

A Gramscian Analysis of Cultural Hegemony and Gendered Social Norms in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*

Dr. Ali Mohammed Hasan

Nawras S. A. Al-Mudhafar

University of Basra-College of Education for Human Sciences / English Department

Abstract

The present study adopts Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony in the analysis of Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* to investigate power, gender, and social norms in Saudi society. It examines how religious and cultural institutions, in addition to other dominant patriarchal systems, restrict women's freedom. Through the lives of four young ladies, the novel highlights the conflict between tradition and modernity. The study deeply scrutinizes how women negotiate, resist, and disobey these hegemonic norms. The study contributes to an understanding of Saudi literature, particularly gendered power relations and potential for social transformation.

Keywords: Gramscian theory, cultural hegemony, modernity and tradition, Saudi Arabian culture, Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*

تحليل من منظور غرامشي للهيمنة الثقافية والاعراف الاجتماعية النوعية في رواية بنات الرياض

لـ رجاء الصانع

د.علي محمد حسن

نورس صباح عبد الزهرة

جامعة البصرة- كلية التربية للعلوم الانسانية/ قسم اللغة الانكليزية

المستخلص:

تتبنى الدراسة نظرية الهيمنة الثقافية لـ أنطونيو غرامشي في تحليل رواية " بنات الرياض " لـ رجاء الصانع للتحقق من القوة والنوع والامتاط الاجتماعية في المجتمع السعودي. وتبحث الدراسة في كيفية قيام المؤسسات الدينية والثقافية، بالإضافة إلى الأنظمة الأبوية السائدة الأخرى بتقييد حرية المرأة. ومن خلال حياة أربع سيدات شابات، تسلط الرواية الضوء على الصراع بين التقاليد والحداثة. تبحث الدراسة بعمق كيف تتفاوض النساء وتقاوم وتخالف هذه المعايير المهيمنة. تساهم الدراسة في فهم الأدب السعودي، وخاصة علاقات القوة بين الجنسين وإمكانية التحول الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية غرامشي، الهيمنة الثقافية، التقاليد والحداثة، الثقافة السعودية، بنات الرياض لـ رجاء الصانع.

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Introduction:

Girls of Riyadh, a novel by Rajaa Alsanea, offers an interesting vision of the modern Saudi society, especially with regard to issues of social traditions and gender. The novel, introduced in the form of emails, envisages four young Saudi women living and encountering the hardships of friendship, love, and social expectations in a restrictive environment. Alsanea, using this storytelling technique, stresses the conflict arising between the ambitions of the young generation, chiefly women, and cultural dictates in a swiftly modernizing situation. An analysis of the novel in terms of Gramscian's theory discloses the devices of cultural hegemony, and illuminates the ways and means by which dominant ideologies sustain gendered roles and opportunities. As stated by Antonio Gramsci, cultural hegemony denotes the mechanisms through which the ruling class obtains the consent of the governed by stimulating prevailing cultural values and norms .

The hegemonic forces, in Girls of Riyadh, are portrayed as strict social practices that govern women's conduct, limit their individuality and sustain patriarchal authority. Nevertheless, the protagonists also display forms of resistance, in an attempt to challenge these norms and reshape their identities in harmony with their own standards. This conflict between resistance and obedience embodies the one between tradition and modernization in Saudi society. The examination of Girls of Riyadh, through the application of Gramscian theory, would offer deeper understandings of the way cultural hegemony strengthens gendered social norms. It additionally recognizes change opportunities when individuals resist. This viewpoint contributes to a larger discussion of the ways in which cultural hegemony affects gendered settings, while also increasing an awareness of the Saudi society.

Social Norms and Gender in Saudi Arabian Society

Examining gender roles in Saudi society would explain the deep-rooted theological and cultural systems that decide the role of women. Saudi women have long undergone marginalization due to the patriarchal standards and religious interpretations, which have restricted their educational and professional opportunities. The analysis shows the effect of certain significant events, such as discovering oil and the increase of the American influence, on making a shift in society and stimulating discussions regarding the responsibilities and rights of women. The duties of Saudi women have permanently been restricted to the home and specific public tasks. This is because of the conservative nature of the Saudi society. For example, women's education, in the beginning, was planned to serve the aspirations of society, such as preparing them for roles of subordination and motherhood. However, Saudi women, due to modernization and external influences, especially the exposure to Western culture and the presence of foreign women in the Gulf War, began to claim more rights. Nevertheless, gender discrimination has continued, such as the prohibition of driving. The study highlights the continuing challenge of creating a balance between traditions and contemporary standpoints on gender issues. The social and political landscape in Saudi Arabia is still being affected by this conflict.

