



Gendered Space And Dynamics In Saudi Arabian Cities: Riyadh And Dammam In Turki Al- Hamad's Trilogy

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Social experience ... always potentially contains space for alternative acts and alternative intentions which are not yet articulated as a social institution or even a project.

Raymond Williams'

There must be critical consciousness...

Edward W. Said'

Introduction: Author, Novel & Context

Turki al-Hamad's trilogy, *Phantoms of Deserted Alleys* (first published 1997-1999) is the most important novel to come out of Saudi Arabia. When its first volume, *Adama*, appeared in English translation (2003) it was hailed as "the most explosive novel to emerge from the Middle East in years". The other two volumes are no less explosive.³ It is also no exaggeration to describe Saudi Arabian urban space as perhaps the most gender-segregated space anywhere. The present study discusses the way al-Hamad's trilogy negotiates gender dynamics in two Saudi cities. Because the Novel as a literary genre is very recent in Saudi Arabian literature, I begin by briefly placing al-Hamad's work in its socio-cultural and literary context.

Unlike poetry and the short story, the novel is a relatively new genre in Arabic literature; but it has nevertheless established itself, over the past hundred years or so, as both popular and influential in Arab culture

Literature & Aesthetics 17(1) July 2007, page 203



from Morocco to Iraq. But while Saudi Arabia has produced many gifted poets and short-story writers (and visual artists) including women, a Saudi 'turn to the novel' has been hesitant and very tardy. Only two Saudi novelists were known before the mid-1980s. Since then, only three other Saudi authors (besides al-Hamad) have joined the long list of Arabic novelists.⁴

Perhaps as Edward Said has suggested, "the desire to create an alternative world, to modify or augment the real world through the art of writing (which is one motive underlying the novelistic tradition in the West) is inimical to the Islamic world-view"⁵. Although Said's statement seems to underestimate another Islamic world-view that has actually enabled the thriving of a secular and world-augmenting Arabic poetic and more recently novelistic tradition, his observation certainly applies to the 'conservative' Saudi world-view. Thus the author of the celebrated *Cities of Salt*, the first significant Arabic novel pertaining to Saudi Arabia, was Saudi only by ancestry. For Abd al-Rahman Munif was born in Jordan to an Iraqi mother and a Saudi father and spent practically all his life outside Saudi Arabia.⁶ While demonstrating profound 'critical consciousness' and understanding of Saudi history and politics, his narrative evinces no personal experience of Saudi Arabian society. It is significant that his *Cities* have fictitious names. On the other hand, Ghazi al-Gosaibi's first novel is situated in Cairo, while his second is an escapist novel of farcical plots and bizarre characters, including a Saudi narrator but no Saudi focus.⁷

To appreciate al-Hamad's contribution it is therefore crucial to reflect on the dialectical relationship between the 'intention', 'perception' and 'reception' of the novel and its impact on its socio-cultural context. The remarkably belated 'beginning' of the genre in Saudi Arabia is not simply tied to the 'ability' of Saudi authors to write novels. Rather, it has to do with their 'perception' of their conservative society's 'reception' of the potentially unsettling 'alternative intentions' of novels that deal with sensitive issues in that society. It has to do, moreover, with the willingness of intellectuals, including novelists, to take existential risks. Munif aside,⁸ Turki al-Hamad emerges as the first truly home-grown yet cosmopolitan Saudi novelist, whose trilogy signals a new 'beginning' of the novel as a

work of 'critical consciousness' that is directly related to Saudi Arabian 'social experience'.

Born in 1952 (in south Jordan) to Saudi Arabian parents, al-Hamad grew up and completed high school in Dammam, Eastern Saudi Arabia, studied politics and economics at Riyadh University and obtained his PhD from South California. After teaching at his Saudi alma mater for nine years he resigned in 1995 and has since devoted himself to writing. Besides the trilogy, his other novels (published between 2000 and 2004) all pertain directly to Saudi Arabia (*East of the Valley*, *Wounds of Memory*, and *Wind of Paradise*). His non-fiction works are concerned with cultural criticism and the need for change, including: *Politics between the allowed and the forbidden*; *Arab culture in the global age*; *Arab culture facing the challenges of change*; *Change begins from here*; and *It is about the human being that I speak*.

It is necessary to highlight al-Hamad's standing as a secular public intellectual and novelist in a society manifestly dominated by religion and tribal values. Despite the religious *fatwas* condemning him and his books, he has continued to live and write in Saudi Arabia and to contribute critically to public debate through the media. He is a founding member of "*Human Rights First – Saudi Arabia*"; and a leading signatory of a courageous submission (in 2002) requesting the Saudi royal family to take steps towards political change, social justice and freedom. As one of his Arab interviewers put it recently, "No other personality has stirred up such controversy in Saudi Arabia over the past two decades as he has done".⁹ Al-Hamad clearly stands out as one who writes mainly to instigate change in a country whose traditional political elite has paradoxically boasted of achieving "*Sixty Years of Progress without Change!*".¹⁰ He is willing to ask embarrassing, risqué, but necessary questions and to cast doubt on old assumptions. As he has put it recently, "Where I live there are three taboos: religion, politics and sex. It is forbidden to speak about these. I wrote this trilogy to get things moving".¹¹

