws", Accessed on 2 December 2018, <https://www.musawah.org/uploads/2018/11>

high ranks.”¹²⁰The Prophet’s teaching moreover encourages education for both males and females and even that slave girls should be educated. His guidance reflects that seeking knowledge is a matter of religious duty binding upon every Muslim man and woman. Though the Quran has brought some amount of reformation into Saudi Arabia fourteen hundred years ago, with regard to the role and status of women in society, not much change can be seen in society. From day to day affairs to the political affairs, Islam as a religion is embedded in the minds of the people in Saudi Arabia. It gives a conservative role to women for maintaining the religious orthodoxy that Saudi Arabia is. As compared to men, a number of Quranic verses give a derogative and degraded status to women. Though the Quran has mentioned the right of the woman to seek knowledge, it has also signified the restrictions, which require women to maintain strict sex segregation in public places. Women can appear in public places with faces and hands uncovered but there are restrictions which emphasize on their appearance in the educational institutions, as they must cover their hair and wear long dresses, that eventually limits their movement and their freedom to work with men or take part in co-education.¹²¹ Education for women in Saudi Arabia has started only in the 1960s when the late King Faisal introduced female education in the kingdom.¹²² Before that, public education for girls was non-existent as females were kept at home under the authority of their fathers and husbands. Girls’ education was therefore restricted to the home, where an old Sheikh used to teach them how to read the Quran and the basics of writing.

Though the first Directorate of Education was formed in 1926 in order to supervise private schools and to create a system of government supported

¹²⁰ The Quran, 58:9, Quoted by Surah Al- Mujadila, <https://quran.com/58/9>

¹²¹ El-Fadl, Khaled Aboul(2001), “Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women”, Oxford: Oneworld.

¹²² Al- Rasheed, Madawi (2002),“A Most Masculine State: History, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia”, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

education for boys only, there was no provision for girls' school at that time. It was only after the establishment of a united kingdom by King Abdul Aziz in 1932, that serious attempts were made in the direction of public education. Moreover, the concern for education emerged after the development of the economy as a result of the discovery of oil in the 1930s.¹²³ The Ministry of Education was established in 1953, and the first public schools for boys opened in the same year. Girls were still confined in their homes by the traditional norms of sex segregation and had very little exposure to the outside world. Their biological constitution and their maternal functions rendered them unsuited for any kind of formal education. In 1956, the wife of King Abdullah, Iffat founded the first school for girls' in the kingdom. However, the initiative of public education for women was accomplished amid great controversy and met with resistance. The main opponents of girls' education were the *Ulema* the conservative religious elements, who claimed that the planned establishment of schools for girls would lead to their moral degeneration and destroy the foundations of the family.¹²⁴ According to them, girls should be kept home, which is the ideal place for her to remain protected and a shield from learning disruptive ideas at school.¹²⁵ King Faisal drew on the Quran to convince the conservative elements that Islam imposed no barriers on the education of women, and on the contrary, the Hadith espoused education regardless of sex. Faisal also convinced the male conservative elements that education could help girls to learn the Quran, and thus become better Muslim mothers, able to teach their children in the future.¹²⁶ Thus, it remains clear how the Quran has been utilized to establish a fixed image of women in the country as the upholders of virtues and morality. In the

¹²³ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2013), " A Most Masculine State: Gender, Politics and Religion in Saudi Arabia", New York: Cambridge University Press.

¹²⁴ Ulema- A body of Muslim scholars who are recognized as having specialist knowledge of Islamic sacred law and theology.

¹²⁵ El Fadl, Khaled Abou(2001), "Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women", Oxford: Oneworld.

¹²⁶ Mona Almunajjed (1997), "Women in Saudi Arabia today", New York: St. Martin's Press.

beginning, in 1960, 22 percent of boys and 2 percent of girls were enrolled.¹²⁷ Within a few years, however, public perceptions towards girls' education changed radically, and the general population became strongly supportive. In 1989 the number of girls enrolled in the public school system was close to the number of boys: almost 1.2 million girls out of a total of 2.6 million students, or 44 percent.¹²⁸ By the year 2001, the total number of female students in the kingdom was 2,420,198 out of total 5,015,650 students, accounting to more than 48 percent.¹²⁹ However, some elements of the powerful Ulema remained suspicious of the actions of the Ministry of Education and continued to resist the modern educational approach for girls' schools. In order to obtain their support, King Faisal decided to work hand- in- hand with the Ulema within the traditional power structure and appointed conservative religious leaders to head the education of girls.¹³⁰ But later, The General Presidency of Girls' School, under the authority of the religious Ulema, closed down due to a fire incident in March 2002 in which innocent girls died. The religious police were blamed for intentionally obstructing the evacuation efforts, as the girls were not wearing the obligatory abaya designed for them. Though this incident caused a widespread public outcry, the government did not accept that the religious police were responsible, and simply merged the Presidency with the Ministry of Education¹³¹. It has to be mentioned that though girls' were permitted to attend school, the education system in Saudi Arabia showed a trend of treating male and females differently due to gender-based expectations of the society, which culminated from the interpretation of Quranic verses with regard to women. The school systems in Saudi Arabia directed boys and girls into different courses whereby boys are taught to think

¹²⁷ Al- Rawaf, Haya Saad and Symmons, Cyril(1991), " The Education of Women in Saudi Arabia", Vol. No. 27(3), Comparative Education,pp.287-295.

¹²⁸ "Saudi Arabia- Education"(2006),Accessed on 4 December 2018, 2006. [\),https://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/31.htm](https://countrystudies.us/saudi-arabia/31.htm)

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Almunajjed, Mona(1997), " Women in Saudi Arabia today", New York: St. Martin's Press.

¹³¹ Michaela Prokop(2003), " Saudi Arabia: The Politics Of Education", International Affairs, Vol.79, No.1, p.78

about male activities and girls are encouraged to develop their future roles as mothers and housewives. The curriculum in girls' school stressed courses that were suitable for the social and biological functions of a woman in a traditional society.¹³² Even higher education used to take place following the custom of sex segregation in the country. Young men and women attended separate institutions with separate facilities and administrations. Also, women were barred from studying subjects such as geology, petroleum, engineering, law, pharmacy, architecture, etc. When in 1962, for the first time, female were accepted at the King Saud University in Riyadh, several problems still persisted. There were a scarcity of female professors and search for competent professors were constant.¹³³ The male teachers used to teach female students indirectly, through the medium of Closed Circuit Television. However, the most frequent criticisms of the CCTV were that, despite the availability of telephones in the lecture theatre for students to question their lectures, communication was difficult because of classroom noise, boredom due to lack of positive participation and the absence of group discussion.¹³⁴ More than 34 percent of men teaching at men's universities hold doctorate degrees compared to only three percent of those who teach at women's universities and colleges.¹³⁵ Thus, the discrimination reflected the limitations of women's education which was institutionalized by the state. The curriculum mainly focused on religious studies, arts, home economics, etc and deliberately avoided the subjects like engineering, architecture for women as it would not suit their biological nature. It is only after the incident of 9/11, that the state adopted modernization discourse for women in the sphere of education, and opened Women's university which included streams like, computers,

¹³² Almunajjed, Mona(1997), " Women in Saudi Arabia today", New York: St. Martin's Press.

¹³³ Louay Bahry, " The New Saudi Woman: Modernizing in an Islamic Framework", The Middle East Journal, Vol.36, No.4, p.513.