Recently, the role of women in the development process has received more discussions and debates in the Saudi society. Additionally, there has been an argument in Saudi Arabia over women's rights and duties in that development. Before one delves into the topic of women's education in Saudi Arabia, it is important to examine the political and social developments that have shaped the status of women in Saudi Arabia. The Middle East region has faced significant difficulties over the last fifty years which have impacted all of the region's countries, but especially the Gulf countries. Like

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other Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia has directly and indirectly gone through some significant societal upheavals.

The commencement of oil production in 1979 and the founding of ARAMCO (Arabian American Oil Company) in Dhahran, the capital city on the eastern coast of Saudi Arabia where the majority of American corporations are based, marked the beginning of American involvement in the country. With their families in town, American engineers and oil executives established several businesses and constructed Western-style homes, schools, and compounds. In the middle of the 1970s, foreign migrant labour made up 43% of all employees in oil businesses (Yamani, 1996). Saudi women were not allowed to drive automobiles or go shopping in malls; American women were doing both. Within a short time, Saudi women started requesting some of the same rights as their American townswomen. Formal conversations were held at times. But after the Mecca uprising in 1979, these conversations came to an end. When Saudi Arabia first came in the 1980s, its society was more complex and it was ready to benefit from all the advances in social and economic spheres. The nation's religious and social customs were to be preserved at the same time (Huyette, 1985). It has been challenging to keep the two in check, particularly in terms of women's professional space.

Furthermore, with US troops fighting in the Gulf War of 1990 (also known as "Desert Storm" in the US), the US was conspicuously present in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. Along the east coast near the borders between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, US military women were observed operating automobiles. Saudi women witnessed American women driving military vehicles in Riyadh and Dammam, but they also saw their sisters from Kuwait, who had left their country, enjoying a freedom that was not available to Saudi women, including driving cars. The entire region was impacted by all three Wars in different ways. Up until 2002, the Ministry of Education was in charge of overseeing the education of boys, while the Department of Religious Guidance was in charge of women's education at all levels, including elementary, secondary, high school, and university. This was dictated to make sure that women's education did not deviate from the original goal of educating them to become good wives and mothers and to prepare them for 'acceptable' vocations like teaching and nursing, which were thought to suit their nature. The situation facing Saudi women was precarious since they are both present and absent from the public eye. Smith, a feminist from the West, for example, contends that gender inequality seems to have its origins in women's historical marginalization and exclusion from public life. The situation involving Saudi women is comparable. Girls were trained enough to accept an assigned role in which they were subservient to men, but not enough to question it, as Doumato puts it (2000, p.93).

Gramscian Theory and Literary Criticism

The Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci is regarded as one of the most important political theorists of the 20th century. Both political theory and literary criticism have greatly drawn from his theory of cultural hegemony. Despite his early lack of recognition in his native Italy, Gramsci's theories are now central to critical theory and his writings—especially his Prison Notebooks—are examined in literary criticism, sociology, political science, and other academic fields. The central concept of Gramsci's theoretical findings is that of cultural hegemony, which provides a sophisticated explanation of how power functions not just by force but also through the consent of the governed, who absorb the ideals of dominant social groups.

Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony examines the ways in which consent and coercion are combined to preserve power in society. Gramsci broadened the analysis to include the importance of cultural institutions—such as schools, the media, and churches—in upholding the dominance of a

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ruling class, in contrast to classic Marxist theory, which concentrated primarily on economic determinism and the ruling class's direct control over the state. Gramsci argues that these institutions contribute to the maintenance of a worldview that serves the interests of the ruling class. This worldview is subsequently taken in as common sense by socially subordinate groups, gaining their "spontaneous" assent (Lears, 1985).