Al-Hamad's trilogy interests me not only because of its intrinsic literary and aesthetic appeal, but above all from a socio-cultural perspective. For I see it as marking a new positive shift in the outlook of Saudi Arabian literature and culture, in terms of the author's 'intention' and 'perception'

and of the novel's 'reception' as a controversial creative genre at more than one level. This includes, in particular, the space and interest which the novelist gives to women and gender dynamics in his narrative. My optimistic reading of such cultural shift has more recently been confirmed by the spontaneous appreciative 'reception' by ordinary Saudi readers of al-Hamad's work. Al-Hamad's trilogy has become an instant best seller in the Arab world. Although it has been condemned by some religious clerics and is officially banned in Saudi Arabia, it is avidly and widely read there. His own compatriots have described him as "a unique writer and intellectual who is dear to us and cherished by our society"; "whose interviews on TV we have enjoyed and benefited from" and as a novelist, "with whose *Phantom's of Deserted Alleys* we have lived".¹² This positive shift has also been validated in a creative way by the publication of Raja al-Sani's courageous and controversial *Daughters of Riyadh* (mid-2005), the first ever novel by a Saudi woman.¹³ In a narrative constructed as a series of email messages, al-Sani's first message begins thus: "I shall write about my female friends... Perhaps this would strike the flint so change could take off"¹⁴. In this and in her declared female focus, al-Sani, regardless of her novel's artistic merit, is clearly taking al-Hamad's call for change significantly further, even if her social message might be misread.¹⁵

Narrative of crossing: place & time

Al-Hamad's trilogy is as concerned with change and with passage in space and time and between situations as with characters, events and ideas. It is essentially a narrative of personal experience and feelings, with keen depiction of every-day minutiae of life and family dynamics in Saudi homes and social interaction in private and public space, particularly in Riyadh and Dammam. Compared to Munif's better known quintet, al-Hamad's narrative is centred on a much shorter time-span of four years and is presented through the more focused lens and sensibility of a central character—a young Saudi student, Hisham al-'Abir. The narrative of settings, situations, places and characters is convincingly imbued with personal experiences and memories around Hisham, his close relatives, school mates, friends and co-activists. Al-Hamad presents Dammam

and Riyadh with their real neighbourhoods, streets, old markets and new shopping centres, all with their real place names, and with their credible Saudi characters, including non-typical ones. To some extent, this may remind us of Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* (al-Hamad is a great admirer of both Mahfouz and Dickens, among other great novelists). In their different ways, both trilogies are about real places, inhabited by real people fused and brought to life in fiction¹⁶. Unlike Mahfouz's long novelistic span of three generations in the life of Egypt's old metropolis during the first half of the twentieth century, al-Hamad focuses on the experiences of one central character and his associates essentially in two emerging Saudi cities in the early 1970s.

Using the old technique of the author as a non-participating narrator, al-Hamad's narrative is consistently projected through the experiences of the ever present central character, Hisham al-'Abir, who is introduced in the third person. The author utilises the flashback technique to pick up threads of Hisham's childhood in the 1950s and 1960s. Older people's reminiscences provide glimpses of earlier times and other places in Arabia and neighbouring Arab lands. It is true this is very much a "coming of age tale".¹⁷ But it is also a narrative of transformations, tensions, paradoxes, dilemmas and uncertainties of a whole society.

The focus of the trilogy's first two volumes, *al-Adama* and *al-Shumaysi*, is on Dammam and Riyadh, and the titles refer to two well-known neighbourhoods in these two cities respectively. But the narrative moves to and fro between the two cities in both volumes. There are also some glimpses from life in the old town of Buraida in al-Qassim, where Hisham's family (and the author's) originated. The third volume, *al-Karadib* (signifying prison cells) evokes a detention complex for political prisoners outside Jeddah, where Hisham was incarcerated for two years. This volume's narrative is almost wholly situated within the walls of that decidedly male-only space. Only in the last ten pages of *al-Karadib* does Hisham return to his two cities.

At a certain level, al-Hamad's trilogy is also an intellectual and political novel, whose narrative is strongly interlaced with debates, ideas and insights about life, society and human nature. Hisham is a cerebral

character whose extensive readings afford him the virtual company of an impressive constellation of celebrated Arab and international intellectuals, novelists, poets and artists. This implies that a curious and daring Saudi high school boy in Dammam in the late 1960s and first year university student in Riyadh in the early 1970s could enjoy many banned books and films and think like a sophisticated cosmopolitan being.

In discussing gendered space and gender dynamics, I find it useful to utilise the motif of 'passage' or 'crossing', which is an important running theme in al-Hamad's narrative. It is significant that his central character—Hisham al-'Abir—has a family name that indicates "one who is passing through" or "one who is crossing". Indeed, a mocking prison officer is able to make a pun on *al-'Abir* (in *al-Karadib*). Hisham is introduced quite early in *Adama* as a passenger on a train approaching Riyadh from Dammam. The setting of the moving train is staged before introducing Hisham, whom we meet after a few pages. He is an eighteen-year old school leaver on his way to attend university. In a real sense, the train journey not only sets the scene, but perhaps also signifies Hisham al-'Abir's passage into adulthood, responsibility, critical consciousness and healthy uncertainty.