¹³⁴ Al- Rawaf, Haya Saad and Symmons, Cyril(1991), " The Education of Women in Saudi Arabia", Vol. No. 27(3), *Comparitive Education*,pp.287-295.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

management, pharmacy, which was not previously deemed suitable for women. But, in contemporary times, most of the women opted for arts and humanities, as the education system in Saudi Arabia placed importance on theoretical studies, which lead to socially acceptable employment such as teaching. Technology-oriented education is rarely approached by women with the exception of the medical field.¹³⁶

The sharp difference between women's education and its contribution to national development has to be mentioned to get a clear picture of whether women's education benefitted society or not. The Eighth Development Plan of the kingdom emphasized a proactive role for women and encouraged their contribution to national development. The plan has sought to increase the participation of women to ensure their full inclusion in the development policies, strategies, and programs.¹³⁷ Though the enrollment and level of education of women have improved considerably in the kingdom throughout the decades, their contribution to the national development remains minimal. Women's pattern of socialization trends in higher education did not accomplish the objective of women's participation in overall social and economic development, which further confined women's participation to employment in government institutions and specifically in the education sector. The hold of the Ulemas over education and public policy was reflected in 1994, at the Conference of the United Nations' Population and Development in Cairo, from which Saudi Arabia withdrew because of their disapproval of conference topics such as birth control, abortion, equality between men and women, and coeducation.¹³⁸ Also, the expansion of the university system in Saudi Arabia enabled the kingdom to limit financial support for studying abroad. Such restrictions had long been the desire of

¹³⁶ Le Renard, Amelie(2008), "Only for Women: Women, the State, and Reform in Saudi Arabia", *Middle East Journal*, pp. 610-629.

¹³⁷ Draft Country Programme Document for Saudi Arabia (2007-2011), Accessed on 19 February 2019. <https://www.undp.org/execbrd/word/DCPSAUI/>

¹³⁸ Ibid., p.56.

some conservatives, who feared the negative influences on Saudi youth from studying abroad. Enforcement of the male guardianship rule, which imposed a restriction on women's mobility without their guardian or chaperon, discouraged prospective students from studying abroad.¹³⁹ Though limited changes came up in contemporary times with regard to the availability of scholarships to study abroad and also opening up different streams of education, the education system continuing for decades reflected a trend which has not been conducive to women's development in this sphere. The male guardianship system and the sex segregation in public places disrupted women's freedom of movement and eventually placed hazards on women's choice to freely choose the path they deem necessary for their development.

Women in Saudi economy:

The Eighth Development Plan of the Saudi Kingdom placed greater emphasis on the potential role of women in the country and the need for more opportunities for employment for them. The plan also identified the routes to achieve such female participation through upgrading the capabilities of Saudi Women, and the removal of obstacles that constrained their increased participation in economic and development activities.¹⁴⁰ However, despite this paper works, in reality, women in Saudi Arabia faced a lot of restrictions in the field of employment, which is imposed by the government. Women in Saudi Arabia have been allowed to work only within the fields mentioned by the government. Opportunities for women to work remained available within restricted areas such as education, nursing and social services where they operate without being in the public domain or interacting with men. These areas have been thought to be suitable to women's nature and thus women

¹³⁹ <http://countrystudies.us/Saudi-arabai/31.htm>, accessed on 23 February 2019.

¹⁴⁰ Saudi Arabia: Women and the Millenium Development Goals, Riyadh: UNDP,2006, <https://www.undp.org>, accessed on 23 February 2019

were permitted to work in these particular areas. Saudi labour law, as a result of sex segregation, prevented women from working in places where they would come in contact with men. It stated, “In no case, may men and women come in places of work or in accessing facilities or other appurtenances thereto”.¹⁴¹In the highly sex-segregated environment, natural, women’s options were limited to educational institutions, hospitals and women only service business. The liberal and conservative women remained divided on this issue and while they argue that the failure to utilize female labour has been tantamount to paralyzing half of the society, the conservatives gave their support in favour of limitations on women’s work, arguing that Islamic traditions and customs have defined women’s roles and broadening these roles would harm family relationships.¹⁴² This division only resulted in the increasing cultural barriers that limit the productivity of the better-educated half of the Saudi workforce. Also, the Saudi woman did not receive the same salary and other benefits as Saudi men. With this level of discrimination, it has been the primary goal of Saudi women to simply find a job or position in the public or private sector. The State’s mission has been to ensure that women’s work confirms to the religion, customs, and local tradition of the country. Opposition to the idea of women working outside their home has been reflected in Sheikh Abd Al Aziz ibn Baz ,then head of the Council of Senior Ulema and Grand Mufti, who suggested that , “removing a women from her home, which is her kingdom, means removing her from what her natural state and her character requires. Women entering the realm of men are a danger for Islamic society in that it leads to the mixing of the sexes which is considered the main path to adultery, which splits the society and wrecks morals.”¹⁴³Conservative and traditionalist elements have always focused on

¹⁴¹ Article 160 of the Labour and Workmen Law of Saudi Arabia

¹⁴² Deitl,Gulshan(2014), “Human Rights in Islam the case of Saudi Arabia”,Delhi:Jawarlal Nehru University .

¹⁴³ Eleanor Abdella Doumato, “ Women and Work in Saudi Arabia: How Flexible are Islamic Margins?”,Middle East Journal, Vol. No. 53(4), pp.568-583.

the reproductive capacity of women and on motherhood as women's major goal in life. To them, if a woman has been successful in her role as mother and housewife, then she has provided society with her best service. Therefore, most of the women preferred teaching as their profession, because of the constant encouragement of both the State and the religious authorities in Saudi Arabia. Also, though through the years, women have established their presence in the media, they have progressed little, especially in the decision-making areas. They have reached high positions within the local radio and Television stations but not at the administrative and executive level in the Ministry of Education.¹⁴⁴ The Saudi State allowed its growth only in spheres that did not challenge the authority of the State. It has to be mentioned that whether "Saudisation", the process of replacing foreigners with indigenous workers, should go to women, depended upon the jobs in keeping with Islamic Sharia. But, whether jobs currently held by foreigners would be considered appropriate for women and made available to them remained a question.¹⁴⁵

While many women preferred segregation of sexes, as they viewed this as an opportunity for them not to compete with men and more jobs in women-only spaces, they were ignorant of the fact that some of the solutions offered to the problem of sex segregation were also a means to perpetuate it. Separate women's malls, banks, industrial zones, separate education facilities provided some jobs for women, but at the same time, they validated sex segregation as a social system when segregation itself has been a model of inequality. Sex segregation in civic life remained patently unworkable as a means of distributing social benefits equally, thus institutionalizing segregation and claiming it as a proof that Islam and feminism have been compatible exposed

¹⁴⁴ Maha Akeel(2007), "Empowering Women in Saudi Arabia", Arab News, 6 January ,2007.

¹⁴⁵ Eleanor Abdella Doumato, "Education in Saudi Arabia: Gender, Jobs and the Price of Religion" in Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Marsha Pripstein Posusney(eds.), Women and Globalisation in the Arab Middle East : Gender, Economy and Society(London, Lynne Reiner, 2003), p.251.

the effect of reinscribing back into society the very ideology of gender hierarchy that justified separation by sex in the first place.¹⁴⁶ Thus, the problem of unemployment had its roots in the Saudi culture and religious tradition which denied women the rights of being treated as equal in the workplace. However, as the numbers of women opting for higher studies increased day by day, the Saudi government sought to improve the rights of women through a series of initiatives in this direction. At the National Dialogue Committee, women's issues were discussed in 2004 and also the Majlis created a women's committee as a "consultative body" and nominated the woman who could be called to offer their opinion on women related issues.¹⁴⁷ These steps were though praised, but were far from satisfactory as it failed to integrate the majority of the women's population through these reforms. Only a small section of highly educated women got chance to participate, but because of the structural deficiency inherent in the society in the form of male guardianship and sex segregation system, these reforms did not indicate improvement in women's economic opportunities in the country.¹⁴⁸ The religious authorities stressed on maintaining the religious cultural structure of the Saudi society as a whole and it was in the interest of the Saudi state to not confront the Ulama, so as to maintain the status quo between them. Thus, in matters of women's employment opportunities, the balance of power between the religious authorities and the royal family remained the most important criterion determining the overall position of women in the country.

However, women in Saudi Arabia are free to inherit and manage the property, which is continuing in the present times. Women actually inherit more of the

¹⁴⁶ Doumato, Eleanor Abdella(1999), "Women and Work in Saudi Arabia: How Flexible are Islamic Margins?" Middle East Journal, Vol. No. 53, pp.568-583.

¹⁴⁷ Le Renard, Amelie(2008), "Only for Women: Women, the State, and Reform in Saudi Arabia", Middle East Journal, Vol. No. 62(4), pp.610-629.

