

“I want to fly”: New Women Traversing Cultural and Geographical Boundaries in the Poetry of Thuraya Al Arrayed

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on Thuraya Al Arrayed’s unconventional portrayal of women in selected revolutionary poems which engage with the notion of the New Woman, a term first coined by the English novelist Ouida in 1894. Although the English New Woman is not the main scope of this paper, I explore how Al Arrayed’s representation of women resembles the experience of the Victorian New Woman who is perceived by contemporary scholars as the foremother of modern feminists who sought social and legal reforms. Thus, this research adds to the existing body of knowledge, offering a new approach to Al Arrayed’s poetry in relation to aspects concerning New Women in contemporary Saudi Arabia. By continuously interrogating Al Arrayed’s choice of metaphors and images in contrast with those depicted by Victorian poets, I aim to establish Al Arrayed as a significant woman poet whose poetry embraces a literary tradition which questions negative gendered attitudes biased against passionate women. In my approach to Al Arrayed’s poetry, I consult selected poems from her published and unpublished volumes, in addition to biographical notes based on personal interviews. Besides, I consider sociological research conducted on the changing role of women which coincided with the transitional phases in contemporary Saudi Arabia and Victorian England. The majority of the thematic focus offered in this article is absent from contemporary literature. Thus, the significance of this research lies in the way it moves the debate on Al Arrayed forward to address aspects to be considered for the first time.

Key Words: Al Arrayed, New Woman, Saudi Arabia, Victorian.

Introduction

In *Desert Voices: Bedouin Women's Poetry in Saudi Arabia* (2009), Moneera Al Ghadeer begins her study by highlighting the lack of extant information about the life and poetry of Arab women: “In recent scholarship on Arabic literature the poetry of Arab women has been given insignificant consideration and continues to be unappreciated, unlike other genres” (Al Ghadeer, 2009: 1). Despite the fact that Al Arrayed’s name is increasingly acknowledged in anthologies and studies by contemporary scholars, she is one of the woman poets whose name is worthy of more attention. Most recently, Majdi Al Ahmadi’s *Thuraya Al Arrayed's Poetry: An Objective and Artistic Study* (2016) considers Al Arrayed’s use of poetic language, techniques, and her portrayal of particular themes, such as home affairs and immigration. Al Ahmadi’s book is an expanded study and continuation of his MA thesis “Thuraya Al Arrayed: A Poet” (2006). In addition, a selection of Al Arrayed’s poems, including “Desert Dreams”, “The Doors; The Game of Times”, “Moments of Silence”, and “The Stillborn” are included in *Gathering the Tide: An Anthology of Contemporary Arabian Gulf Poetry* (2011). *Beyond the Dunes: An Anthology of Modern Saudi Literature* (2006) is another book which addresses Al Arrayed’s name and two of her poems, “Questions” and “Name It What You Like”. A decade earlier, her poem “Thirst: In the Stealth of the Stillness” is included in *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001).

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In her PhD thesis “The Literary Movement in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia Emergence and Development 1930s-1990s” (2000), Nedhal Al Nassir dedicates an entire section to Al Arrayid as a modernist Saudi poet. In 2008, Mohammed Ali Al Khalfan’s *Thuraya Al Arrayed and Poetry* includes a number of critical essays and articles written in response to Al Arrayed’s published volumes. Although none of the existing literature pays attention to the notion of the New Woman neither in Al Arrayed’s poems nor in modern Saudi Arabia, it is worth noting that contemporary scholars acknowledge Al Arrayed as a defender of women’s rights. Referring to her poem “They are all me”, Al Ahmadi points out, “[Al Arrayed] refuses the persecution faced by women [...] and she found an opportunity to talk about women’s rights which are lost in the Arab world” (Al Ahmadi, 2016: 47). Despite this claim, Al Arrayed’s engagement with women’s rights is included in a short subsection in Al Ahmadi’s book. Similarly, Abdullah Al Guthami identifies the same poem as “Thuraya’s uprising” against patriarchal conventions (Al Guthami, 2008: 125). Building on the previous arguments, this research offers an insightful account to the subversive meanings in Al Arrayed’s poems which have not yet been considered by contemporary critics.