The novel can be read as the story of Hisham's physical, emotional and intellectual 'passage'. First he passes from high school in Dammam to first-year university in Riyadh (economics and politics); then to more than two years as a political prisoner—in that other "university" as Hisham calls it—and finally back to uncertain freedom in Dammam and Riyadh. Spatially and socially, Hisham al-'Abir "passes" not only from Dammam to the capital Riyadh but also, within Riyadh, from living in his maternal uncle's home during the first semester to sharing student accommodation in the second semester. The last two dramatic, and in a sense defining, "transitions" for Hisham are introduced at the end of the second and the third volumes of the trilogy, respectively. Here he is drastically transported to Jeddah's notorious '*Karadib*' and after two years there his 'journey' seems to come full circle as he returns to Dammam and then Riyadh, where old familiar spaces have been transformed and new neighbourhoods have sprung up.



On the Dammam–Riyadh train, Hisham crosses the vast but seemingly changeless desert expanse. Instead of looking forward to future excitements in the capital and at university, he becomes immersed in re-viewing scenes from his recent past, focussing on the last two years at school, particularly his secret involvement in a prohibited political party. This involvement continues to weigh heavily on his mind and eventually lands him in jail. The trilogy ends with Hisham sitting in a non-descript open-air café in a newly-created Riyadh suburb that has replaced a familiar old date-palm grove, where only two years earlier he and his friends used to picnic and watch the sunset. He is now alone, smoking the hookah and sipping strong black tea, uncertain whether to look forward to resuming his university studies. He wonders about his relatives and colleagues and about the women he had intimately known two years earlier. (Death has intruded too while he was in prison, depriving him of his beloved aunt and both grandparents in Buraida and his uncle in Riyadh). Through his own tobacco smoke, his weary eyes gaze melancholically at the distance—towards the old abodes of loved ones, dreams and bitter-sweet memories. But he can only visualise “deserted alleys populated by wandering phantoms that refuse to pass away”.¹⁸ The last sentence of the trilogy evokes its title: *Phantoms of Deserted Alleys*. The first volume, *Adama*, ends as it begins with the same half paragraph, describing Hisham in the train approaching Riyadh. The reader exits the third volume with the paradoxical signpost, “The Beginning”, instead of the expected “The End”. Thus the novelist imparts a sense of circular narrative; and perhaps a sense of what I would call “change without progress” in Hisham’s social reality.

Space, gender dynamics and the presence of women

Saudi Arabia is a traditional, segregated, patriarchal society, which is undergoing drastic transformation. How does al-Hamad, as a Saudi novelist who is also a progressive public intellectual, negotiate the tensions of gender dynamics and interaction in the urban space of his society? Women play significant roles in Hisham’s life and imagination, and females have a tangible and consistent presence in the narrative as it is filtered through Hisham’s sensibility. However, other male characters in



the trilogy tend to view women negatively in public space and sometimes ignore them in private space. We find a collective marginal 'presence' of women in the first scene. As the train draws into Riyadh railway station, the jostling and clamour of the passengers is spurred, the children's screaming rises and with it "the shouting of men and the indignant huffing of the women at all the pushing and shoving that respect neither veils nor the sanctity of human bodies"¹⁹. From al-Hamad's perspective and no doubt from the women's standpoint, the presence of females in this train 'journey' is both negatively and actively 'dis-regarded' by the men. This perhaps sums up the place and dilemma of women and men in a society which is torn between ostensible 'material progress' and very slow, or even denied 'cultural change'.

I can discern and highlight Hisham's obvious appreciation and close attachment to three women within his spatially dispersed extended family and, in different ways, to three other women outside it. In both Dammam and Buraida, family dynamics seem atypical. Thus Hisham is the only child in a small nuclear family with no other relatives in Dammam. In Buraida, where his paternal grandparents live, Hisham's aunt Sharifa is married but remains childless; and her husband refuses to take another wife besides her. Indeed polygamy rarely features in al-Hamad's trilogy.²⁰ Hisham's mother emerges as a loving, smiling, dutiful and conscientious wife, utterly devoted to her only son. She is always hoping, asking God and even almost convinced that Hisham would stay "away from nasty types, and from things which God has forbidden". Although her name is not mentioned, Mother plays a central role in the narrative of her small family, both at home and in travel within and outside Saudi Arabia. She is Hisham's omnipresent conscience, even when she is miles away, especially if he is unable to live up to her expectations. He respects her moral strictures, although he often ends up violating quite a few of them, and this causes him frequent feelings of guilt and even disgust with himself.

Hisham's paternal aunt, Sharifa, is like another mother to him, always proud of him and wishing never to be separated from him whenever his family visits Buraida. She and his mother are the only female family members who always embrace him strongly and fondly and kiss him

repeatedly on both cheeks, particularly after some absence. (His paternal grandmother in Buraida only kisses him 'formally' and he reciprocates by kissing her forehead).