¹⁴⁸ Le Renard, Amelie(2008), "Only for Women: Women, the State, and Reform in Saudi Arabia", Middle East Journal, Vol. No. 62(4), pp.610-629.

nation's wealth through matrilineal lines than Saudi law might indicate and also hold a substantial amount of Saudi Arabia's private capital. This results in the independent women-only businesses that women indulge in, including retail manufacturing business, in wedding service, event facilities, and restaurants combining areas of entertainment and also in local chambers of commerce and industry in the country. According to Abdul Wahab Attar, Saudi Arabia's permanent representative to the United Nations, women now own more than 20,000 companies and business establishments and hold 21 percent of total private investments.¹⁴⁹ Also, there is no distinction between men and women over the control and use of their money under the Sharia or Kingdom's statutory rules. Perhaps, this idea of giving women the right to own and manage their own property flows from the fact that Khadija, the first wife of Prophet Muhammad was a successful and independent entrepreneur. Islam claims that the Quran has given women Islamic and social rights long before such rights were given to Western women. From the beginning of Islam, women have been legally entitled to inherit and bequeath property, holding their wealth in their own names even after marriage, without obligation to contribute that wealth to their husband or their family.¹⁵⁰ However, the policy of sex segregation in Saudi Arabia has an effect on women's business. This is reflected in the fact that, while women can be a major shareholder in a company, she is not allowed to attend a board of directors' meeting as it will involve both men and women. Instead, she must be represented by her guardian on behalf of her. The reason given for the strict sex segregation is that the religious authorities prohibit *Khilwa*, known as the mixing of both the sexes in public places. Also, a woman traveling on business is usually accompanied by another woman, either a female relative or a

¹⁴⁹ P.K. Abdul Ghafour, "Women control 21% of Kingdom's investments", <https://www.arabnews.com/services/print/print.asp?>, accessed on 17 february 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Fouad Al- Farsy(1990), "Modernity and Tradition: The Saudi Equation", London: Kegan Paul International.

woman hired for the job.¹⁵¹ These restrictive practices hinder women's prospect for business. But, in order to survive in today's business and professional environment, women also find ways to escape the strict laws of sex segregation system, which in turn reveals the hypocrisy built into it. To engage in activities outside one's home, either one pretends that the interaction did not occur, or one must intellectually categorize male intermediaries as gender-neutral, especially drivers, business managers, and house cleaners, or one must confine business relationships within lofty and rarefied elite circles that are above sex segregation rules among themselves. For all women, discretion in public is the sine qua non of social survival.¹⁵²

Women in Domestic Sphere :

Family, which is considered to be the very foundation of society, is the arena where women face exclusion the most. Young girls in Saudi Arabia become subject to early socialization that ingrains in their minds the necessity of marriage in motherhood in a country which signifies their women as the symbol of purity. Marriages in Saudi Arabia indicate a consolidation of family ties, thus having social dimensions, rather than an individual proposition. For some groups, the joining of families through marriage is used as a way of increasing their symbolic and material capital.¹⁵³ Marital alignments can also have political consequences as those who are politically influential have the option of extending jobs and access to relatives by marriage. Therefore, marriages reveal the influence of political and religious matters, denying women their autonomy in choosing their own husbands. Also, marriages in

¹⁵¹ Khilwa-The presence of unrelated men and women in any confined place in Saudi Arabia.

¹⁵² Doumato, Eleanor Abdella(1999), "Women and Work in Saudi Arabia: How Flexible are Islamic Margins?" Middle East Journal, Vol. No. 53, pp.568-583.

¹⁵³ Saraya Altorki(1986), "Women in Saudi Arabia: Ideology and Behaviour among the Elite", New York: Columbia University Press, p.145.

Saudi Arabia are always threatened by the possibility of polygamy. Saudi men are allowed to marry up to four women on legal and religious grounds, and women do not possess any right to claim their objection in this matter. Even, while Saudi Men can divorce anytime they want to, Saudi Women can divorce only once, which involves a long and complicated judicial procedure. For this reason, most women express a fear of divorce as an alternative open to men but denied to women, which leads to guarantee the asymmetric power relations between husband and wife.¹⁵⁴ It must be noted that the divorce rate in Saudi Arabia has steadily been on rising compared to the other countries in the world. The involvement of husbands in illicit relationships has been the most common factor behind these divorces.

Veil System:

Women in their domestic sphere experience the most prominent symbol of subjugation in the prevalence of the veil system in the country. It reveals the perpetuation of a patriarchal social order which monitors their appearance every moment in the public sphere. The practice of veiling has been drawn from some verses of Quran, which says, “Tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest, and to display of their adornment, only that which is apparent and to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their adornment save to their own husbands or fathers, or husband’s fathers, or their sons or their husband’s sons, or their brothers’ sons or sisters’ sons or their women, or their slaves or male attendants who lack vigor, or children who know naught of women’s nakedness. And let them not stamp their feet so as to reveal what they hide of their adornment.”¹⁵⁵ This social norm has been

¹⁵⁴ Kucinskas, Jaime(2010), “A Research Note on Islam and Gender Egalitarianism: An Examination of Egyptian and Saudi Arabian Youth Attitudes.”, Vol. No.4, pp.761-770.

¹⁵⁵ The Quran, 24:31, Quoted by Surah An- Nur, Accessed on 4 December2018,.<https://quran.com/24/31-41>

enforced by the religious police rigorously, the prohibition of which cost severe harassment, punishment to the women of the country. This became evident in the 2002 fire accident in school; where the religious authorities prevented the schoolgirls from leaving the blazing building as they were not correctly veiled and not wearing proper Islamic dress.¹⁵⁶ As a result, this imposition of cultural norm took innocent girls' lives. Though some changes were introduced in wearing abayas, the existence of the veil system indicated the intention of the ruling elites to continue with the patriarchal social order, where the subjugation of women remained inevitable.¹⁵⁷

Women's Role in Politics:

In Saudi Arabia, political participation and decision making remained an exclusive domain of the males. Women were neither represented in the government nor in the consultative council and were forbidden to even criticize this legal discrimination. The situation changed only after the incident of 9/11, which made the Saudi State seek its legitimacy by introducing some significant reforms in the country. Thus, in February 2005, King Abdullah announced for women's participation both in the Consultative Council and the Municipal Elections as both voters and candidates in 2015.¹⁵⁸ Saudi woman finally got to vote and run the elections for a new board of directors of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry. In 2009, for the first time, a woman was appointed deputy minister of education and another was appointed university director for Princess Noura bint Abdul Rahman University, a public

¹⁵⁶ Prokop, Michaela(2003), "Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education", International Affairs, Vol. No.79(1), pp.77- 89.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Rajkhan, Fouad Safaa(2014), "Women in Saudi Arabia: Status, Rights and Limitations", Accessed on 4 December 2018, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/handle>

women's University in Riyadh.¹⁵⁹ This was regarded as a major step forward for women in the country, especially when they were barred from participating in the Municipal elections held in the country. But the reality did not change. The Saudi State carefully co-opted the highly educated elite women in the country whose contribution did not bolster development for the general population of the country. Even, these elite women faced difficulties in participating in the political system of the country because of the existence of social and religious barriers, in the form of male guardianship system and the sex segregation system in public spheres.¹⁶⁰ Thus, it can be said that politics has always been the exclusive domain of the Saudi state, and women's place has been kept minimal as per the wish of the state to secure its authoritative image in the world.

Women in Saudi Arabia have seen shifts and changes in the form of reforms to relax some of the restrictions imposed upon them in social, economic, political, and religious spheres. Some of those changes are considered as beneficial in changing the extreme form of exclusion of women in Saudi societies. But the contradictions remain. Whether in the discriminatory practices between men and women, ensured in the religious texts, or the societal norms influenced by the domination of the religious authorities, women have been given a generalized image in maintaining and upholding the purity of the nation. The perpetuation and control of the religious authorities, with the support of the State, ensured the search for their own individuality non-existent in Saudi Arabia. Further, the enforcement and manipulation of the Islamic norms and principles confirm their persistent subjugation in the country.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Al- Rasheed, Madawi(2007), "Saudi Arabia Post 9/11: History, Religion and Security", Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. No.43(1), pp.153-160.