In addition, this study is inspired by the title of Louay Bahry’s article “The New Saudi Woman: Modernizing in Islamic Framework” which sheds light on the increasing opportunities for Saudi women. Bahry argues: The emergence of Saudi women as a social force is one of the most dynamic of the many changes reshaping Saudi Arabia today. [...] Saudi women are clearly on the move, asking for and taking an increased role in the social and economic life of their country. [...] The new Saudi woman has become more aware of her own personality, circumstances, and environment. (Bahry, 1982: 502-503). Bahry preceded me in applying the term “New” to Saudi women; however, his article lacks any discussion on the origin of the New Woman and her emergence with the social and political changes in late-Victorian England. I take Bahry’s argument forward and offer a more in-depth insight to the term “New Woman” by providing a comparative study of Al Arrayed’s poetry and late-Victorian poetry published by women writers who engaged with the notion of the New Woman.

This comparison takes as its starting point the fact that the English New Woman was an outcome of the social, religious, and political reforms which took place in *fin-de-siècle* England. In their definition of the *fin de siècle*, Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst observe: The Victorian *fin de siècle* was an epoch of endings and beginnings. The collision between the old and the new that characterized the turn of the century marks it as an excitingly volatile and transitional period; a time when British cultural politics were caught between two ages, the Victorian and the modern; a time fraught with anxiety and with an exhilarating sense of possibility. (Ledger and Luckhurst, 2000: x).

After the industrial revolution, the Victorians were confronted with “old” convictions and the ambition for the “new”. The radical and rapid changes, which took place toward the end of the nineteenth century, included amendments in laws concerning women in both the private and the public spheres. Women were no longer considered properties of their husbands and more places were open to them outside the private sector. Mary Shanley points out that the “ideology of the home”, which was dominant among the public, “encouraged women of all classes to tend to domestic duties and to make the household a haven from the turmoil and competition of the marketplace” (Shanley, 1989: 7). However, due to the legal changes, such as those implemented in the 1882 Married Women’s Property Act, this ideology was no longer idealised and was confronted by the New Woman in both real life and literary works.

Similarly, recent research on sociology finds that the revolutionary amendments in Saudi women’s rights coincide with the dynamic changes Saudi Arabia is passing through in King Salaman’s reign. For instance, in “Separate or together? Women-only public spaces and participation of Saudi women in the public domain in Saudi Arabia”, Annemarie Van Geel argues: “Important factors influencing the position of women and supporting stricter and new forms of public gender segregation were the discovery and exploitation of oil, the process of urbanisation, and the rise of the revivalist Islamic Awakening movement and its discourse on segregation” (Geel, 2016: 360). Despite the different cultural and religious background, this article crosses geographical boundaries, positioning Al Arrayed’s poetry within the transitional phase in Saudi Arabia and highlights the predominant sense of “anxiety” present in many of her poems, bridging older conventions and ambition for the “new”. This link between the past and the future is considered by Nathalie Handal in her introduction to *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*. Handal notes, “Arab women poets have struggled for freedom, for an enlightened Arab world, for universal recognition, peace, and equality.

Arab women poets have encouraged a look toward the future rather than the past, while still holding onto the richness of past literary manifestations” (Handal, 2001: 60). Handal includes Al Arrayed’s name in her annotated anthology, a further evidence of my argument.

Thuraya Al Arrayed: A Short Biography

Thuraya Ebrahim Al Arrayed is a distinguished Bahraini/Saudi thinker and poet who occupied prestigious political and social positions during her productive lifetime. The Arrayed family in Bahrain is a branch of an extended family by the same name originated in Arabian Peninsula north of Madinah. Born in Al Manama/ Bahrain, sixth daughter of Ebrahim Al Arrayed, Al Arrayed was very much influenced by her independent-minded father who was a social agent and a poet, too:

My father took care of my genetic and creative details. [...] I can never forget the way he respected my views of life since I was a child. My beliefs, attitudes, and expectation of others were all inspired by him. I remember his anticipation of all the success I have reached today. He always believed in me and in my opinion. He accompanied me in a world wider than the world of childhood without denying my naivety. I grew up in a house full of thousands of books in different languages. We were visited by politicians and artists from Bahrain and other countries. All of them were men. There was one Lebanese woman scholar among them. She wanted to collect some information for her research on my father. I remember how weird it was when this woman smoked a cigarette. Since then, I took the decision to enter the world of scholarship and knowledge without adopting males’ behaviours.

