

# ***GIRLS OF RIYADH AND ROMEO AND JULIET: AMONG PHYSICAL, FAMILIAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICTS FOR SEEKING TRUE LOVE***

***Ali Mohammad Alshhre***

King Khalid University, Faculty of Arts and Science  
Assir Province, Muhayil City, Saudi Arabia

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## **Abstract**

This paper explains how the characters in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Girls of Riyadh* seek for their true love facing all the challenges, which result in many familial, psychological, physical, and social conflicts. As well as explaining how false- fake- love may be a destructible element for separating between lovers. Additionally, this short paper clarifies the problems and matters, that causing these conflicts, such as the tribal traditions, the social life of that society, the intercultural customs and its influences...etc. In addition, the paper compares between some characters in these two literary works in terms of their sufferings for seeking true love, and how they face their families' refusal of not accepting or agreeing on the marriage.

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**Keywords:** Girls of Riyadh ( banat al- Riyadh), milkah( time between wedding and writing of thmarriage contract), shofa ( the first meeting of the couple before writing themarriage contract)

## **Introduction**

Love! By just, instantaneously, uttering it, many thoughts come to the mind from happy, sad, unearthly feelings and emotions. As the proverb says: "It is love that makes the impossible possible", and, in many philosophies of the world that only in love "1+1 may not necessarily be equal to two [and love makes your feelings and thoughts] ... set... on fire" (Alsanea 2), mentioned in every land, culture, civilization...etc. In addition, this wonderful equation of love is expressed in *Romeo and Juliet* when Friar Lawrence stated, "Till Holy church incorporate two in one" (II. V. 37). What is more, many poets say poetry because of elaborating their inner feelings towards something or someone. Through all periods, each culture has its own love mixed with its people identity as well as blended with many special

“flavors” and an intuition that stabilizes in their hearts. Love is the language of soul, unlike distaste, which is the language of devils as the Armenian adage says, “all men have three ears, one on the left of his head, one on the right and one in his heart”. More deeply, it- love- is fabulously expresses largely in Rajaa Alsanea’s novel *Girls of Riyadh* and in Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Love in these two great literary works have different ways in its forms in addition to many vicissitudes of many occasions that are resulting from it. This novel, *Girls of Riyadh*, which sculpting some of traditions, rehashing some tribal ordinances and shaping them in city of Riyadh, capital of Saudi Arabia, made many hot debates, thusly it was suppressed and blackballed, in the society, especially in Riyadh city, which later on- the novel- was heavily, largely, and strongly fulminated against by many Saudi writers in different newspapers as well as magazines. On one hand, the novel’s main concern and theme is love in addition to its explanation by giving many background of those who drank from “sea of lovers”. It tells a story of four open girls, Gamrah, Sadeem, Lamees, and Michelle, who try to find a true “love” that is defined fantastically in *Romeo and Juliet* as “ a smoke made with the fumes of sighs” (I. I. 190) in Riyadh and their doings to encounter some conservative families who are criticizing them always due to their openness in a conservative society. On the other hand, *Romeo and Juliet* is generally epitomizing for love and the pulchritude between Romeo and Juliet as characters. These two playwrights did great and huge portraitures for expressing many incommensurable themes and intimations, which are classified as preventive barriers and encumbrances, are obviating the happiness, by getting married, of their lovers. One of these hindrances is contraventions which is, importantly, a thematic element in these two novels, and ergo, Gamrah, Sadeem, Lamees, and Michelle- also called Mashael- as well as Romeo, and Juliet face many familial, psychological, and physical contraventions that keep them away from, or even seeking for, their true lovers.

Fake or false love, excogitated as a serpentine thing, can be a devastating constituent, causing all kinds of conflict stated above, for some lovers; this sort of love does not prolong or even survive for the sake of true elements of love. For example, Romeo loves Rosaline, whose his love to her has been completely forgotten when he saw Juliet in the outset of the play. He pays a careful attention to her, and even he attended the feast prepared by Capulet to see Rosaline despite all disputes between the two ménages, Capulet and Montague. Al the more, before he, Romeo, attends the feast, he describes, with many great words, his lovely Rosaline when he meets his friend Benvolio as:

BENVOLIO. At this same ancient feast of Capulet’s  
 Sups the fair Rosaline whom thou so loves,

With all the admired beauties of Verona.  
Go thither, and with unattained eye  
Compare her face with some that I shall show,  
And I will make thee think thy swan a crow.