Chapter 5

IMPACT OF REFORMS INITIATED BY PRINCE MOHAMMED BIN SALMAN

Women in Saudi Arabia have suffered an extreme form of exclusion in social, economic and political spheres. The difference of treatment in comparison with men reveals their position in the country that is to conform to the religious practices in order to maintain the purity of the nation. Reforms initiated for women have not been able to introduce any real change in the country. But there has been a significant change in looking at women's position in recent years. Saudi Arabia has been going through a period of transformation that is focused on diversifying its oil-dependent economy. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman initiated an ambitious plan which directed its attention towards relaxation of restrictions for women of the country, under the label "Vision 2030".¹⁶¹ The State's vision towards women created an environment to look for gender equality which has not been on the agenda of the state since its establishment. The liberal stances of the reforms revealed various dimensions to look at the reforms, so as to make an assessment of the impact it initiated on the women of the country.

Reforms in Pre- Salman Era:

Saudi Arabia has made a series of limited changes over the last 10 years to ease restrictions on women. Allowing women to participate in the country's limited political space, actively encouraging to enter the labor market and

¹⁶¹ "Saudi Women on the road to Vision 2030", Saudi Gazette, Riyadh, 14 April 2019.

taking steps to better respond to domestic violence, can be cited as notable examples in this regard. The incidents such as King Abdullah appointing women to the Shura Council, his highest advisory body in 2013 and also allowing women to participate in the municipal council elections on December 12, 2015, has been considered as a symbolic victory for women the first time in Saudi history.¹⁶² Women's participation in politics contributed to participation as the deputy minister in education only in 2019 and in 2013 the percentage of women rose not more than 20 percent in this sphere in comparison to the full participation of men who considered it as a male domain.¹⁶³ Also, in 2014, it granted license to the first Saudi female lawyer.¹⁶⁴ It can be seen that only a minority of elite educated women have been integrated into the political process that undermined the potential to cause any effective change in women's status in the country.

In the social sphere, Scholarships for women were provided after the 9/11 incident to study in universities abroad were highly appreciated among the women of the country Also, in this era, women's education was emphasized and women only universities were opened to include a range of subjects especially computers, management, pharmacy which were previously considered as the male-only domain. Even, Saudi Arabia has also worked to improve women's access to government services, which included enabling women to secure their own ID cards, issuing to divorced and widowed women family cards, just some months after the incident of 9/11 took place.¹⁶⁵ The

¹⁶²Le Renard, Amelie(2008), "Only for Women: Women, the State and Reform in Saudi Arabia", Middle East Journal, Vol. No.62(4), pp.610-629.

¹⁶³ Habibi, Nader(2019), "Implementing Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030: An Interim Balance Sheet", Centre for Middle East Studies, Vol.No. 127.

¹⁶⁴ Rajkhan, Fouad Safaa(2014), "Women in Saudi Arabia: Status,Rights and Limitations", Accessed on 4 November, 2018, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/handle>

¹⁶⁵ "Women and Saudi Arabia's Male Guardianship System", Accessed on 10 November 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/16/boxed/women-and-saudi-arabias-male-guardianship-system>

state has also taken steps to better respond to violence against women and to provide women which remained evident in the implementation of the law criminalizing domestic abuse in the country. Removing requirements that women bring a male relative to identify them in court has been regarded as another initiative for improving the condition of women. But it has not introduced any reform in the sphere of cultural and religious traditions that brings gender disparity the most in the country.

Although female labor participation is limited in Saudi Arabia, Saudi Women are getting educated as of their male counterparts in all levels of education. Over 93 percent of the educated females hold either a secondary qualification or a university degree versus 60 percent of employed men.¹⁶⁶ The reason for women's lack of participation has been attributed to social pressures and lack of family support which prevent them from entering the labor market. Since 2000, women's participation in the Saudi labour force has nearly tripled from 5.4 percent to 15.4 percent in 2013.¹⁶⁷ However, this cannot be termed as an improvement as it represented one of the lowest levels of national female employment rates in the region. Moreover, whereas male unemployment has shown a steady decrease, the issue of female unemployment has been increasing, which hinders the prospect of economic growth of the country.

Therefore, all these reforms remained partial and incomplete, introducing inconsequential changes in women's overall status in the country. These reforms only meant to ensure the participation of a small section of elite women, with whom the majority of women could not associate themselves. Inclusion of highly educated, elite women, who have been encouraged to take part in government sectors and the labour force, indicated a process of

¹⁶⁶ Almunajjed, Mona(2010) "Women's Employment in Saudi Arabia: A Major Challenge", Washington D.C: Booz& Company.

¹⁶⁷ Rajkhan, Fouad Safaa(2014), "Women in Saudi Arabia: Status,Rights and Limitations", Accessed on 4 November, 2018, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/handle>

authoritarian consolidation renewing the modalities of elite integration and the regime's legitimization.¹⁶⁸ It barely had any effect in elevating the status of educated but unemployed women in the country. Even the fact that just three months after the 9/11 incident in 2011, the Saudi authorities decision to grant national ID cards for the first time in the kingdom's history and in 2015, allowing highly educated women to participate in the Shura Council conforms to the notion, that using women's issues for political leverage has always been a part of Saudi Arabia's legitimization process¹⁶⁹.

“Vision 2030” project of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman:

Crown prince Mohammed bin Salman ascended to the throne of political power in 2015, as a part of a major restructuring of the government by his father King Salman. Being appointed as the Minister of defense and the deputy prime minister, it gave him unprecedented political power in the country.

Background of the Reform Drive:

Since Mohammed bin Salman's rise to power in 2015, he has been regarded as the “reformist” prince for the undertaking of reforms not only in the sphere of women but covering socio-cultural-economic spheres of the society, with the higher aim of transforming the economy from an oil-dependent economy to a post-oil economy. This came to be known as the Crown Prince's

¹⁶⁸ Le Renard, Amelie(2008), “Only for Women: Women, the State, and Reform in Saudi Arabia”, Middle East Journal, Vol.No.62(4), pp.610-629.

¹⁶⁹ Al- Khamri, Hana(2018), “Torture, reform and Women's Rights in Saudi Arabia”, Al Jazeera, 30 November 2018.

ambitious Saudi “Vision 2030” project in April 2016.¹⁷⁰ The driver behind the reform has shed light on the changing economic structure of the country. The income from oil is significantly challenged in the long run, both from the global overproduction and not least from the challenge by the low cost of solar power.¹⁷¹ Also, Saudi Arabia as a country experienced steep increases in the population. The old model, where the government through high oil incomes was able to secure the population high incomes and a comfortable lifestyle, had lost its relevance in the current situation of the country. Therefore, the state seeks reforms to diversify the economy, so as to bring in more sources of income apart from relying on the government. This reinforces the idea that large segments of the population need to work, migrant labor force needs to be reduced and job creation for Saudi citizens cannot any longer take place in the public sector. Therefore, the private sector needs to be revitalized for the inclusion of more Saudis to work there. Hence, Crown prince Salman launched the “Vision 2030”, a comprehensive long term plan, aspiring to transform Saudi Arabia into a vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation.¹⁷² The Saudi “Vision 2030” project saw a change in the social and cultural spheres, relaxing many restrictions previously followed by the country with the real motive of facilitating more economic participation by the Saudi Women to revitalize the country’s economy. The other reason remains to attract private investment to entertainment projects like movie theaters and amusement parks. Lifting of bans from the entertainment sector has been viewed as great signs of relief for Saudi women, who were previously barred from engaging in cultural and entertainment projects including music, dance, and even sports stadium. Though the reform did not remove the sex segregation in these public places, Saudi women view this as a

¹⁷⁰ Hvidt, Martin(2018), “The new role of Women in the new Saudi American economy”, Accessed on 5 January 2019, <https://www.sdu.dk/videncenter/artikler>

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² “Saudi Vision 2030”, Accessed on 8 December 2018, <https://vision2030.gov.sa/file/fid>

kind of personal freedom, being ignorant of the country's real motive. The same reason applies to Prince Salman's decision to finally end the ban on driving in September 2017, which was highly appreciated by the women of the country.¹⁷³ All these changes affecting women are deemed necessary for both establishing the modernized image in the western world and the desire to seek women's economic participation, extremely needed in the country.