In this interview, Al Arrayed reflects on her unconventional childhood which seemed to have played a major role in shaping her later career. In *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (2014), Amelie Le Renard explores cultural and religious factors influencing opportunities for Saudi women. In regards to education and employment, Le Renard observes, “[since the 1960s, the] curriculum’s official goal was to make female students into good, pious, virtuous wives and mothers, protected from interactions with men” (Le Renard, 2014: 29). Although Al Arrayed did not receive her education in Saudi Arabia, such ideologies dominate the Gulf during the 1960s, a fact which is evident in Al Arrayed’s reference to the only woman scholar they were visited by. Thanks to her supportive father, who was a believer in the education of women and developing all their capabilities, Al Arrayed had the advantage of pioneering education. She describes herself as “lucky for being raised by a liberate father who came to the Arabian Gulf carrying international knowledge about the position of women in the family”. In so doing, Al Arrayed confirms her awareness of the woman question since she was young.

It is worth to note that the censored education, which was available for young women in the Gulf, resembles the ideals taught for schoolgirls in the Victorian time. In *Good Girls Make Good Wives: Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction* (1989), Judith Rowbotham explores how published books were meant to restrict girls’ attention to domestic duties as their primary role: “The stories written for girls throughout the period expose the pivotal importance of that ‘traditional’ feminine role in contemporary society, by revealing many of the factors and reasoning behind this limited domestic tradition” (Rowbotham, 1989: 12). In his description of this kind of education, Simon Morgan observes that “such an education made women worse than useless; superficially charming in the flower of youth, perhaps, but incapable of fulfilling any serious role in society” (Morgan, 2007: 36). However, Victorian New Women, including the ones I will refer to shortly in my analysis of the poems, refused to submit to such “charming” characteristics and continuously sought an alternative kind of knowledge which would enable them to fulfil roles beyond merely the domestic sphere.

Like Victorian New Women, Al Arrayed leaves behind the prevailing expectation of women’s passivity and pursues her passion. By age twelve she was well known in Bahrain as she was ranked First scholastically among all her cohorts and won prizes in literary contests for adults. Her stories were read over the radio. She studied there till age sixteen, but later left to Lebanon to continue her education as Bahrain had no university yet. After graduation she worked for a year as a teacher of English language in a secondary school, then went back to Beirut and got her MA in Education in 1969. Upon returning home she was appointed in the office of Educational Planning, Ministry of Education working directly with the Minister. She was the only female in that building. Reflecting on her experience there, Al Arrayed says, “I never felt out of place with my colleagues or paid any attention to the fact that they were males and I was a female. They liked me and I liked them”.

This shows that even early in her career, Al Arrayed surpassed her time by accommodating herself in male-centred institutions. In her article on sociocultural identity among Arab men and women, Manal Ismail observes: “The social fabric of the Arab cultural system is primarily patriarchal. Arab societies typically associate men with the public sphere and women with the private domain” (Ismail, 2012: 262). Although Ismail’s study is conducted from a linguistics point of view, it pinpoints the cultural prejudice against women’s passion to enter the workforce. While in Beirut Al Arrayed met her future husband, a Saudi studying with her in the American University of Beirut. Later both got their PhDs from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Upon graduation the couple returned to Saudi Arabia in 1976. Al Arrayed was granted the citizenship and appointed head of the newly opened girls section in King Faisal University in Dammam. However, she preferred to work in Aramco because it was close from University of Petroleum and Minerals where her husband worked. Later she moved to Government Affairs where she was in charge of reviews of all publications, then appointed as a member of the Advisory Group to the Aramco Management.