In Riyadh, cousin Moudhi, daughter of his maternal uncle, is an affectionate admirer and guardian angel for Hisham. At eighteen years of age, she is able to run her father's household, after her elder sister got married and while her mother is away visiting a sick brother. Moudhi looks after her father and her four adult brothers, and is always busy cooking, cleaning, or making tea and coffee. She is assertive and doesn't hesitate to be critical of her brothers and can raise her voice even in her father's presence if one of them displeases her. She has a mind of her own, and tells Hisham that she regretted not going beyond primary school, reproaching her otherwise "good" father for "being afraid of education for his daughters".

Indeed, while these three women in Hisham's extended family are represented in conventional roles, they all demonstrate strength of character, despite limitations imposed by patriarchal traditions. Besides cousin Moudhi's fiery personality, Hisham's mother has quite a persuading sway over her husband (this is also true of his uncle's wife in Riyadh). In Buraida, his aunt has a stronger presence and influence than her husband. Outside the family, young Noura in Dammam and Sara in Riyadh (both become Hisham's lovers) and even Ruqayya the pick-up girl, all display strength of character and determination and often take the initiative in their relations with him. But al-Hamad presents all these women as ultimately accepting the limitations on their position as God's will, notwithstanding Moudhi's angry protests. Both Sara and Noura leave the decision about their respective betrothal to their parents. Sara's marriage brings her no anticipated freedom or personal space, but more oppression.

Gendered space and family dynamics

Presented through Hisham's keen eyes, al-Hamad's narrative provides sharp contrasts in social contexts and family dynamics between Dammam and Riyadh (and Buraida). As a port city on the Gulf, associated with the

oil industry and foreign workers, Dammam seems socially more relaxed and open to influence than Riyadh. The latter enjoys and suffers the pangs of drastic material 'progress' while its old men deny change and hold fast to their patriarchal ways and dubious piety. In Dammam, Hisham's family home is a small 'modern' free-standing house with a garden. Apart from his parents' large bedroom and his own room, there is a large sitting-cum-TV room, and a smaller reception room for women, which doubles as his mother's work space. Although she is the only female in the house, there is a special 'women entrance' (*bab al-harem*) through the backyard, presumably for women visitors.²¹

Despite gender segregation in the presence of strangers, private space in Hisham's home in Dammam is not always strictly defined along gender lines. Although the kitchen is the mother's domain, Hisham's father sometimes participates in cooking. The three of them always eat together. Hisham's mother would often settle in the large sitting-TV room (in the absence of male visitors); and would also use it to receive female visitors. "It was a pleasure for Hisham to come home after school and find his mother 'in her favourite place in the sitting room', absorbed in her never-ending needlework, directly in front of the television..." Indeed Hisham's mother had to ask him on occasion to "leave that room at once, for we have [women] guests arriving unexpectedly ... and the 'women's room' hasn't been tidied up"²². Thus the same space could be used by either male or female guests, as long as the two genders didn't mix. Hisham isn't expected to meet female visitors, not even his secretly beloved Noura and her mother.

Differences in family dynamics and use of private space between Dammam and Riyadh are striking. Hisham's maternal uncle's house in Riyadh is a large traditional mud-brick complex. A passageway leads from the front gate to a central courtyard and a spacious reception-sitting-dinning room to the right. The rooms of the adult sons (Hisham's first cousins) are accessed from the central courtyard; and the kitchen—the main space for the women—is located at the far end. (Beyond this is a large backyard with a cow shed). Upstairs, overlooking the central courtyard, are the parents' two separate rooms and Moudhi's room, as well as two



spare rooms for close family guests (Hisham is to occupy one of these). The paradoxical pattern of gender segregation and the woman's role as carer and household manager pervades the house, including the roof-terrace. Here the boys sleep under the stars during summer and autumn; but their sister uses that open space only to make their beds, tidy up and hang the washing.

Strict segregation and family dynamics at meal times in Riyadh contrasts with the pattern in Dammam. Although Hisham's uncle and his wife may share coffee and dates upstairs, "the main meals were always strictly segregated. This is something which Hisham was not used to at home".²³ Even during the fasting month of Ramadan, when the men eat the main meal in the courtyard, the women serve them and then retreat to eat separately, usually in the mother's room upstairs. Otherwise the men eat in the main sitting-dinning room and the women in the kitchen across the courtyard. The eldest son, who is married, would join his father and brothers for meals leaving his wife and small children to eat separately in their self-contained apartment attached to the house. Moudhi would often get angry at her married brother and blame his wife (in her absence) as a "lady of leisure". In attempting to manage the tension between his grown-up children, Hisham's uncle, a high ranking government official, seems to me at times as ambivalent as Mr Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*. He allows his daughter Moudhi to protest and chastise her elder brother when she comes to clear up at the end of a meal. The father admonishes his son for annoying his sister as she leaves quickly in anger. But then the father asks his son to calm down and not take her seriously, for "women are deficient in both reason and faith".²⁴ He then reproaches his son for being harsh on his sister. He usually leaves the table early to catch evening prayers at the local mosque, and unsuccessfully enjoins his sons (and Hisham) to do the same.²⁵ Hisham would watch these and other Riyadh family antics with amazement.