ROMEO. When the devout religion of mine eye  
Maintains such falsehood, then turn tears to [fires];  
And these, who, often drown'd, could never die,  
Transparent heretics, be burnt for liars!  
On fairer than my love! The all-seeing sun  
Ne'er saw her match since first the world begun. (I. II.

82-93)

The interlocution, above, pushes Romeo to appear in his best romance towards love of Rosaline even by describing his love as "Love goes toward love as schoolboys from their books / But love from love, toward school with heavy books" (II. II. 156-57), and he gives her the portion of eternal beauty, by enunciating, that he doesn't find a match of her or a girl, before Juliet, that is as elegant and pulchritudinous as Rosaline. Due to this, he goes to the feast of Capulet privately for looking at Rosaline which resulted in a fight between Romeo and Tybalt, Lady Capulet's nephew. Conjointly, love forced Romeo to attend the feast not for having food but for food of "heart" that how hard he can be satisfied with. It isn't mentioned or even declared that Romeo dated Rosaline or even giving a hint for finding an answer for this wringer, "Does she love Romeo? If she does, Romeo in this case might probably break Rosaline's feelings and heart after his love especially when he and Friar Lawrence start talking about Rosaline:

FRIAR LAWRENCE. God pardon sin! Wast thou with Rosaline?

ROMEO. With Rosaline? My ghostly father, no;

I have forgot that name, and that name's woe. (II. III. 44-46)

It is just short love that ended up after Romeo saw Juliet. Wondrously, Romeo describes Rosaline as "O, she is rich in beauty, only poor/ That, when she dies, with beauty dies her store" (I.I. 215-16) with perfection of beauty that kills his feelings and psychologically battles himself for this fake love. Like Sadeem in Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh (Banat al-Riyadh)*, she fights herself when she was divorced by Waleed who made her startled, perplexed, and speechless for days and has a terrible shock physically and psychologically when Waleed, her inamorato and suitor, divorced her after *milkah*, the period betwixt the sanctioned confirming of documents and the nuptials (Alsanea 31). According to the Islamic laws, a husband can sleep, or meet, with his prospective wife even ere the wedding ceremony after making *milkah*. Nevertheless, in consonance with most tribal traditions, in Saudi Arabia, it is abjured for a one to sleep or even meet his wife-to-be after *milkah*. But in case of Sadeem, she throws all these tribal

traditions, a girl vs. a society, and allows herself to meet her husband to-be without her father's knowledge. Alsanea mentions incontrovertibly that Sadeem has no brothers, no sisters, and her mother died when she was small. After the sundown, she "put[s] on the black lace nightgown he had bought for her but which at the time she had refused to try on his presence. She invited him to come over for the evening without informing her father, who was out camping with friends in the desert" (32). After she meets Waleed that night and convinces herself that "he wouldn't be satisfied unless she offered him a little more of her 'femininity,' and she was willing to do anything to please him... even if it meant exceeding the limits she had spent her lifetime guarding" (Alsanea 32). She remained bewildered and very depressed when her divorce paper was sent to her father by Waleed's father without giving any plausible, rational reasons for this divorce. Wherefore, she suffers psychologically and startles whether to let her father know concerning her wrongdoing that night or not though she has wished her mother would be alive to consult her about this. Put differently, Waleed's action for divorcing Sadeem shows how the false love, which he claimed for her, might be a destructible, perishable, easily spoiled and short-lived love. Shakespeare does not mention, in *Romeo and Juliet*, whether Rosaline suffers or not when Romeo shifted his love towards Juliet. As a consequent of Sadeem's action, she will pay it mixed and accompanying with much torture and anguish when she completely gave up her whole body for Waleed enduring her doing's consequences as Mohammad Abdu, a Saudi singer who nicknames the Arab singer, says, "whom you love will humiliate you". Finally, she is thrown as a "victim of the painful fate" by Waleed who answered his father's question, apropos of the divorce, carelessly that he "had said to his father...he had discovered he wasn't comfortable with his bride and he preferred break the contract now before the wedding was consummated" ( Alsanea 35).