Al Arrayed was among the first generation of Saudi women to be employed as a member in the Shura Council, participating thereby in one of the momentous changes in the history of Saudi Arabia. In his recent study on women’s increasing opportunities in Saudi Arabia, Md. Muddassir Quamar argues: “Saudi women have made significant gains [which can] be witnessed in their rising economic participation and increasing involvement in media and civil society, as well as a growing presence in many professions other than the traditionally acceptable teaching and medicine” (Quamar, 2016: 324). Although Quamar’s article includes some misconception about Islamic regulations concerning women, he sheds light on Saudi women’s empowerment which is in line with the revolutionary social reforms launched in King Abdullah’s reign. Although published earlier, Al Arrayed’s poems, which are included in this article, anticipate recent research on sociology and Saudi women’s engagement in the public sphere.

Occupying a series of respected positions during her youth, Al Arrayed was ahead of her time, a fact which, as she asserts, is mirrored in her poetry: “My poetry in Bahrain and Beirut was mostly reflecting growing self-awareness of a sheltered Gulf girl totally different in her sense of self from the other girls, vaguely aware of herself not only as a full-fledged human being, but as uniquely individual and gifted one”. Al Arrayed’s description of her self-awareness as “vague” is not striking, for, as mentioned earlier, it was uncommon for young women in the Gulf to have dreams beyond the walls of the private sector.

Al Arrayed’s reflection on her poetic experience differs when she was asked about the poems she wrote in Saudi Arabia. As she notes, “in KSA my poems developed a politicized edge, as a pan Arab on the one hand, and resisting the social pressure surrounding females on the other”. Although the “politicized edge” will be the scope of a future research, it is worth noting that part of Al Arrayed’s political views are of significance to this research. According to Al Arrayed, “the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is passing through a transformational phase, reminding us of *fin-de-siècle* England.” As noted earlier, the reforms which were installed in *fin-de-siècle* England involved gradual changes in women’s rights and were mirrored in literature. In fact, Al Arrayed’s awareness of the British culture is not limited to the social changes, but, as it is evident in her poem “The Joy of Making Friends” (2006), she is familiar with major literary figures:

At nine
I discovered the world had a key
The Word
I read a Thousand and One Night in Arabic
And Shakespeare in English (54-58)

These lines show that Al Arrayed developed an interest in both Arabic and English literary canon at a young age, reminding us of her comment on the liberate education she received as a child. Born to a father in the literary domain, the capitalization in the “Word” indicates how valuable literature is to her. This value is further emphasized when interpreted in relation to her comment which reveals that her own “Word”; in another word, poetry, was initially written for personal use: “I did not write poetry to publish it but to express feelings.” As will be shown later, Al Arrayed’s hesitation to publish may be read as a result of censorship regulations which confront the subversive meanings in her poems.

In the same poem, Al Arrayed addresses the question of “Gender” which is at the heart of this paper:

At twelve I discovered Gender
 I was told I am a female
 Hence I must cover and not play in the street
 Thus I discovered that Freedom is dearer for female. (69-72)

As stated, Al Arrayed’s realization of the gendered conventions began when she was twelve; she learned that, as a female, she is not allowed to “play in the street”; that is, governed by the walls of the private sphere. Given the fact that this poem was written when Al Arrayed is already a mature woman recalling her childhood, “play[ing] in the street” may hint at meanings beyond the literal, implying a feminist account against social attitudes which confront women’s involvement in the public sphere. Reading this stanza in relation to the previous one, I argue that Al Arrayed’s literary interest and her belief in the power of the “Word” goes hand in hand with her feminist motives which are implied in her assertion that “Freedom is dearer for female”, hinting thereby at a male-dominated society.