In Dammam, Hisham and his parents always ate together and his parents would chat pleasantly over meals, his father joking with them and treating him as an equal. His father would even occasionally cook lunch for the family when he came home early from work. In Dammam no fuss



was made about regularly attending the mosque, since one could pray at home as his father would say. But again, as Hisham thinks to himself, "the customs of [his own small family] and of his friends' families in Dammam were completely different from anything that went on in his uncle's house", although his parents and his uncle all "hailed originally from Buraida in Qassim and were equally proud of their Najdi background".²⁶ In Buraida, meal arrangements were somewhat different. In Hisham's grandfather's house there, men and women would sit in the same large room but would eat separately, both spatially and in hierarchical time sequence. The men would eat first, occupying the centre, while the women would sit to one side and wait to eat what is left over.

All women are overworked at home. With the exception of Hisham's father, the men seem to have no thought of helping them. In Riyadh, Hisham's uncle's family only had an eleven-year old Eritrean boy, more like an adopted child, who informally acts as a part-time home help and errand boy.²⁷ In Dammam, neither Hisham's family nor their neighbours and friends had any servants although they were all reasonably well off. Things would change drastically within three years with the 1973 oil boom, as we see in the concluding pages of *al-Karadib*.

The role of the veil appears in a new light in al-Hamad's trilogy. It functions as a gender separator but also as a filter for communication, especially within an extended-family context. When Hisham first arrives to live with his uncle's family in Riyadh, his first cousin Moudhi joins in welcoming him most warmly shaking his hand, though not embracing him. She shows him to his room upstairs and explains things. Indeed it was she who chose that room for him facing her own room across the space of the courtyard so "you can easily call out to me if you need anything". But she always communicates with Hisham from behind her thin veil; as a rule Hisham could only see her eyes and hands. Since Hisham was often in the company of her brothers, she would be veiled in her own brothers' presence, simply because her first cousin was there too. Hisham would reflect on the contrast with the innocent pre-puberty days when he and Moudhi used to play and swim together on the beach whenever her family visited Dammam and when she had wished once that she were as free as

the American women they had seen in Dhahran. In Buraida, even his old grandmother would be ready to lower her veil when some one knocked at the outer door. His mother would cover her face in the presence of his aunt's husband. Thus close family connection may enable Hisham and his cousin Moudhi to chat together in the same private space in Riyadh, or his mother and her brother-in-law to share the same space with the rest of the family in Buraida. But in both cases the thin veil has to be lowered on the woman's face, as a social convention.

It is instructive to pursue the theme of gender dynamics in the private space outside Hisham's immediate and extended family context. Other women's fleeting appearance highlights the diversity of gender dynamics, not only between Riyadh and Dammam, but also between different families in the same city. Thus when Hisham visits the home of a class mate, or a political co-activist, or a family friend in Dammam, the degree of familiarity and the family dynamics in each situation would determine interaction. Can a friend's mother or sister, for example, open the door, talk to Hisham and the other visiting young men, uncover her face in their presence, bring them refreshments, or even exchange greetings and brief conversation with them? In some households in Dammam, women did not cover their faces in the presence of familiar visitors at all. Ibtihal, whose mother was from Damascus, is half-sister to Hisham's close friend, Adnan. Ibtihal can "bring them tea and cakes, give Hisham a natural friendly smile and look at him intently with her honey-coloured eyes before leaving the room, her lovely fair cheeks blushing".²⁸ Yet Adnan's and Ibtihal's family is dutifully religious. By contrast, when Hisham visits a new acquaintance, the host's elderly mother immediately covers her face and retreats inside; yet her son is a non-religious socialist revolutionary activist. Clearly it is not necessarily religiosity or lack of it that determines such patterns of behaviour.

Crossing public and private space

A significant theme in both *Adama* and *Shumaysi* is the paradoxical, sometimes hypocritical social manoeuvrings in spatially gendered and segregated Riyadh. As he begins to settle in the capital, Hisham complains

that he doesn't know this city "where I am going to live for the next four years". It was his young cousin, Abd al-Rahman, scarcely Hisham's own age, who helps him "to know Riyadh like you've never done before. I'll show you another Riyadh, another world".²⁹ Although Hisham was used to seeing anonymous women walking amid men labourers in Dammam's commercial streets, things in Riyadh were more complex. In Wazir Street on Thursday night, for example, women and men mingle discreetly. 'Abd al-Rahman is notorious for following girls and flirting with them. The cerebral and studious Hisham soon discovers that "everything is possible in Riyadh". During the fortnight before the start of the university term, he discovers a "Riyadh that gives up her secrets to those who seek them out, while jealously withholding them from uninterested lifetime residents and visitors".³⁰

As Hisham moves out of his uncle's house in old Shumaysi, he begins to experience contradictory feelings about his freedom. He seems to have an almost alarming sense of freedom and independence. But he finds that the rented house, which he now shares with another student in the new neighbourhood, was surrounded by a constellation of nine houses, whose families were reluctant to accept bachelors as neighbours in the first instance, and who remained suspicious throughout. Hisham and his colleague have to cross carefully from their new private space through the restricted public space of their neighbourhood, with only fleeting moments of minimum interaction. They pass back and forth to the exclusively male university campus, where students engage in academic and political discussions and most of them brag about real or imaginary romantic adventures with girls outside.

