



The Arab Chic Lit: Men, money and Maserati, as a signifier of Americanization in Ameera al Hakawati's *Desperate in Dubai*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to address and unravel the Arab feminist culture effectuated by Americanization, as presented in Ameera Al Hakawati's *Desperate in Dubai*. The instantaneous engagement of Arab women with social media platforms have hybridized their cultural and social instincts and that too sometimes makes them vulnerable in their indigenous society. This work explores Hakawati's manner of dealing with modern lifestyle, relationships and anxieties that presents a substitute for an American lifestyle in Arabia, particularly in Dubai. America as an empire became a kind of mediator and propagator of a new global order in world politics, economy and culture. This 'American' culture as a global order structure a process called 'Americanization', which simply means following the American ideals. In western societies, Arab women are mostly shown as traditional and subjugated which humanize their characters, on the contrary, this work exposes the Arab women's sensibilities and aptitude in a realm that resembles the western culture in day-to-day lives. Further, this paper, examines the cultural landscape and experiences of the characters that lead to heightened consciousness in redefining their identity. Hence, by reinterpreting and reinventing the identities and symbols of Americanization, the evolution of modern Arab women is represented through the premise of a city, in other words, metaphorization of Dubai as a symbol of emancipation of women's identity. Therefore, by implementing a post-positivist approach, this paper aims to examine the city of Dubai as a personification of a young Arab women under the ideals of Americanization in the characters of Ameera Al Hakawati's *Desperate in Dubai*.

Keywords: Americanization, post-positivist, Arab women, social media, lifestyle

Introduction

Ameera Al Hakawati's *Desperate in Dubai* is a ground breaking novel which has popularized the 'Chic Lit' genre in the Middle Eastern literary world. This genre of literature deals with a 'heroine-centric' theme, where the female protagonist commonly, focuses on her tribulations, lifestyle and relationship narratives ^[1]. It mostly deals with issues of women, love, modern relationship and humour. In English, major works include Bridget Jones's *Diary* and the *Old girl networks*. In the Arab world, Raja al Sanea often praised and sometimes blamed for starting it, Novelist Badriya al-Bishr says, 'that sexual theme in the Saudi literature is saturated with sexual scenes but critics don't bother it, only when Saudi women write about sex ^[2], they are singled out'. Al Sanea's *Girls of Riyadh* and Ameera al Hakawati's *Desperate in Dubai* are the pioneer works of this genre. This genre is getting more popular but has a poor reputation. It is now joined by author Rande Addel Fattah's, *No Sex in the City*, with her passionate female protagonist Esma.

Plot and Characterization

The book *Desperate in Dubai* opens with the acknowledgement "to the women of Dubai, who inspired with their strength, their faith and their stories" ^[3]. Ameera Hakawati further, starts the book with the name of the chief protagonist, Lady Luxe who stretches herself to relax after an aeroplane flight, thinking that the cute guy beside her would be thinking that "she is nuts".

This is the first glimpse of the chief female character, who enters in Dubai, with full of glamour and westernized mindset, hailing from London, leaving all her freedom and exotic life to meet her friend in Dubai. This novel is about love, family, friendship, career and vanity, that makes life beautiful and meaningful but as the story progress, it eventually leads to despair and melancholy, which sometimes comes with vanity and glamour. This story revolves around four women, who are struggling to find a foothold in the city of Dubai. They are also very well connected with each other and vigorously searching for a meaningful relationship to be reconsolidated in Dubai. One woman is looking for a new life in Dubai, as she is tired of her present identity, the other one is building a new identity, while running away from her past, the other is at a stage where she is about to make important decision of her life, and the last one is looking for a love life and seeking a husband.

In this way, they are all are dreaming with a passion of getting loved. The phenomenon of dreaming and wishing a better future has been carefully brought out by the author, with the thought processes of these characters, which they had built in their mind. The portrayal of the mysterious longings of women and the hidden fantasies inside

their abayas has very beautifully demonstrated by these four modern Arab women. The reader often experiences a sense of present ability when he or she goes through the episodes of this novel. The ultra-modern life these women characters possess are full of designer clothes, tinkling bangles, sparkling jewellery, lined eyes, and purses full of girl's stuff, is beyond description. The hidden world of fancies where these women lives are presented in an Arab society, which becomes a symbol of 'Americanization', surrounded strictly by its cultural and fast-changing belief system. Their lavish lives, the feeling of fanciful freedom and the fragrance of paper flowers, all become magnificent manners of a materialistic feminist charisma that needs love, emotions and seduction. In this chi-lit novel, the brand consciousness and the feel of being a connoisseur are unnecessarily stretched ^[4].