The (New) Woman Question in Selected Poems

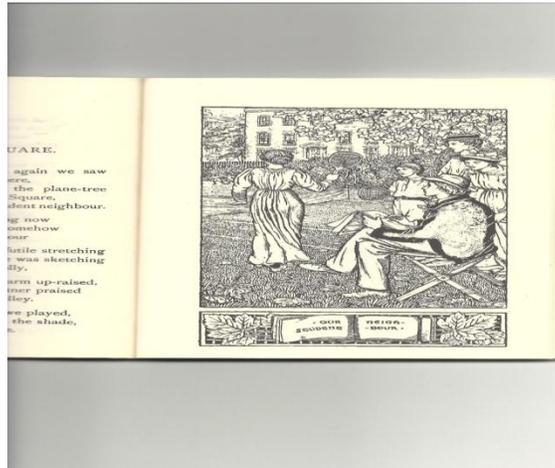
In my feminist perception of Al Arrayed’s poetry I highlight her mocking tone which is used to describe some of the conventions surrounding women in a patriarchal society: “When I speak to a man, I show him that I am fully capable and that there is no reason to underestimate me. I always wonder why shall we always identify a woman as a dependant (she is either the mother of a male or the daughter of a male.” In this comment Al Arrayed conveys her refusal to the expectations of women as dependant entities who are identified by their relationships to male figures in their lives, implying an attack on the Saudi law of guardianship which denies women their freedom. Al Arrayed also touches on the widely-spread custom of calling women by nicknames rather than using their first names. This issue of naming is also addressed in Al Arrayed’s published volume, *A Woman with No Name* (1998), which appealed to many critics. In “The Argument of Naming and the Argument of Being: A Reading of the poem ‘Without Name’”, Fatima Al Wahaibi concludes, “After all this denial is a form of proof; the poet is proving herself through her attempt to deny, and she seeks to enforce a new different perception” (Al Wahaibi, 2008: 158). Supporting Al Wahaibi’s assumptions, I argue that in her account of women, Al Arrayed reflects and simultaneously challenges the social double standards which are enforced and inspired by the culturally inherited gendered prejudice.

Al Arrayed’s belief in women’s independence is evident and occasionally implied in many of her published poems, including “Desert Dreams” (2011) which addresses a passionate speaker who resists male dominance. From the very beginning of the poem, the speaker asserts: “I came into your world/ Wrapped in my inherited desert shawls” (1-2). The choice of the word “wrapped” indicates the speaker’s restricted freedom; thus, the “desert shawl” may be read as a metaphor for the eastern social and cultural conventions. Also, as the speaker suggests, wearing the “shawls” is an “inherited” tradition rather than a choice of her own. Despite the imposed conventions, the speaker is represented as determined and refuses to be passive: “Don’t dream that you will rule my ever-moving dunes/ Or that you will ever own the keys to my mysterious tunes” (27-28). If the speaker is female addressing a male lover, she would be challenging the gendered perception of the man as a ruler in the private sphere, a reading endorsed by the speaker’s use of the possessive pronoun “my”. She is in control of the “dunes” which reflect and simultaneously challenge the fixity of the eastern culture, for these “dunes” are “moving”, possibly searching for social reform. On the other hand, the previous lines may be read in relation to male dominance in the public sphere, for the speaker refuses the addressee’s authority over her songs and “tunes” unchaining herself from the confines of censorship and the gendered attitudes biased against women’s writing. Both readings are inspired by Al Arrayed’s comment which demonstrates her motives: “The aim is to put the right person, male or female, in the right position. Let the qualified person use his/her speciality without imposing gendered ideologies”. Al Arrayed’s comment manifests her subversive feminist thoughts which shun misogynistic ideas.

Challenging male authority is a common theme in poems written by late-Victorian poets who engaged with the New Woman. For example, in her poem “In Our Square” (1891), Dollie Radford uses the image of a pale male artist to mock the gendered system which places women in the private and men in the public sphere. The title itself suggests women’s control over the place. The use of the pronoun “our” indicates that tennis, which is represented as a sport practised by the women in the poem, is exclusively for women and subsequently identifies the man as a voyeur. Like Al Arrayed’s poem, which empowers the female speaker, the title of Radford’s poem offers a challenge to prevailing attitudes toward women’s engagement in the public sphere. As Linda Hughes argues, in *fin-de-siècle* England, “the bourgeois ‘feminine sphere’ was still defined in terms of private spaces” (Hughes, 2007: 236).