For Hisham, the bachelors' house is the locale for hours of study, interrupted by meals, often with other visiting male friends, playing cards, listening to Arabic songs and world news on the radio, discussing politics, smoking cigarettes and occasionally indulging in drinking counterfeit spirits or inferior home-made wine. The only fleeting female presence in a student's lodging would be a pick-up girl who would arrive completely veiled, while the perturbed vigilant neighbours are told that she was "just a close family relative come to help with tidying up"! To establish their



credentials as “respectable young men”, the students make themselves conspicuous at regular prayers in the neighbourhood mosque; they choose religious formulae to greet male neighbours, and deliberately abstain from saying a word, or reciprocating a smile to the thinly veiled and curious female neighbours.

This pattern of “passing” between incompatible spaces and situations seems to characterise Hisham’s life and his circle of male friends in Riyadh. They are socially isolated but vigilantly scrutinized by their suspicious neighbourhood, with male and female neighbours having different motives for watching them. Their paradoxical crossing between the sacred male-only public space of the mosque, where they join other men in prayer, and their own private space in the bachelors’ residence, where they occasionally indulge in forbidden alcoholic drinks and illicit sex, creates inner tensions and guilty feelings. But this ironically enables them to ease the external tension with their immediate surroundings. In another neighbourhood, where other colleagues share a bachelor-house, things work differently. As Hisham approached that house on a visit “... as the call to evening prayer sang out... a few minutes later the door opened and [Hisham’s friend] Muhaysin’s head popped out and looked anxiously left and right....Hisham saw... a girl wrapped in black slip from the students’ house and head quickly for one of the houses opposite. She ducked inside and shut the door [of her family’s home] quietly behind her”.³¹

Hisham and his male friends evolve a pattern of diversions, including relatively innocent outdoor pleasures in a modern Riyadh street, such as eating out, “hanging around” and gazing at elegantly veiled women shoppers. On the other hand, a peculiar strategy for negotiation of space and time in the context of gender dynamics, particularly of a casual non-innocent kind, emerges on a number of occasions in Riyadh. It seems that a young man in this city can meet with a girl, but she can only be a pick-up girl, usually a divorced young woman, like Ruqayya and her friends, who are now back living with their parents and are in want of extra pocket money and some fun. When Hisham first arrived in Riyadh, his adventurous young cousin, Abd al-Rahman, bragged about his exploits and how he had first met Ruqayya. As she passed by his house



gate, she looked at him from behind her veil, which was so thin that it hardly hid her face at all, smiled at him, and he followed her in a sequence reminiscent of some *1001 Nights* plot or a 1960s Egyptian film. Hisham thought his cousin was simply making up a story to tantalize him, but the story turned out to be true. Abd al-Rahman followed Ruqayya to her parent's house where she took him into a small room and they ended up making love that evening, "while everyone was watching television elsewhere in the house".³²

Going out for a "a drive" into the desert with his cousin Abd al-Rahman, accompanied by a veiled Ruqayya and a bottle of arak for a "picnic" beyond the sand dunes, is another way to get around Riyadh's taboos. On a Friday afternoon, they arrange to pick her up in front of the outpatient clinic of a large public hospital. "The hospital is safer today than anywhere else".³³ To the rest of the world she was just one of the many wrapped-up female patients waiting for male family members to take them home (as women are not allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia).

But what about real love and romance? Between Dammam and Riyadh, Hisham experiences two romantic affairs. These only interest me here in so far as they illustrate aspects of gender dynamics, negotiation of interdicted space, and of course the novelist's interest in such a taboo subject. In his last year at high school in Dammam, Hisham strikes up a friendship with the neighbours' daughter, Noura, slightly younger than him. Initial mutual admiration develops into love, reminiscent of some 1960s Egyptian films. They start to communicate (on Hisham's initiative) via hand-delivered notes to avoid being found out. As Hisham's school mates notice his anxiety to be home by a certain time (when Noura delivers a daily gift of fresh milk to his mother), they start to tease him about his rendezvous with his 'Juliet' or 'Lolita'. The only opportunity for Hisham and Noura to meet at all is literally behind their parents' backs. When his mother becomes more vigilant, the two young lovers decide (on Noura's initiative) to meet secretly at night in her family's back garden. To devise strategies to meet, they find two paradoxical allies: the modern TV and the old mosque. As Noura's family is engrossed in watching some film or soap opera on the small screen, she would leave the front door slightly ajar for



Hisham to slip into her backyard where she would lead him to a safe spot under a palm tree to talk, kiss and cuddle. Hisham's contribution to time and space negotiation is to make himself noticed by Noura's pious father at the evening prayers in the local mosque. After respectfully greeting his senior neighbour and wishing him goodnight in front of his house gate, he would sneak in through the same gate a few minutes later for his date with the daughter of his praying companion while the latter obliviously settles in to gaze at the TV screen.³⁴