The phrase "cultural hegemony," coined by Gramsci to describe the pervasive influence of elite values in creating societal norms and ideas and making them seem natural or inevitable, outlines this subtle process of control. He maintained that while coercive measures—laws, police, and military forces—remain essential to preserving power, the ubiquitous effect of ideology frequently supersedes these. The governing or dominating group, in addition to using concrete compulsion, employs cultural institutions to impose and publicize its ideology among the governed.

For a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between consent and coercion in social dynamics, consider Gramsci's theory of hegemony. For example, if we look at how capitalism sustains itself, we find that it does so through cultural norms that legitimize the status quo rather than the economic force alone, as traditional Marxism might imply. Therefore, Gramsci's theories diverged from conventional Marxism, as they stress the intellectual superstructures that maintain materialistic conditions. Gramsci's approach of cultural analysis, as many critics believe, paved the way for new perspectives on how the dominant classes preserve their power through cultural and ideological practices (Lears, 1985).

Literary criticism has been considerably influenced by Gramsci's cultural hegemony, particularly in investigating the way writings can contribute to shifting social norms. Gramsci's theory has an important role in analysing how literature serves as a tool for both domination and resistance, as literary texts often highlight the dominant ideologies of the day. As such, Gramsci's ideas have significantly affected the field of postcolonial studies. The idea of cultural hegemony has been adopted by different academics such as Edward Said to show how Western literature and academic discourse have conventionally depicted the "Orient" as an inferior, exotic "Other." Colonial powers have found an advantage in this representation, which indirectly validates their dominance by envisaging non-Western cultures as primitive or undeveloped. Gramsci's idea, that cultural power can be essential in maintaining control as political or economic power, can help understand how literature may reinforce such hegemonic ideas (Aidi, 2017).

Likewise, feminist literary critics have employed Gramsci's theory to scrutinize the ways in which patriarchal norms are sustained in literary works. Many literary works—particularly those found in the canon of Western literature—reinforce gender stereotypes and present women as inferior to males. Through normalizing these representations, these works help to maintain patriarchy by framing it as an inevitable and natural societal structure. However, much as Gramsci's theory of hegemony makes resistance possible, feminist critics draw attention to the ways in which some literary works oppose or subvert these prevailing ideas, providing alternative perspectives on gender relations (Hennessy, 1993).

The independence of subordinate groups inside hegemonic organizations is also taken into account by Gramsci's theory. When the ruling class tries to force its ideology on others, the working class, racial and ethnic minorities, and other oppressed groups can fight back by establishing alternative cultural forms that subvert the dominant power. Cultural studies and literary criticism have benefited greatly from the concept of "counter-hegemony" because it has made it possible for

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researchers to analyse how marginalized voices in literature challenge authority and present opportunities for social change (Green, 2011).

As a counter-hegemonic voice opposing imperial narratives imposed by colonial powers, the voices of the colonized are frequently framed in postcolonial literature. Writing from their own experiences, writers from former colonized countries question the prevailing narrative that once supported their enslavement. These writings provide fresh perspectives on identity, nationalism, and power in addition to opposing colonial rule. Gramsci's beliefs, beyond the Marxist economic determinism, have additionally prompted new methods focusing on the analysis of the relationship between culture and power. Cultural hegemony is dynamic and it necessitates a kind of negotiation and redefinition by the dominant group in response to any resistance shown by the subordinate groups. The dynamic element in Gramsci's theory is specifically helpful in the study of literary texts, as they might depict the continuing conflict between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic powers in society. Gramsci emphasized the importance of the role of intellectuals in supporting or challenging cultural hegemony. He distinguished between "traditional" intellectuals, who strengthen the principles of the prevailing class, and "organic" intellectuals, rising from marginalized social classes, and offering alternative perspectives.

To form a shared consciousness that could challenge the dominant class, organic intellectuals have a vital role in the counter-hegemony development (Gramsci, 1971). In literary criticism, this distinction has been functional in exploring the ways in which specific writers support or challenge hegemony. On the one hand, an organic intellectual might produce works that inquire into the existing power structures. A traditional intellectual, on the other hand, might write literature that retains these powers. Therefore, it is probable to find a great number of feminist writers, postcolonial writers, and socialist writers as organic intellectuals who use their works for making a social change.