By locating women in the Square, Radford's poem challenges the Victorian definition of the "feminine sphere" as exclusively private:

I passed so near him as we played,
He looked so peaceful in the shade,
Amid our bustle. (15-17)



She offers an ironic representation of the male character seated in the middle of a feminine scene where women are playing tennis, while he remains silently watchful. The muted student neighbour who "looked so peaceful" in the middle of the women's "bustle" is the central point of the irony expressed, because it is usually women who remain silent in a patriarchal society. character seated in the middle of a feminine scene where women are playing tennis, while he remains silently watchful. The muted student neighbour who "looked so peaceful" in the middle of the women's "bustle" is the central point of the irony expressed, because it is usually women who remain silent in a patriarchal society.

Figure 1 This illustration is attached to Radford's poem "In Our Square" and copied from *A Light Load* with designs by B. E. Parsons (*A Light Load* 67)

Similarly, challenging male-authority was born with Al Arrayed's early poems, including "The Stillborn" (1965) which questions the marginalisation of passionate women writers. Both anger and grief dominate the poem which opens and closes with a poet's yearning for her voice to be heard:

I want to burst, to shout
Speak up with all my force
With all my might
Open my swollen heart
Cry out
Until the word is heard
Until the word pierces the sky
I suffocate
I'm heavy with the word
I'm pregnant with the word
Enclosed within my soul
Unknown....unheard (1-12)

The poem manifests a marginalised speaker whose gender is unspecified. Thus, the poem may be read at two levels. If the speaker is male, he might be a working-class poet seeking fame in the midst of an established literary canon. Also, he might be a social reformer hoping for unity between diverse social classes and shuns racial distinctions by calling "any stranger" as "brother":

I'd turn to any passerby
 To any stranger
 Any sullen face
 And call:
 "Here brother, look at me;
 look deep into my eyes
 Into my heart
 Brother, companion
 We are free!
 Why do we separate?
 Why think in terms of you and me?
 Think of the Whole
 Of every human soul
 Break down the wall
 And reach your hand to me. (13-27)

The speaker's rejection to social segregation reflects on Al Arrayed's personal belief that "racial and intellectual conflicts participated in damaging future generation which became a prey to religious and political extremism". Thus, the call for unity becomes a common theme in many of Al Arrayed's poems, including "The Agony of Sounds" in which the speaker identifies her/himself with members from different social classes and groups: I see myself:

Yearnings carried by poets laureates
 Yearnings scribbled by little kids
 Yearnings guarded by prisoners
 Yearnings denied by guards that wait (22-26)

As in "The Stillborn", the gender of the speaker in "The Agony of Sounds" is unspecified; however, it is more plausible to argue that the speaker is female reflecting on Al Arrayed's own personal experience. Speaking about her poetic career, Al Arrayed points out: "My poetry is written from and for the commune. As a poet, I speak for all women and sympathise with their suffering". On the one hand, this comment echoes the lines quoted from "The Agony of Sounds" in which the speaker identifies with the suffering of different social groups. On the other hand, it sheds light on women's rights as one of Al Arrayed's primary concerns.

Therefore, if the speaker in "The Stillborn" is female, regardless of her class, the expressed agony may be linked to the double disadvantage of being a woman and a writer in a patriarchal society. Although the speaker is portrayed as suffering and "suffocat[ing]", she refuses to remain silent "[u]ntil the word is heard", a representation which confronts the prevailing expectations of women's passivity. My reading of the poem in relation to the woman question is inspired by the fact that this poem was written when Al Arrayed aged nineteen, and as previously mentioned in the discussion of her poem "The Joy of Making Friends", she became aware of issues concerning gender at the age of twelve (69). Also, as evident in the lines above, the speaker addresses the male as a "companion" rather than superior asking him "[w]hy do we separate?" challenging thereby male hierarchy and social boundaries which are symbolised in the word "wall". This reading is in line with Al Arrayed's poetic interest which as she comments, "is centred on the long-distance future. My poems address bitter political conditions which are mixed with issues concerning women". Thus, it is plausible to argue that Al Arrayed's questioning of the separate spheres anticipates recent research on sociology, such as Geel's "Separate or together?" which explores contemporary women's challenge of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia.