In Riyadh, Hisham experiences a more daring and more passionate romance, when he becomes seriously (and of course secretly) involved with Sara, a young wife of an older man just across the alley. The vicissitudes of this romance don't concern me here. I am interested in analysing the somewhat different gender and space dynamics in the traditional Riyadh neighbourhood where Hisham lived for a few months in his uncle's house. Al-Hamad's novel shows that in 1970-Riyadh, where traditional houses were still only one or two storeys high, roof-terraces and windows could act as channels for clandestine communication between young neighbours of the opposite sex. Hisham and Sara first exchange smiles through their facing windows across the narrow alley. Hisham sees her making the bed and sleeping uneasily with her husband under the stars on the roof opposite. After a bout of voyeurism he soon responds to Sara's nodding invitation and is united with her in her house.³⁵ To keep the liaison secret from everyone, the two lovers carefully negotiate both space and time. Hisham's role was to make sure that the scene is clear for him to cross into Sara's private space of an afternoon; this includes ensuring that her husband is still deeply busy in his butcher's shop. For her part, Sara takes the initiative of strengthening her neighbourly friendship with Hisham's female cousin, Moudhi. This enables her to cross into Hisham's space and secretly meet up with him in his room, while the unsuspecting Moudhi is busy elsewhere in the large house.

Hisham seems to paradoxically respond to Riyadh's duplicity, where "everything was forbidden in principle, and everything allowed in practice". Cinemas are non-existent, but one can watch recent films before they are even screened in Beirut or Cairo. Even pornographic films are



claimed to be available at some clubs. At certain 'known' places, one can pick up a girl from among several, or buy locally made wine, imported arak and even whisky.³⁶ In both Dammam and Riyadh, particularly the latter, Hisham finds himself often moving between *halal* and *haram*: between what is morally allowed or even enjoined and what is forbidden. Most paradoxically, he moves between the sacred space of the mosque and the spaces of his forbidden amorous exploits. In the mosque he prays and makes a point of lingering for a while, reading the Qur'an, ensuring that he is seen by those it may concern.³⁷

After prayer, he resorts to his romantic adventures. He is deeply conscious that Riyadh, much more than Dammam, has made him lose much of the standards and virtues which his mother had instilled in him. He has now learnt to smoke heavily, drink alcohol, and indulge in illicit sex and in social deception.

Such contradictions produce strange dreams and nightmares in Hisham's sleep. He sees himself in different places, including other Arab cities he had known, and persons become mixed up. He sees his friends in Dammam and his relatives in Riyadh muddled together with characters from films, novels and tales. The Brothers Karamazov mingle with characters from *Les Misérables*, together with al-Sayyid and his wife Amina from Naguib Mahfouz's trilogy. But he sees old pious Amina dancing erotically, while the scandalous Christine Keeler is praying avidly. Meanwhile he sees his own mother, his remote moral monitor, biting her finger like Jacob in some painting warning Joseph to beware of temptation.³⁸

I would like to conclude by pointing out al-Hamad's reflections, through Hisham's sensibility, on the duplicity of social life in conservative male-dominated Riyadh, particularly segregated space and the veiling of women. We have seen that several things can have contradictory functions in al-Hamad's Riyadh. The veil can be a thin separator and a filter for communication, where women would be hanging their washing or passing in the streets with their faces hardly concealed behind their fine veils. The television may provide innocent family entertainment in the same room. But it can be used to distract parents from knowing their adolescent



and grown-up children's illicit adventures elsewhere in the house. Even prayers in the mosque can be abused and made to have paradoxical functions. The call to prayer may punctuate the day's pattern and set life's rhythm. But it can be used, particularly in the evening, as a timer for boy and girl to prepare to meet or depart safely while male worshippers prepare to enter or leave the mosque's sacred space. Communal prayers may help male neighbours to meet in the city's otherwise hectic daily life. But being seen in the mosque can also mislead others into thinking that you must be 'a good person', when in fact you might be plotting an amorous rendezvous afterwards.

Al-Hamad makes Hisham challenge Riyadh's contradictory society, seriously questioning the basis of conservative gender segregation. Hisham finds it "hellish to be a bachelor in Riyadh: no one trusts you, every one avoids you". This reader of al-Hamad's narrative finds it quite apt to re-phrase Mrs Bennet's famous first maxim in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: "It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in a Riyadh neighbourhood must be feared". For Hisham, all this fear—and persecution—of bachelors and the building of walls to separate women from the nearest man, are signs of men's lack of trust of their women. This makes him recall the notorious misogynist motif of the Jinni and his unfaithful wife in the framework story of the *1001 Nights*.³ While he seems to interpret this story as allowing the woman some agency or control as far as her desires are concerned, al-Hamad doesn't seem to portray Riyadh's attitude as signifying persecution and exploitation of women. A contrast in perspective, through a woman's lens and a decidedly feminine voice, may be found in Raja al-Sani's *Daughters of Riyadh* (2005), the already noted (experimental), daring and controversial novel.