Gramsci's influence can be noticed in various disciplines, such as anthropology, political science, and sociology, as well as literary criticism. His "cultural hegemony" has developed as a central concept in critical theory, and researchers have since then examined the implicit ways that language, culture, and ideology are used by authority. The Frankfurt School, in addition to adopting Gramsci's theories, has also used the ideas of other theorists like Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno to build their criticisms of mass culture and capitalist society. The Frankfurt School has looked at popular culture as a central ground for retaining hegemony, as it encouraged capitalist ideas under the pretence of entertainment (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1944). Scholars like Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams, who have investigated the role of communication and media in the reinforcement of cultural hegemony, have furthermore been affected by the critical theory of Gramsci. Drawing on Gramsci's findings, Hall's work on representation and Williams' definition of culture as "ordinary" explore the ways in which prevailing ideologies are recurring and challenged.

Antonio Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony, and the way dominant groups retain power not only through power but also through the consent of the governed, led to new research tendencies in different academic fields. His theories have been vital to literary criticism and help critics understand how books maintain and undermine social norms. Eventually, his work has become essential for academics considering the relationship between culture, politics, and literature. Gramsci has deeply effected modern thinking through offering a framework for scrutinising the diverse systems of control in society and verifying that the hegemonic struggle is central to politics and culture.

Analysis of Cultural Hegemony in Girls of Riyadh

The novel under scrutiny, Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*, symbolizes the struggle between tradition and modernity in the Saudi society, through a focus on the lives of young women. Written in the form of E-mails, the story explores the obstacles that the protagonists must overcome to balance marriage, love, and personal freedom while adhering to deeply ingrained cultural standards. The protagonists' attempt to strike a balance between their yearning for independence and social expectations based on orthodox interpretations of Islamic ideals demonstrates the intersection of modernity and tradition. The protagonists' ongoing struggle to balance their contemporary aspirations with the constraints imposed by patriarchal structures is shown by this juxtaposition (Hamdan, 2005).

In the culturally constrained context of Saudi Arabia, Rajaa Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh* discusses the idea that women have been oppressed by the Western modernization model and the irrational, immoral, and selfish behaviour of men. It also attempts to expose the widespread deception and exploitation of modernity. Does modernity's blurring of tradition solely have positive aspects? What potential for social transformation does modernity bring with it? What issues might they present? Does it treat men and women equally, those who have and those who do not, those in positions of power and those who are weak? Adorno and Horkheimer view modernity as "mass deception" (Hamdan, 2005, p. 1) in light of all these negative elements, as it only serves the interests of the bourgeoisie and not the proletariat. Alsanea presents the various tales of four different girls from Riyadh who are friends at the university and all have stories of sufferings, obstacles, and hardships because of the gender-biased society of Riyadh. Alsanea, herself, is a Saudi woman living in the West as an American dentist. On the one hand, she wants to capitalize on the patriarchal society negative views of women, and how the male community uses them as objects of pleasure. On the other hand, as university students, they endeavour to emulate the modernism and freedom of the West. In the book, Mashael's story reflects the above-mentioned idea, therefore, Faisal thinks-

Mashael was a cultured educated girl, she was a university student whose potpourri of Eastern and Western thinking he really liked and admired...the girl was sophisticated and not straight out of the village like all of the other girls he had met or those his mother had hinted strongly about marrying him off to (94-95)

Saudi women must endure a life of neglect at the hands of men since gender inequality consistently casts women's involvement in public life in a negative light. The protagonists in Alsanea's story can access new ideas due to technical breakthroughs like the internet as well as various Western influences, but these innovations frequently go against the norms. In the end, *Girls of Riyadh* portrays a generation of women attempting to find a voice for themselves while torn between the pull of tradition and modernity.