American Symbolism

The process of Americanization depicts certain cultural practices and forms one encounters which are becoming more and more alike. This new global culture is "American" in the sense that even when it is produced in Hong Kong or Berlin, it is basically following American models. This growing "Americanization" of modern culture can also be seen today in the progressive societies of the Middle East, particularly in Dubai. Author John Tomlinson views this phenomenon as Cultural Imperialism, where such "Cultures are 'condemned to modernity' not simply by the 'structural process of economic development, and an increasing rationality, but by the human process of self-development and a struggle for self-realization" ^[5]. Modern American culture has initiated the possibilities for cultural self-expression and imaginary self-fashioning. This gradual development is linked to a growing tendency to liberate expressive elements, and thereby separate the imaginary from moral, social and narrative contexts. Popular music, Hollywood and fashion have therefore become the world-wide devices of this cultural development. Presently, social media, in fact, is the form in which this tendency toward imaginary self-empowerment and the decontextualization of expressive elements is most obvious ^[6]. This tendency and realization of the self, has led to the emergence of feminine audacity in young Arab women's life. The ideals and models of American women as empowered, independent and liberated becomes an inspiration as well as aspirational in the mind of an Emirati women. Hence in the novel, the city of Dubai is presented as a man's paradise and a woman's playground. Al Hakawati's story resembles the sophisticated American feminist culture which resonate through the characters of modern popular television series. Similarly, it has a plot development, which very much symbolizes the plot of *Desperate Housewives*, *Gossip Girls* and *Sex and the City*. The chief character, Lady Luxe and her friend Leila, who is aware of her husband's affair with Jennifer, tries to find a peaceful life. The two other girls Nadia and Sugar, are very good friends, who often meet with each other. Lady Luxe's is a party animal and loves everything that is un-Islamic also falls in love with Mr. Delicious. Leila admires Lady Luxe brother, which was hidden from Lady Luxe. On the other hand, Sugar meets the golden boy but inside her, she misses her ex, who is the current crush of Nadia. Everyone is oblivious to each other's lives and eventually, comes to know that all of them are the reason for their lives problems in some way or the other. It's a complete Bollywood entertainment, where love fetches pain, personal status is at stake and everything is fair in love, which eventually wins. This is something which is prevalent everywhere, and these themes are commonly seen in a fast-progressive society like Dubai, but very few can hardly put up these expressions forward. Young Girls will surely admire this work, with pumping slogans and high fives to the characters. It is a bold book that deals with men, women's secret inside their kitties and a completely new Muslim post-Orientalist world. In the story, the character of Leila, is looking for a rich husband, she is from Lebanon, and Sugar, who is from England, is continuously running away from her past, and Nadia who wants her husband's good career in Dubai, but finds that he only focuses on her. This blog turned novel attracted a large fan following, with its light-hearted and soothing read, which keeps the interest of the reader ignited throughout the pages. Even though the book was banned and re-banned, it never lost its demand also which grew even in large number in a place where English readers are still very less. This demand also made the book a running success in the black market, which ultimately cemented its foreground in the mainstream Emirati bookshelf as an answer to *Desperate Housewives*. The naughty content and the extra sensitive emotions that are lying inside the Arab bosoms are an example of bubble piercing in the Arab society. A blogger describes this book, "It's like sitting in a room with a girlfriend who is describing her scandalous affairs with the society ^[7]". The adventures of Lady Luxe are uncovered in the secret details of Sugar that has been frankly described by the author, is indeed a task of guts. Although, this book is a continuous narration without using footnotes, and the symbolic names which normally Arabs don't name their girls, can be easily understood as metaphorical names of elite-class cheerleaders. The city of Dubai is described with its modern grandeur, especially with the description of Ibne Batuta Mall and the Mall of Emirates, where English movies can be seen in the late evening shows, as it is also a point of a perfect date for newly acquainted couples. The description of India court, with its huge Elephant and Ornate pillars, gives a feeling of a Mughal palace, or like a Persian Court with its dome and the intricately decorated ceilings is quite attractive ^[8].