Notes

- 1 Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London, New Left Books, 1979), p. 252
- 2 Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic* (London, Faber, 1984), p. 28
- 3 I use the original Arabic text of the trilogy: Turki al-Hamad, *al-Adama*, (London, Saqi, 1997); *al-Shumaysi* (Saqi, 1998); *al-Karadib* (Saqi, 1999; 3rd reprint, 2003); occasionally I also cite the English translation of the first two volumes: *Adama*, trans. Robin Bray (London, Saqi, 2003) and *Shumaysi*, trans. Paul Starkey (Saqi, 2005).
- 4 Salma K. Jauyysi, *The Literature of Modern Arabia: An Anthology* (London & New York, Kegan Paul



- International, 1988), pp. 534, 542, refers in passing to two novels by Ibrahim al Nasir, published in 1961 and 1969, respectively; and to Hamza Bogary's autobiographical novel, published in 1983
- 5 Edward Said, "The Novel as Beginning Intention", in his *Beginnings, Intention & Method* (New York, Basic Books, 1975; Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 81
- 6 'Abd al-Rahman Munif's *Mudun al-Milh* (Cities of Salt) quintet was first published in Beirut, 1984-89; On Munif's novels, see Shakir al-Nabulsi, *Madar al-Sahra'* (Desert Orbit) (Beirut, 1991); for more insights into Munif's aesthetics, see Nijmeh Hajjar, "The Humanity of a Modern Arab City: a Novelist's Biography of Amman", *Literature & Aesthetics*, 15 (December 2005); pp. 75-89
- 7 Ghazi al-Gosaibi, *Shiqqat al-Hurriyya* (*Apartment of Freedom*) (London-Beirut, Riad El-Rayyes, 1994): it is situated within the period 1956-61; Ghazi al-Gosaibi, *Abu Shallakh al-Barrma'i* (*Amphibian Bragger*) (Beirut, al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya, 2001)
- 8 Salma K. Jayyusi, *The Literature of Modern Arabia*, does not include Munif at all among Saudi writers
- 9 Extended interview with Turki al-Hamad (in Arabic), by Turki al-Dakhil in *IDA'AT* (Flashes of Light), on *Alarabiyya TV*, Dubai, 25 August 2004
- 10 See Saudi government official advertisement in *the Times*, London, 23 September 1992; on the "progress without change" irony, see Ahmad Shboul, "Islam and Globalisation: Arab World Perspectives", in Virginia Hooker & Amin Saikal (eds.), *Islamic Perspectives on the New Millennium* (Singapore, ISEAS, 2004), pp. 43-73.
- 11 Interview with Turki al-Hamad, *Open Book, BBC London Radio 4* (2003), quoted by the publisher on Turki al-Hamad's, *Shumaysi*, Eng. Trans. (London, Saqi, 2005).
- 12 Views of several educated Saudis, independently put on an informal Saudi website – in Arabic, 9 to 12 July 2005: See <http://www.rasid.com> (The context is a series of personal messages of sympathy and condolence on the sudden tragic death of al-Hamad's wife on 9 July 2005. All messages evince typical religious sentiments of compassion and are mostly from Eastern Saudi Arabia, the author's native province)
- 13 Raja al-Sani, *Banat al-Riyadh* (Daughters of Riyadh) (London, Saqi, 2005)
- 14 Raja al-Sani, *Banat al-Riyadh*, p. 1.
- 15 While al-Sani is essentially concerned with women's dilemmas and men's hypocrisy, a prominent Saudi intellectual, poet and novelist like Ghazi al-Gosaibi (cited in the publisher's publicity blurb) seems to me to praise the novel mainly for revealing the "girls' enchanted and enchanting world..."
- 16 On Mahfouz's *Trilogy*, see Nijmeh Hajjar's study in the present volume.
- 17 As Boyd Tonkin observed in his review of the first volume in the London *Independent* (cited on the cover of *Adama*, London, 2003)
- 18 *Karadib*, p. 288
- 19 *Adama*, p.10; (p. 9).
- 20 For example, *Adama*, p. 150: where a man "has three wives, six sons and seven daughters, all living in the same house"
- 21 *Adama*, p. 246
- 22 *Shumaysi*, p. 140
- 23 *Adama*, p. 70
- 24 This misogynist statement is sometimes (dubiously?) attributed to the Prophet Muhammad; its first half (about reason) is also credited to Aristotle, as Turki al-Hamad himself notes in one of his non-fiction works, *Min Huna Yabda' al-Taghyir* (Change Begins from Here, London, Saqi, 2004), p. 31
- 25 *Adama*, pp. 94-95
- 26 *Adama*, pp. 96; p. 94
- 27 *Adama*, p. 69



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- 28 *Adama*, p. 148; p. 143
- 29 *Adama*, p. 100; p. 97.
- 30 *Adama*, p. 167
- 31 *Shumaysi*, pp. 33-34; pp. 31-32
- 32 *Adama*, pp. 76-78
- 33 *Shumaysi*, p. 39
- 34 *Adama*, pp. 230-33
- 35 *Shumaysi*, pp. 768-86
- 36 *Adama*, pp. 168-69; *Shumaysi*, p. 160