Of the Saudi nationals, in comparison to 40percent men working in employment sectors, women comprised of not more than 10 percent in the workforce.¹⁷⁴ By international standards, these numbers are extremely low. Thus, in an effort to increase the total number of Saudis working, Vision 2030 makes a special effort to increase the percentage of women in the workforce. Prince Salman, terming Saudi women as great assets, talked about over 50 percent of female university graduates, who will be given opportunities to develop their talents, enhance their productive capabilities, and enable them to strengthen their future and contribute to the development of our Saudi Arabia's society and economy.¹⁷⁵ In a country where women have historically played a very restrictive public role, enabling women to play a more independent role is seen as "an economic debt that is sure to pay off"¹⁷⁶. Therefore, in order to start this process, Mohammed bin Salman has asked various entities in the public sector to post jobs targeted at women. In January 2018, the General Directorate of Passports advertised 140 posts for women to work in airports and land border crossings. Also, the Kingdom's Public Prosecution Office announced that it would recruit women as investigators for

¹⁷³ "Saudi Vision 2030", Accessed on 8 December 2018, <https://vision2030.gov.sa/file/fid>

¹⁷⁴ Hvidt, Martin(2018), "The new role of Women in the new Saudi American economy", Accessed on 5 January 2019, <https://www.sdu.dk/videncenter/artikler>

¹⁷⁵ "Saudi Vision 2030", Accessed on 8 December 2018, <https://vision2030.gov.sa/file/fid>

¹⁷⁶ "Women can drive now in Saudi Arabia . Here's what they still can't do.", Fortune, 28 September 2017

the first time.¹⁷⁷ The move by the Public Prosecution follows an announcement in January by the Ministry of Justice that it plans to recruit 300 women as social researchers, administrative assistants, Islamic jurisprudence researchers, and legal researchers. In addition, the employment of women within the military has opened up.¹⁷⁸ Thus, the opportunity for women in the workforce comes in conformity with Prince Salman's "Vision 2030". The most visible initiative taken to bring women into the job market and change their status in the society reflected in the decree issued by King Salman in September 2017, that from 24 th June, 2018 women will be allowed to drive.¹⁷⁹ The protests and campaigns for gaining this basic right of women since 1990s, which hinders their prospect of economic participation in the campaign and make them dependent upon their guardian or mahram for mobility, has finally been lifted because women are the need of the hour for the country.¹⁸⁰ This ban on the right to drive has made it common among Saudi families to hire a foreign driver, the cost of which cannot be borne by most families. Consequently, the high sex segregation system and the ban on the right to drive made women's mobility in the public place extremely difficult, causing very little participation from elite women in the workforce.

Motivations behind the reforms:

¹⁷⁷ Hvidt, Martin(2018), "The new role of Women in the new Saudi American economy", Accessed on 5 January 2019, <https://www.sdu.dk/videncenter/artikler>

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ "Saudi Vision 2030", Accessed on 8 December 2018, <https://vision2030.gov.sa/file/fid>

¹⁸⁰ Al- Sharif, Manal(2017), "Daring to Drive", Great Britain: Simon&SchusterUK Ltd.

Since Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ascent to power, the Crown Prince has advocated for reforms challenging the decades-old political-economic model of the Kingdom. These reforms made way for social liberalization, which seemed unattainable in the ultra-conservative Saudi Kingdom, with a Saudi tradition of political conservatism. The motivations and rationale behind Prince Salman's reforms, aiming to loosen the restrictions towards women, has to be taken into account for a proper understanding of the political context, which acted as the main driver for ensuring the State's legitimacy, with its effects on women's emancipation in the country.

Political Motivations:

Saudi Arabia, being situated at the heart of the MENA region, is as globally strategic as it is volatile, thus, considerations about political instability cannot but remain pivotal. The 2011 upheavals in the Arab world, the "Arab Spring" sent shockwaves not only through North Africa and the Levant but also the Gulf.¹⁸¹ Out of the six monarchies comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council, four of them, specifically, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait were affected by sustained protests, with varying degrees of intensity. The most intense and sustained protests in Saudi Arabia were localized in the Shia majority eastern province and thus largely perceived as a rebellion of a religious minority driven by sectarian motives and fuelled by Iran for political interests.¹⁸² But, a different phenomenon arose, involving large parts of the Sunni majority and especially young people. With the emergence of extremist Sunni militias in Syria, a long-standing trend set the young Saudis leaving to become foreign fighters, unleashed disproportionate magnitude. What remained evident from this situation is the disconnection of the Young Saudis

¹⁸¹ C. Bianco and G. Stansfield(2018), "The Intra GCC crises: mapping GCC fragmentation after 2011", *International Affairs*, Vol No.94(3),pp.613-635.

¹⁸² Ibid.

with the kingdom's rulers, manifested in attacks and campaigns against the Saudi State. Since the inception of the House of Saud as a state, ruling the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, it faced one of the most challenging times in terms of its legitimacy and its relationship with the population after 2011.¹⁸³ Therefore, when Prince Mohammad bin Salman established its hold over the country in 2015, he came forward with a set of reforms, representing a chance to bridge the gap between a traditionally elderly leadership and a nation composed, for approximately 70 percent of citizens under 30 years of age.¹⁸⁴ This explained Prince Salman's initiatives to identify the young Saudi population as a fundamental part of his "Vision 2030" project. Also, this dynamic is particularly embedded in politics in the era of populism, which acted as a catalyst, precipitating the theme of gender equality in this era.

Economic Motivations:

Saudi Arabia is uniquely defined by one main feature: its abundance of oil reserves, fuelling economies all around the world. However, at the domestic level, this factor impacted the kingdom not only economically, but also socially and politically. It has to be mentioned that 80 percent to 90 percent of Saudi Arabia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is directly or indirectly dependent on its oil resources.¹⁸⁵ This "oil addiction" underpins its political economy as a rentier state and through that impacts its socio-political and socio-economic structures. Rentier states play a dominant role in their economies by distributing resources to the population in the form of public

¹⁸³ Mabon, Simon(2012), "Kingdom in Crisis? The Arab Spring and Instability in Saudi Arabia", *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. No.33(2), pp.530-553.

¹⁸⁴ Hvidt, Martin(2018), "The new role of Women in the new Saudi American economy", Accessed on 5 January 2019, <https://www.sdu.dk/videncenter/artikler>

¹⁸⁵ Baghat,G(2016), " Lower for Longer: Saudi Arabia Adjusts to the New Oil Era", *Middle East Policy*, Vol. No.23(3), pp.39-48.

services, subsidies, and employment in state bureaucracies.¹⁸⁶ Individual wealth is thus not strictly related to individual productivity but rather results from the commercialization of the country's natural resources as managed by the state. However, in today's world, where oil prices are volatile and major economic powerhouses actively pursue new sources of energy, Prince Salman's project of "Vision 2030" has been perceived as the plan to prepare Saudi Arabia to overcome its addiction to oil. Indeed, "Vision 2030"s goals revolve around the idea that the state should start providing less for the population and the private sector should take over and increase its role in the production of the country's wealth, all in preparation of the post-oil era.¹⁸⁷ The financial wealth derived from oil revenues has long allowed the Al Saud monarchy to engage in a comprehensive form of co-optation towards all strata of the Saudi population that consolidate its rule and contribute to ensuring the monarchy's stability. Through extensive patronage, allocation of government contracts and cradle- to- grave welfare, the royal family ensured loyalty from the business elites, tribes, the religious establishment, and the ordinary Saudis.¹⁸⁸ The State distributed the revenues to Saudi citizens in the form of significant subsidies on housing, fuel, water, and electricity. The State remained the country's primary employer, as around 70 percent of Saudis work in the public sector.¹⁸⁹ Financing the comprehensive welfare state and extensive subsidies took a significant toll on Saudi Arabia's public finances, after the oil price crash in the job market. With the consistent population increase, Saudi Arabia saw a youth bulge, and consequently, the public sector increasingly lacked the ability to absorb the young workers entering the job market. Therefore, in the past few years, the percentage of unemployed Saudi

¹⁸⁶ Beblawi, Hazem(1987), "The Rentier State in the Arab World", Arab Studies Quarterly, Vol. No.9(4), pp.383-398.