Despite the revolutionary notion of "The Stillborn" and the speaker's continuous attempt to "[b]reak down the wall" and to "bring the struggling message out" (40), she is finally left in despair with her dead word:

And then the word
 The struggling word
 Silently dies
 Within my boiling breast. (56-59)

Unlike the determined female speakers in many of Al Arrayed's poems, such as "Desert Dreams", the pessimistic ending of "The Stillborn" may be read in relation to the time it was published in 1965 when Al Arrayed herself was relatively young and women had even less inferior positions. This reading echoes Al Arrayed's comment on the sense of anxiety which is common in a number of her poems.

According to Al Arrayed, this anxiety "stems from this feeling of harbouring that could get me chastised for non-conformance"; she continues, "you can see and take actions, but because you are a woman, you can't say it and you're not allowed". In so doing, Al Arrayed pinpoints the marginalization of women writers, locating it as an outcome of the cultural prejudice which denies women equal opportunities.

In "Memories of the First Reader", Mai Al Dabbagh, Al Arrayed's beloved daughter, recalls her childhood days when she used to read her mother's poems and articles. As an observer of her mother's career development, Al Dabbagh seems to be aware of the conflict suffered by Al Arrayed as a woman writer. She points out:

In fact, it was obvious that the situation of a woman becomes more problematic if she wants to become a writer, for women were and are still expected to remain silent behind the scenes. Otherwise, if the woman writes, this indicates that she entered the public sphere and dominated a system which is normally reserved for men. (Al Dabbagh, 2008: 191)

Despite the prevailing conventions, Al Dabbagh shows that her mother strove for defending her feminist thoughts. She adds: "When we started receiving threatening phone calls, sometimes during late-night hours, and messages from groups which tried to frighten my mother urging her to cease writing, she did not pay attention" (Al Dabbagh, 2008: 195). Al Arrayed's refusal to submit to patriarchal norms, biased against women writers, is in line with the previously discussed point about her desire to "[b]reak down the wall" in "The Stillborn".

Also, in her use of the "wall" metaphor, Al Arrayed reminds us of domestic and social barriers which are central thematic concerns in poems written by late-Victorian poets who supported the New Woman. For example, in "Xantippe" (1881) by Amy Levy the wife's initial eagerness to share Socrates's knowledge is confronted by his selfishness and underestimation of her mental capacity. Before her marriage, Xantippe is seen as having had "high thoughts", "golden dreams", placing all her hopes on marrying an educated husband who will share his knowledge with her:

And when, at length, my father told me all,
That I should wed me with great Sokrates,
I, foolish, wept to see at once cast down
The maiden image of a future love,
Where perfect body matched the perfect soul. (74-78)

Contrary to her expectations, Xantippe's marriage brings nothing to her soul and adds nothing to her life, but disappointment and the burden of domesticity:

I think I could have borne the weary life,
The narrow life within the narrow walls,
If he had loved me; but he kept his love
For this Athenian city and her sons (227-230)

The "narrow walls" may be read as a metaphor for the restriction of life after marriage, leading Rosie Miles to conclude: "Xantippe realizes there is no place for the woman she aspires to be within the philosophic framework embodied by her husband. Translating this back to the early 1880s the poem strikes a note of anxiety and uncertainty" (Miles, 2013: 123). This sense of anxiety is also evident in Al Arrayed's poem "The stillborn" whose speaker struggles to "[b]reak down the wall" which may be read as a metaphor for social barriers.