Gramscian theory may help to shed light on how gender roles and societal expectations are created and maintained in the Saudi Arabia of Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*. The four young Saudi women in the novel navigate the limitations imposed by a traditional society. In the book the author mentions:

In the novels of Al-Quasibi and Al-Hamad, she found a lot of political illusions that reminded her of the novels of the Egyptian writers she had been addicted to as a teenager. She recalled suddenly

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the demonstration she and her classmates had been prohibited from participating in, those days when all of the Arab nations were protesting to show support for the Palestinian Intifada and the Al-Aqsa Mosque uprising (64).

Al Quasibi and AL- Hamad's novels provide a subtle criticism of the Arab male dominated world in which women are depicted as subalterns or minor subjects being socially and politically underrated

Al Sanea in this quote reflects vital subjects and issues in relation to societal expectations, gender and political consciousness in Arab literature in general and in Saudi Culture in specific. It reveals the crossroads of gender identity and restrictions imposed by the society on women in the Arab World.

Alsanea shows how dominant cultural standards are assimilated and questioned by bringing attention to challenges an individual woman faces to fulfill her needs. Both material and ideological tactics are employed by cultural hegemony, in Gramsci's view. The way that social pressure and traditional gender roles are portrayed in *Girls of Riyadh* is a reflection of the ideological power that Saudi Arabia's patriarchal structures wield. In the "Author's note", Rajaa Alsanea writes: "I hope that by the time you finish this book, you will say to yourself: Oh yes it is a very conservative Islamic society" (102).

Generally, the Islamic Society is widely considered as a very conservative one, in which women encounter limited freedom as being marginalized while men are the major subjects in such a patriarchal society. In her novels, Raja Al Sanea frequently tackles these issues in which she offers a vivid portrayal of the society and shows how women resist in such social structure.

The manner in which the characters negotiate and fight these rules reveals how hegemonic ideas are disputed. Additionally, Alsanea's story shows how literature may be used to challenge and even change hegemonic views. *Girls of Riyadh* questions popular perceptions of gender and social structure in Saudi Arabia by elevating the voices of women who struggle with and overcome cultural norms. This is consistent with Gramsci's theory, according to which literary and other forms of cultural output are essential to the preservation and challenge of hegemonic power. The novel under study presents a subtle critique of the cultural hegemony that shapes the lives of its protagonists by depicting the junction of personal and societal problems. For instance, Gramsci's belief that subordinate groups might be coerced into a passive acceptance of the dominant ideology is reflected in Sadeem's comment on the absence of political engagement among the young. As such, Sadeem muses: "Why was it that young people these days, had no interest in foreign politics unless it was the scandalous behaviour of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky?" (65). She hopes to find a cause to fight for that draws attention to the covert encroachment of prevailing cultural norms, deflecting it from organized opposition and political activism. This illustrates how hegemony operates, preserving the status quo with the approval of the governed.

Your analysis has to be richer and more specific to help support your argument. You rarely cite examples that outline "consent" to cultural prohibitions that apply to women only. As such, you need to supply more examples and be less general.

Middle Eastern writers have attempted to subvert and challenge prevailing cultural narratives through their works, especially by emphasizing women's lived experiences and the nexus of

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tradition, modernity, and gender norms. The importance of literature, particularly that authored by women, is crucial in refuting stereotypes and providing complex depictions of the Middle Eastern experience. The events of September 11, 2001, altered the way the West perceives the Middle East worldwide. The influence included Arabs and Muslims in particular. The "clash of civilizations" as concept has become popular in the aftermath, and the appearance of Islamophobia has become part of cultural hegemony.

The connection of modernity and tradition is mainly clear in the context of women's education and their emerging voices in literature. Saudi women have been banned from the literary landscape for decades because of certain social and cultural restrictions. However, as Al-Matrafi (2023) notes, the slow and gradual appearance of some female novelists represents a larger tendency toward identity reclamation and self-expression. By shedding light on the marginalized experiences of Saudi women through writing, these novelists subvert patriarchal hegemony.