¹⁸⁷ "Saudi Vision 2030", Accessed on 8 December 2018, <https://vision2030.gov.sa>

¹⁸⁸ M. Stancati and A. Al Omran(2016), "Saudi Arabia Faces Challenge in Enlarging Private Sector", Bloomberg, 7 June 2016.

¹⁸⁹ Hvidt, Martin(2018), " The new role of women in the Saudi Arabian Economy", accessed on 14 February 2019, <https://www.sdu.dk>

citizens under the age of 30 remained at around 30percent.¹⁹⁰ Looking at this dimension, Prince Salman's "Vision 2030" emphasized on a phased reduction in unproductive costs for the state, especially subsidies and redundant salaries, and increased investments in diversification and measures to spur the private sector, thus creating new jobs for Saudi youth.

Here comes the role of young Saudi women in contributing to the private sector as outlined in Prince Salman's "Vision 2030". The need for the more involvement of Saudi youths provides for equal opportunities for men and women in order to make Saudi Arabia a post-oil economy. Therefore, the state is integrating the educated but unemployed women in the project to see a real transformation of the welfare state. Thus, in order to secure economic efficiency and a major restructuring of the state's economy little steps have been taken in social and cultural spheres, which on one hand secures the state's modernist image and on the other hand, confirms women's participation in the economic sector, revealing women's emancipation in the interest of its broad project "Vision2030".

Limitations And Challenges Of The Reform Drive:

Prince Salman's ambitious plan of "Vision 2030" carves a significant place for women to increase their participation in the workforce in Saudi Arabia. This gives a chance to look at the spheres where women face extreme exclusion and how far Saudi Crown Prince Salman's "Vision 2030" helps in elevating women from their persistent subjugation in the social, cultural and economic spheres in the country.

¹⁹⁰ A Changing future: The economic role of women in Saudi Arabia", Abdul Latif Jameel, Jeddah, 31 January 2018

Challenges In Economic Domain

Most important changes are visible in the economic domain, making women a part of the labor force and ensuring equal opportunities to work in the mission of revitalizing the economic structure of the country. But, the structural conditions bring light to the reality of female employment in a man's world. As part of the Saudification program, which focuses on the participation of women in the labour force, companies receive bonus payments for employing women.¹⁹¹ Women are being actively encouraged to seek jobs in the industry and also to work from home. It has to be mentioned that women make up just 16 percent of the total number of employees, one of the lowest shares worldwide and even in the Arab region.¹⁹² In Saudi Arabia, the type of work women perform has nothing to do with supply and demand in the labour market. Female employees primarily work in the public sector, usually as teachers at girls' schools. While Saudi labour law grants women the right to do the same jobs as men, it also stipulates that Sharia must be followed and expectations with regard to "a woman's nature" must be considered.¹⁹³ This invariably reveals the guidance of the Ministry of Labour, in presenting a "positive list" that reveals which jobs are considered suitable for women, for example, saleswoman, hair stylist, etc as it demands less physical and cognitive abilities from the employee. On the other hand, women are regarded as unsuitable for positions in the mining sector, the construction sector, and automotive repair.¹⁹⁴ This reveals the discrepancy between the law and the

¹⁹¹ Nassir Djafari, "Breaking up Ossified Structures", 24 September 2017, : <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/labour-marketsaudi-arabia-inflexible-unjust-and-limiting-countrys-economic-renewal>

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Meijer, Roel and Aarts, Paul (2012), "Saudi Arabia Between Conservatism, Accommodation and Reform", Accessed on 4 December, 2018, <https://www.clingendael.org/files/pdfs>

¹⁹⁴ Nassir Djafari, "Breaking up Ossified Structures", 24 September 2017, : <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/labour-marketsaudi-arabia-inflexible-unjust-and-limiting-countrys-economic-renewal>

religious traditions that ultimately hinder women's participation in the employment sector in comparison to their male counterparts. On top of all that, women need the permission of a male relative in order to be allowed to work. Also, the strict physical separation that Saudi clerics require between men and women in the workplace is another barrier in this regard. The Ministry of Labour has issued rules on building separate entrances and exits or separate cafeterias, even though the separation of the sexes is not explicitly stipulated by law. Taking into account all these factors, employers who want to hire women have to deal with the added expenses of finding appropriate rooms and arranging transportation for female employees. Therefore, structural conditions make private employers prefer hiring men. Even though women are now more educated than men, the prevalence of the male guardianship system and the sex segregation system make the unemployment rates for women at around 35percent.¹⁹⁵ The labour market in Saudi Arabia is inflexible to a large degree, which hinders the diversification and modernization of the economy. Traditional roles and cultural values limit the mobility of the Saudis, and incentive structures are also inadequate. Though the reforms tend to relax the strict sex segregation system in the workplace to some extent, their dependence on the male guardian's limits their freedom of choice.¹⁹⁶ Saudi Arabia's still very traditional social order blocks the way to the country's economic renewal. Thus, the new reform agenda has to look at reforming the structural condition which hinders women's participation in the workforce. Merely encouraging women to join the workforce would not change the real reason behind their lack of participation in the economic sector. The disparities between men and women in the labour force reveal the contradictions of women's lives, which need to be done away with for proper implementation of Prince Salman's reforms in "Vision 2030".

¹⁹⁵ Nassir Djafari, "Breaking up Ossified Structures", 24 September 2017, : <https://www.dandc.eu/en/article/labour-marketsaudi-arabia-inflexible-unjust-and-limiting-countrys-economic-renewal>

¹⁹⁶ Kalen, Stephen(2018), " Saudi Woman's flight rallies opposition to male guardianship", Reuters, Riyadh, 12 February 2018.

Challenges In Restrictive Social Practices

A Saudi woman is subject to guardianship laws, which consist of legal codes based on a strict interpretation of Sharia law, coupled with a rigidly traditional view of the sexes. Though the “Vision 2030” aimed at relaxing radical religious interpretations of Islam, it did not entirely remove the male guardianship law, which makes women permanent legal minor in Saudi society. It makes them dependent upon their guardian, a father, uncle, husband, brother or son, to consent to a variety of basic needs. This is the most restrictive domain of women, ensuring the subordination of women to the patriarchal society, whereby their guardians give ultimate consent to their work, education, travel, obtaining passport, marriage, clothing and many other areas in their daily lives. Also, to open a bank account for women in Saudi Arabia, their guardian’s consent is needed. In government offices and in companies, the Saudi custom asks for the guardian’s consent to female employment. Though authorities have removed restrictions on women in the labour code and ended formal requirements for them to obtain a guardian’s permission to work, some employers still demand this and are not penalized for doing so.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, according to women’s rights groups, though there is no formal ban on women buying or renting property, it may be difficult without the presence of a guardian. Women’s rights activists in Saudi Arabia have repeatedly called on the government to abolish the male guardianship system in 2009 and in 2013 at the United Nations Human Rights Council, following which, Saudi Arabia took limited steps to reform certain aspects of

¹⁹⁷ “Women and Saudi Arabia’s Male Guardianship System”, , July 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/16/boxed/women-and-saudi-arabias-male-guardianship-system>

the male guardianship system.¹⁹⁸ But these changes remain insufficient, incomplete, and ineffective, and the guardianship system remains mostly intact today. With regard to women's access to government services, women only sections are prevalent which further limits women's freedom due to the strict sex segregation system between men and women in those spheres. Even in the government decreed council meetings, because of sex segregation, women councilors participate via video link, which broadly hinders their growth in the areas they work. Even, the government enforces a strict dress code on women, which create disincentives to hiring women. Saudi Arabia, which acceded to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination in 2000, is legally obligated to end discrimination against women without delay, by abolishing the male guardianship system.¹⁹⁹ As long as it fails to take steps to eliminate the discriminatory practices of the male guardianship system and sex segregation, the government is restricting the ability of women to enjoy even the most basic rights. Thus, Prince Salman's project "Vision 2030", giving importance to developing women's talents in the society and economy should look for permanent solutions which mitigate women's subordination in this exclusionist domain without which women cannot engage themselves in any meaningful contribution in society and economy.