It is worth to note that Al Arrayed's early poems anticipate the rapid changes which are taking place in contemporary Saudi Arabia. In October 2017, Al Arrayed was interviewed by MBC channel to comment on King Salman's order which permits driving for women. Al Arrayed expresses her gratitude to the order which, as she notes, "ought to have come earlier". Unlike the views of some opponents to women's driving, Al Arrayed's welcoming of the order identifies her as a Saudi New Woman who resembles her Victorian predecessor.

In late-Victorian England riding bicycle was perceived as a form of liberation and was associated with the New Woman. Jihang Park argues: “The New Woman was the one who ‘rode a bicycle, played tennis or golf [...]’. Indeed, the historical evaluation of the relationship between these phenomena has generally agreed with the opinion that sport and feminism developed together” (Park, 1989: 10).

Similarly, allowing bicycle rides for Saudi women was considered as a breakthrough in women’s rights. In 2013, encouraging Saudi women to ride bicycles in restricted places was seen as a revolutionary step which informed the headlines of international newspapers and magazines, including *Time* and *The Guardian*. In fact, the constructive reforms concerning Saudi women are in line with the motives addressed in many of Al Arrayed’s poems including “Simple Things”. Despite the poem’s brevity, it manifests the poet’s radical thoughts: “The things I want are very simple/ I want security, peace and a place to grow blossoms and wings” (5-6). The speaker’s search for “security” may be read at two levels, for this “security” might be financial or emotional. In both cases, the speaker engages with women’s rights in the private and the public spheres. In addition, the speaker’s desire “to grow blossoms and wings” indicates her eagerness to freedom. This reading is further emphasised in Al Arrayed’s subversive use of the “wings” metaphor in many of her poems, such as “A Silky Lily”.

In “A Silky Lily”, the poem’s title stands as a metaphor for the yearning speaker who is in conflict between her feminine and feminist characteristics. While she compares herself to a coloured butterfly, more weight is given to the “wings” and the speaker’s desire to unchain herself from the lover’s confines, finally asserting “I want to fly” (50). Despite the speaker’s continuous attempt to “[d]istance” herself from the lover (49), she remains with “[t]attered dreams/ Wings that cannot fly” suggesting conformity to heterosexual normativity (88-89).

The speaker’s failing attempts to fly in Al Arrayed’s poem recalls the restrictions imposed on women in Victorian England. Graham Tomson’s poem “Bird-Bride” (1889) depicts an ironic association between the bird-bride and the Victorian angel. Although the bird-bride is white and has wings, she is described as a “wild white wife” (“Bird-Bride” 43). Her wildness is represented in the strength of her beating wings, which imply her desire to fly and escape the confines of domesticity. Despite the wife’s wildness and her rejection of the man’s love, the poem is concluded by the voice of the man emphasising that his wife remains his property:

Ay, ye were mine,
and till I forget,
Ye are mine forever and aye,
Mine, wherever your wild wings go (81-83)

The poem describes the wife’s efforts to free herself and her children from her husband’s subordination, but finally the husband claims authority over his wife, possibly reflecting on the insufficient amendments of the Matrimonial Causes Act. Tomson herself, as Joseph Bristow notes, “had experienced two painful divorces, both of which not only involved the loss of custody of three children but also encouraged her to create yet another authorial identity” (Bristow, 2006: 519). Thus, her depiction shows that it was difficult for women to escape marriage conditions both in real life and in poetry. This interpretation is reminiscent of Al Arrayed’s speaker in “A Silky Lily” whose passion is faced with “[w]ings that cannot fly”.

Afterword

The themes and findings presented herein, as revealed through Al Arrayed’s poems, combine to offer evidence of the fact that her name is worthy of more attention than it has received formerly. The article has shown Al Arrayed’s engagement with the wider debate raised by her contemporaries concerning women and their role in the private and the public spheres. Despite being a married woman and a mother, Al Arrayed, as her comments and poems convey, defied confining social norms which imprisoned women and deprived them of their rights. By working on a comparative approach, I aim to have traversed cultural and geographical boundaries to prove that New Women, who lived in the Victorian time, have paid the price for women’s emancipation and remain a source of inspiration to contemporary feminists, like Al Arrayed.

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