Gramsci's cultural hegemony, as a process through which the dominant class imposes its power by attaining the subordinates' consent through ideological means as opposed to physical force is relevant to Middle Eastern literature, as counter-narratives striving for cultural and political dominance oppose the typical narratives enacted by Western imperialism. Gramscian theory shows how specific cultural symbols, such as the headscarf and women's place in public life, remain part of the Saudi Arabian culture to sustain social order. Women's education, for example, is formulated in a hegemonic language, where their duties as caregivers are prioritized over their independence. The educational system is exploited to preserve these conventional roles. However, it offers women a means to question them. by Gramsci's concept of "spontaneous consent" is particularly useful to comprehend how Saudi women have resisted the challenging scene of cultural hegemony. The Saudi government, having the support of religious authorities, becomes the dominant authority that imposes an actual view of gender roles. Nevertheless, the increasing involvement of women in literature and education is a form of resistance to this hegemony. However conservative the society is, Saudi women are able to challenge the dominant discourse and express their identities by producing their own cultural narratives.

Narratives by Saudi women, though relatively new, have developed in terms of examining gender dynamics and cultural hegemony in the country. Rajaa Alsanea, besides other female writers, have challenged the existing gender norms through their writings and drawn attention to the difficulties women face in a patriarchal environment. Narrators, not only reproducing the world, can express their opinions of it. For Saudi female novelists, this helps as a platform for questioning the existing cultural system. Women writers are able to critically challenge the societal norms, which helps to state feminist awareness.

The characters in Alsanea's novel symbolize the greater battle that Saudi women face. The battle is the tension between the strains of a patriarchal culture and women's desire for independence and self-expression. In this way, *Girls of Riyadh* explores the potential for social change while also offering a critique of cultural hegemony. The book also casts doubt on the idea that modernity is intrinsically freeing, offering a more complex picture of the ways that traditional beliefs still influence women's lives.

According to Mazzoni (2017), *Girls of Riyadh* evolved into the contemporary equivalent of the book of life and is among the best accounts of the narrator's worldview. According to him, "modern novels are made up of stories that are told in any manner at all by narrators who exist as contingent beings within time and space, just like us." As a result, they offer an interpretation of the world

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rather than a replica of it (Mazzoni, 2017, p. 1). Writing novels thus enables female writers to discuss the indescribable in a way that women's literature a means of advocating for a feminist understanding.

Novelists share with readers their cultures, ideals, worldviews, and concepts. It makes sense that a female novelist's life would have an impact on her work, and gender themes are crucial to these up-and-coming authors. One could argue that the Saudi female fiction is a genre in which stereotypes of Saudi women are introduced. But it is also an area where vocal power has the ability to shatter these stereotypes. It represents the interaction between the feminine and the "other"—men and society—and serves as a tool to end the silence surrounding patriarchal hegemony and the oppression of women. Almost all Saudi female novelists offer exceptional perspectives into the diverse lifestyles of Saudi women. This brings up a crucial query regarding the title of Saudi women's literaturean (Al-Matrafi, 2023).

Conclusion

Rajaa Alsanea gives a compelling story in *Girls of Riyadh* that captures the conflict between modernity and tradition in Saudi society, especially when viewed through the prism of Gramscian cultural hegemony. The novel critically examines how gendered social expectations and patriarchal standards are used as instruments to uphold cultural hegemony via the lives of four young Saudi women. According to Gramsci these norms which normalize gender roles and restrict the participation of the subordinated—in this case Saudi women—in public life are part of a greater ideological system that ensures the spontaneous consent of the dominated and keeps male dominance. The conflict between the protagonists' personal desires for independence and the dominant social forces is presented in their attempts to achieve a balance between maintaining traditional values and embracing contemporary influence. The internal conflict of these women reveals Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemony as they question and reject the dominant cultural narrative that is imposed on them. Western education and technology offer the women new ideas to challenge the the system and confirm that cultural change is both possible and essential. Eventually, Gramsci's theory that subaltern classes actively engage in and internalize hegemonic ideas in addition to coercion is highlighted by Alsanea's text, which stresses how deep-rooted gendered and cultural norms are. Though *Girls of Riyadh* does not call for a radical revolution against these norms, it does present a nuanced critique of the rigid structures that govern Saudi women's lives. Through education, technology, and exposure to the outsider world, the possibility of an important change in society increases. Consequently, readers are encouraged to reevaluate gender roles and comprehend the ways in which hegemonic forces affect Middle Eastern society on a daily basis.

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