Contradictions Of The Reform Project

Saudi Arabia has a long history of forcefully silencing women who dare to stand up to the kingdom's unjust laws and patriarchal gender norms. Almost four decades ago in 1990, 47 brave Saudi women were harshly punished by

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ "Saudi Arabia- Coalition 'Equality without reservation'", Accessed on 6 December 2018, 10 April 2007, <https://cedaw.wordpress.com/2007/04/10/saudi-arabia/>

the authorities for participating in a major driving ban protest.²⁰⁰ They were arrested and their passports were taken away. Some of them were even sacked from their jobs or expelled from their schools. This largely reflected the lack of freedom of Saudi Women in protesting the authorities; hence their subordination in the authoritarian state became a common practice in Saudi Arabia. Nothing changed in Saudi Arabia even after the Crown Prince Salman's reform agenda. Vision 2030 represented at its core, a new Saudi social contract.²⁰¹ The vision envisioned by Crown Prince involved changes and a modernist agenda to loosen the restrictions on women in social, cultural, economic and religious spheres. This should be implemented in doing away with the old system by allowing citizens space to have a say in the new Saudi Arabia that he has envisioned for them. But, precisely the opposite thing has happened so far. A young economist named Essam Al Zamel, who ran the figures on Vision 2030 and offered criticisms and suggestions for improving it has been set up for serious charges that would justify long term imprisonment.²⁰² The most striking transition was turning away from Wahhabism, the conservative version of Islam that had long been allied with the Saudi State. The government has stopped all funding to Wahhabi institutions outside Saudi Arabia and curtailed the powers of the religious police. But, in spite of his reforms of loosening religious control over Saudi Women, he has arrested the moderate religious figures, so that they can remain alienated from their support base for a long time. Even, the Crown Prince has arrested leading women's rights activists, who have advocated for social reforms for a long time. It has to be mentioned that just weeks before the ban

²⁰⁰ Hana Al-Khamri, "Torture, reform and women's rights in Saudi Arabia", Al Jazeera, 30 November 2018

²⁰¹ Iyed el-Baghdadi, "Mohammad Bin Salman is the worst enemy of his 'Vision 2030' plan", The Washington Post, 15 June 2018

²⁰² Ibid.

on women's right to drive was officially lifted on June 2018, the Prince arrested those who protested and launched campaigns in favour of lifting the ban for decades. While many across the world saw this lifting of driving ban a confirmation of Mohammad Bin Salman's reformist credentials, it was evident from the actions that Prince later undertook to stifle dissent, that the initiatives of gender equality aimed at improving the public relations agenda to gain favour from the west and encourage foreign investment in the country²⁰³. Therefore, Mohammed Bin Salman followed the footsteps of his predecessors by introducing cosmetic and inconsequential women's rights reforms, while forcefully silencing the cries for genuine reform.²⁰⁴ He has started accusing all the critics and opponents of his leadership – regardless of social status, political inclination, gender, and attitudes towards the monarchy, in order to consolidate his power through his new propaganda, "Vision 2030". Mohammad Bin Salman, with the help of his father king Salman, assigned loyal figures to all important sovereign positions, especially in the judiciary. Since the Crown Prince's rise to power in 2015, and amidst an escalation of politically motivated arrests in the Kingdom, those of the judges and prosecutors who got an eminent position in the presidency of State Security, naturally remained loyal to the current leadership. Thus, the fate of the political prisoners under this presidency can be known very well. Therefore, under Prince Salman's rule, hundreds of writers, human rights activists, academics, economics, clerics and opponents within the royal family have been arrested because they dared to go against him.²⁰⁵ All this demonstrates that Mohammed bin Salman's blueprint for reforms is not at all aimed to ensure gender equality, rather its implementation exposed curtailing of women's active political participation, disrespecting freedom and women's

²⁰³ Khalaf, Roula(2018) " Saudi Women's rights rule book :drive and shut up", Financial Times, 27 June 2008.

²⁰⁴ Al- Khamri, Hana(2018), " Torture, reform and Women's rights in Saudi Arabia" ,Al Jazeera, 30 November 2018.

²⁰⁵ Aziza, Sarah(2018), " Promised Reforms in Saudi Arabia Giving Way to Crackdown on Dissent", The Intercept, 6 October 2018.

civil and political rights in a way that is very much undemocratic. He viewed women's reforms as part of its grand strategy to gain favour from the west and consolidate more political and economic power. Women's modernization only acted as a tool to help achieve their participation in the private sectors, previously excluded for women. While pretending to implement a reform agenda that aims to elevate the status of women in Saudi Arabia, the current leadership has oppressed women further by identifying any demand for rights and freedoms as an attack against national cohesion, even when they just want to seek justice and equal rights from the state.²⁰⁶ The women's rights activists are feeling the pressure most in contemporary times, as unlike male activists in the kingdom, they are fighting against both an authoritarian political system and a patriarchal social structure that keeps women in political, social and legal boundaries created by the state. According to the Amnesty report, every Saudi woman who wants to have a say on her place in society is now facing a threat of not only harassment, incarceration, and intimidation, but also torture and sexual abuse.²⁰⁷

The Saudi regime has made a distinction for years among individuals campaigning for social rights without directly challenging or blaming the political system and individuals calling for holistic political reform and constitutional monarchy. Though it has allowed some limited and informal breathing space for the former, the members of the latter group always faced relentless oppression. But, under the rule of Mohammad bin Salman, all ground up efforts to bring about change and social reform are being swiftly stifled. To the current leadership, every single bottom-up rights movement is a threat to the survival of the pseudo reformist, despotic rule of the young crown

²⁰⁶ Hana Al- Khamri, "Torture , reform and women's rights in Saudi Arabia", Al Jazeera, 30 November 2018

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

prince.²⁰⁸ Thus, the contradiction inherent in the new reform agenda can be reflected which on one hand talks about women as a fundamental asset, who will be given equal opportunities with men to develop and nourish their talents; on the other hand, it places restrictions on the women who ask for their own rights and liberties. Therefore, this is the reason because of which Saudi women's rights movements are facing the worst crackdown since their formation in the early 1990s. Sarah Leah Whitson, the Middle East Director at Human Rights Watch said: "Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's 'reform campaign' has been a frenzy of fear for genuine Saudi reformers who dare to advocate publicly for human rights or women's empowerment".²⁰⁹ When asked to the Prince about these arrests, he told that some of those arrested had connections with foreign intelligence agencies and had tried to harm Saudi Arabia. Thus, it is evident that he knows the political game quite well. Even when Mohammad bin Salman instituted several societal reforms in Saudi Arabia, including opening the country's first movie theatres and allowing music concerts to take place, it has been considered as progress towards a more open society, especially benefitting the women of the country, who were long prohibited from engaging in cultural and modernization programmes. But, it was during the same period that the number of executions in the kingdom steeply increased. It exposes the irony of openness in a society which curbs the difference of opinion in the most brutal way possible. Amnesty International has also condemned Saudi Arabia's prominent use of the death penalty, adding the country uses the punishment as a way stifling criticism from a Shia minority in the country.²¹⁰ The organization also criticized Mohammed bin Salman personally, saying the Crown Prince should invest in

²⁰⁸ Iyed el-Baghdadi, "Mohammad bin salman is the worst enemy of his 'Vision 2030' plan", The Washington Post, 15

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ Iyed el-Baghdadi, "Mohammad bin salman is the worst enemy of his 'Vision 2030' plan", The Washington Post, 15 June 2018.

human rights, and not engage in Public Relations for trips abroad.²¹¹ In fact, after Mohammad bin Salman was appointed as the official heir to the throne in June 2017, the situation of atrocious human rights record has only stepped up. Here, mention should also be made about Jamal Khashoggi, once an adviser to members of the royal family, who fell out of favor for his criticism of bin Salman's reform program and this eventually led to his murder as there is no room in Saudi Arabia for anyone who will dare to speak and criticize the reform.