Indian Cultural Affluence

Further, this novel describes the religious values of an Indian Muslim family, where females of the family don't wear hijab and never restricted their daughters in wearing modern clothes. Indian words like *jaldi* (*hurry*), *Roja and sehri* (*fasting*), etc., are commonly seen in the novel. The chief protagonist Luxe, who is a party lover at night, sleeps with her boyfriend and listens to western music, this seems like an English woman flirting a

Bedouin Arab. It is a description of intercultural identities while discussing ancestries belonging to Pakistani, Bengali, Indian and Lebanese descent. The other character Nadia, also describes her life who moves to Doha with her father from London for a lucrative job. Further, she got engaged to Daniel, which annoyed Yusuf. It is an example of cross-cultural and cross-religious relationships that are now openly welcomed in the Dubai society. Leila's expressions to marriage are like an agreement of keeping mistresses afresh when she says "*I won't be the wife who has to worry about your affairs, in fact, I will probably be the mistress*"^[9]. Here, she likes to enjoy her life off freedom during her marriage which she doesn't consider as a responsibility. The episode of Nadia and Jaiden, are affectionate enough to call it a sensual affair that betrays their relationship with their spouses. The dealing, dating and mating episode in this novel is constant stress to a reader who imagines Dubai in a different way, where women like them possess dating skills, getting drunk and moving on the path of their life without any regret. Lady Luxe's surreal ideas on life, her sharp tongue and her disregard of traditional Islamic values, arguably gives room to look for something more from her.

Religious Symbolism

As she herself admits, that "it's not that I don't believe in God or the Prophet, but what I don't get is if you believe why you don't care about doing anything about it"^[10]. Further she asserts that she is a girl, a Muslimah, and an Emirati. [They all were somehow cheating with each other and at the same time helping each other. This novel fails to add more relevant characters that surround people of this kind, who are living an 'Americanized' lifestyle. This novel ends with a taste of freedom that is not glorious as the chief protagonist has imagined, as the materialistic world cannot buy things that are phenomenally free.] It ended with Mr. Delicious's whispering smile on top of Luxe's head saying "that's ok, I used to call you Lady Luxe."

This novel doesn't end with an index or an end note, rather with an acknowledgement, where Ameera Hakawati pay thanks to all the friends and family who encourage her to write, while beginning a journey of putting pen to paper. Today Ameera lives in Dubai by getting inspiration from the fascinating lives of the women, who dominated the glamorous city of Dubai. It seems Ameera has always been a writer from the age of three when she told her first story to her mother about the truth behind the missing chocolate biscuit. She can be found with her hamster Sam and her husband in Dubai, and can be matched up on Twitter: @ameerahakawati and Facebook: www.facebook.com/desperateinDubai.

Conclusion

This novel primarily deals with the theme of cyber romance. Ameera Al Hakawati is a pseudonym taken by the author of the book *Desperate in Dubai*. Originally, this book was started as a blog which was later converted to a full-fledged book with a few changes. This novel is a series of emails which were sent to the subscribers of an internet group by an anonymous woman who, is also the narrator in her mid-twenties. She in her book, changed the understanding of contemporary relationships existing in the rich and progressive states of Middle East like U.A.E. In this work, the author has brought many changing dynamics of extramarital affairs and female instincts that has not been earlier discussed by Arab women in an open forum. This has raised arguments on the status of women in the conservative society, who can't speak of their own and their expressions are generally crushed in the name of patriarchal and religious fundamentalism. Nevertheless, authors like Ameera have found out ways to express the inner instincts of women, which need no traditional and religious practice, but as a physical need and demand that women should entail under any social and political pressures. The characterizations in this work have very well defined the usage of social media as a tool to explore romantic and sexual desires by the females of a fast-changing Arab society. In this novel, the depiction of Dubai as a progressive and dynamic city in seen as a symbol of women's emancipation in the Middle East, the more the city grows the more women will grow. As a cultural phenomenon, Americanization with all its influence and attraction has invaded the personal lives of young Arab women whose self-imagery and self-expression have come to the fore through social media and popular culture.

Therefore, feminist discourse in the Arab societies which this work has tried to express on the basis of the themes such as cyber romance, lipstick feminism and Americanization, to build a better understanding of their experiences and expressions. The obsession of the western stereotypical women who carries a sophisticated and modern outlook, who desires lavish lifestyle, bonds with handsome men, craving for expensive cars—in this case a Maserati, and a wish for fame and flame is being mimicked by oriental women is seen as a spur in the making of a contemporary Arab woman. In this way, by making a women's utopian world, the 'American dream' tries offers a liberal, prosperous and secure platforms for every individual throughout the world. What needed is, common grounds and state structures that allows freedom from all prejudices and subjugation, where women's voices can be discussed and the threats that the society hurls upon such women can come to resolution. In finding the roots of such problems, where women couldn't attain rights of self-expression and face prejudices, strict laws and equal protection should be given to the writers who make up their mind to write about their own self-imagery and personal narrations. Through modern and to an extent American ideals, has enabled these women to conjure up their own narrative styles in a way that suits the present-day reader's mindset and allow them to ponder on the subjects and explicit themes, that they have to offer.

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