Political Repercussion:

Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's "Vision 2030" project has ushered in a new phase by trying to engage women in the Saudi economy. Diversity in women's groups brought about different opinions regarding the reforms, which ultimately indicated at Mohammed Bin Salman being termed as a popular figure among the women of the country for initiating at least small steps towards gender equality. While the liberal group criticized the inability of the reforms to alter the structural disabilities that hinder women's emancipation in the country, mainly in the form of the male guardianship system, the Islamist groups remained overwhelmed with the relaxation of the socio-cultural norms, which will in turn give them opportunities of visibility in the public domain. It remained evident from the nature of the reforms initiated by Prince Salman that it wanted to introduce only those liberal measures that would not affect the authority of the state. It has also taken steps to stifle all kinds of dissent in this regard. But, indeed it has culminated in an era where gender disparities are being talked about, resulting in consciousness among the women to understand their strength in the changing economic structure of the country.

²¹¹ ' Saudi Reforms no more than PR blitz claims Amnesty', Accessed on 2 Dec 2018, <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/393257>

For this reason, the new set of reforms in Saudi Arabia and the contradictions inherent in it exposes the challenges that women in Saudi Arabia faces all time, revealing its effect on women in the country. Thus, it is time to speak up about the crisis of legitimacy, oppression, brutality, and the shrinking civil society, which Prince Salman's "Vision 2030" confirms in the contradictory patterns of social change it ensured through its broad set of reforms, so as to make women aware of their situation and to bring in real change in the status and condition of women in Saudi Arabia.

CONCLUSION

Changes and reforms are the hallmark of a modern society organized as a territorial state. Political leadership and political policies adopted by territorial state are necessarily directed to ensure the survival and sustenance of the state. Saudi Arabia's more recent focus on a reformist agenda to support hitherto denied rights and privileges to women deserves a thorough examination for several reasons. The gradual and limited nature of the measures for the betterment of the situation of the women has evoked protest, not from the women beneficiaries in Saudi Arabia but the gender activists and feminists. The measures have indeed helped the international image of the deeply orthodox, conservative political regime. This, however, in no way has been a movement unfolding in progressive ways. It is not certain that the political regime would be consistent in adding to its efforts in this direction on a continuous basis. What however is certain that the state would control what possibly may be conceded, what may not and the state would also decide on the quantum and scope of the freedom or liberty to be made available. It is not necessary that the positive measures advancing women's freedom of choice or of movement may keep on gaining in strength. What may be given may also be taken away. So there is no automatic relationship between the Saudi regime's recent reformist agenda and certainty of improvement in the status and condition of women in the country. As such, there is every reason to think that the measures are more in the nature of instrumentality to help consolidate the reach and acceptability of the regime rather than accentuated or driven by a sense of delivering gender justice.

Women's empowerment remains a utopian ideal in Saudi Arabia. The most authoritarian country of the world utilized gender reforms to project a bright reformist image that conceals the excesses of an authoritarian state. The

establishment of the modern state in the 1930s has confirmed the cooption of religious nationalism and its influence in women in Saudi society. From the 1930s to the modern era, the restrictive social norms and practices confirmed women's exclusion in the private and public spheres. It has been a common practice of the Saudi state to highlight the issues of gender in order to ignore general political activism in the country. Thus, in times of political crisis, it carefully chose the issues of women to ensure their own survival. For instance, after the Mecca Mosque crisis of 1979, and in the wake of the 9/11 incident, it employed different strategies, keeping gender issues on the forefront. Following the Mecca Mosque crisis, the state ensured greater control on women on account of their alleged moral corruption by the religious authorities, and after the 9/11 incident, which called for great danger to the legitimacy of the state, it ensured liberal reforms for women in the country. Themes of women's emancipation have thus been politicized to conform to international legitimacy at one time and to secure the state from the attacks of fundamentalist groups on the other. Bringing forward genuine reforms for improving the highly marginalized condition of women in the country has never been the State's agenda.

This became most visible after the Arab Spring when gender reforms were promoted by King Abdullah to convince the west that he is a great gender reformer. The authoritarian state, which denied women political representation for so long, suddenly came up with reforms ensuring women's political participation in the Consultative Council and in future Municipal elections. King Abdullah became eager to promote women's rights, education, and employment opportunities because it does not immediately impact the authority of the state. Moreover, it helps the state in recovering from western condemnation for its lack of democracy. The Saudi leadership championed women's causes so as to show its lack of enthusiasm for radical ideology in the name of terrorism, which posed internal security challenges for the state.

Therefore, the state co-opted women's aspirations and channeled it in official Saudi media and international media so as to bring internal and external legitimacy. The state directed its attention towards state-controlled objectives at a time when, women started protesting for their rights, inspired by the movement of the Arab Spring. This culminated in giving women the right to vote in the future, and promise of access to state when needed, so that women, who are structurally excluded from political, religious and economic decision making consider the authoritarian state their protector against the oppression of women.

Similarly, Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman initiated his reform drive "Vision 2030", to include the women in Saudi Arabia's changing economic structure, which focused on giving women equal opportunities so that they can participate in the workforce. Many social and cultural norms which were restrictive were lifted so that it can help in bringing gender equality. This is indeed a commendable initiative in a country where women face oppression, because of their highly unequal status in comparison to men. Therefore, in recent times, Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's reform agenda has generated expectations on the part of the women in the country that the country may undergo a radical change with this reform programs under "Vision 2030". But women in the country need to look at the measures which Prince Salman has taken in the name of the emancipation of women in the country carefully. The Prince has adopted repressive stances to secure his position. The two goals are not well aligned with each other at all.

The Saudi leadership had banned and imprisoned women's rights activists who called for lifting restrictions on women's right to drive, a basic social right for women in the country. However, the ban was relaxed subsequently. Moreover, the Prince has forcefully silenced any form of criticism coming from political, economic and religious figures of the state. It shows that the

Crown Prince has not allowed free space for individuals to have a say in his reform agenda, which is the vital aspect of gender equality. Instead, he has tried to remove all forms of dissent that challenge the authority of the state. It remains clear that it is not on the state's agenda to elevate women's status in the country anytime soon. Rather, the state has ensured women's loyalty and appreciation for being the provider and championing women's causes in the country. The economic necessity of transforming the country cannot achieve its full potential without engaging female youths of the country, who are as much educated as men and also because of their exclusion from public spaces, they will be very much willing to accept the jobs offered to them without demanding for higher allowances and benefits. Thus ensuring women's participation can while on one side, improve the production in the country, it would also reduce the dependence on foreign men in the labour force of the country. Therefore, the same trend is visible in Prince Salman's reform agenda. He is choosing those kinds of reforms that will make the women of the country supporter of the Prince and also glorify its image in the international media. The contradictions are inherent in the implementation of those reforms, which promotes women's empowerment as the rhetoric to gain the appreciation of women in the country, to ensure their participation in the economy, which is the prime motive of the state.

Therefore, it would not be wrong to say that hypocrisy is at the root of Saudi Arabia's treatment towards women and this cannot change unless women in Saudi Arabia become aware of the project of the state to utilize gender for ensuring their political and economic interests. Diversity of women with regard to their aspirations and demands from the state has a significant impact on their lives. While the liberal group presses for easing of restrictions on women and gain more rights and freedom, the Islamist group, wants to secure their conservative image behind the framework of religious nationalism, thus making it beneficial for the state to maintain its authoritative image in the

world. This diversity regarding women's opinions hinders the prospect for any universal demand from the state. Thus the state favors one group at one time and shows its concern for another group as per the changing political context to maintain the status quo in the world. Therefore, it is high time that women come out of their homogeneous category and challenge the very authority of the state that it seeks to protect by enhancing the socio-cultural-religious interference in women's lives. Only when women will understand that their real empowerment and the question of gender equality is enmeshed in political projects, therefore they need a space to represent themselves in the formulation of policy despite just being concerned about their own issues and grievances, can the path towards gender equality actually start for women in Saudi Arabia.

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