In Aristotle's *Poetics* apperception is a modification from philistinism to be a knowledgeable person that can gain experience from life and being cognizant of the surroundings (56). Here is another wonderful experience, in *Girls of Riyadh*, of Gamrah's marriage from Rashid, who has a scholarship to the USA for studying Ph. D in electrical engineering and will take her with him to America. She suffers and faces many challenges resulting in many physical, social, psychological, and familial conflicts while she was in the United States of America. In other words, Gamrah's accompaniment of her husband is very challenging and demands patience because she faces most kinds of the literary conflicts- person vs. person, person vs. self, person vs. society, person vs. nature, person vs. supernatural, and person vs. technology. Consequently, her new life in Chicago is described as a "banishment" for her because she knows nothing of this city.

Moreover, this new life, I can call, is like an ostracism for Gamrah that keeps her as an imprisoned girl in the jail or is locked on her in an attic in a society she herself knows nothing about, reminding her with those novels and stories of those who the attics become their lifetime friend behind walls, or those who lived in strange communities which have different culture and lifestyles from theirs, such as Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Queen Abreeza character in *The Arabian Nights* when she left her home in Europe to live with her lover son of King Noaman in Baghdad, character Alice in movie *Alice in Wonderland* and Charles Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. During the first weeks of her arrival there, she got bored from her life there:

Gamrah began her new life in absolute fear and trepidation. She felt like she died of terror every time she walked into the elevator that took her up to the apartment they shared on the fortieth floor of the Presidential Towers. She felt the pressure splitting her head open and blocking her ears as the elevator shot upward through the floors of the skyscraper. She got dizzy every time she tried to look out of a window in the apartment. So very far down, everything appeared tiny and fragile. She stared down at the city streets, which looked to her exactly like the streets in the Lego sets she played with when she was little, with their minuscule cars no larger than matchboxes. Indeed, from this height the cars looked like ants in row: they were so very small and so neatly and quietly arranged in long and slow- moving lines.

Gamrah was afraid of the drunken beggars and shook their paper cups in her face, demanding money. The stories of theft and murders that she always seemed to be hearing terrified her. Every story she heard has something to do with this dangerous city! She [even] was just as afraid of the huge black security guard at their building, who ignored her whenever she tried to get his attention with her poor English hoping he would help her commandeer a taxi. (Alsanea 25-26)

So, these problems faced Gamrah while her stay in Chicago, conflicting her life there which later on considered as a "strange life". She tries to learn and enhance her poor English, and she did a great job for having a try to head forward regarding that; by the time, she becomes able to commandeer a taxi and goes to the supermarkets and malls without asking help from anyone. Her husband, Rashid, doesn't not pay any looking after her:

Gamrah had dreamed of much more; of caresses and love and tenderness and emotion like the feelings that stirred her heart when she read romance novels or watched romantic movies. And here she was, facing a husband who clearly felt no attraction toward her and indeed had not touched her since that ill-fated night in Rome. (Alsanea 26)

In more details, Gamrah considers her new life as an ouster like Romeo when he killed Tybalt, he is exiled to Mantua causing him much pain until he suffered physically, socially, and even he complains from Mantua nature that doesn't fit his presence and being far from Juliet. More clearly, Gamrah feels wretched many times and remains physically with Rashid in Chicago. But spiritually all her feelings are with her family in Riyadh. She is like Romeo when he is banished, he suffered, stating the whole harsh, uneasy consequences of Coventry with Friar Lawrence, much especially physically and psychologically:

ROMEO. There is no world without Verona walls,  
But purgatory, torture, hell itself.  
Hence "banished" is banish'd from the world,  
And world's exile is death, then "banished"  
Is death misterm'd. Calling death "banished,"  
Thou cut'st my head off with a golden axe,  
And smilest upon the stroke that murders me.

FRIAR LAWRENCE. O deadly sin! O rude unthankfulness!  
Thy fault our laws calls death, but the kind prince,  
Taking thy part, hath rush'd aside the law,  
And turn'd that black word "death" to "banishment."  
This is dear mercy, and thou seest it not. (III. III. 17- 28)

In *Girls of Riyadh*, Alsanea clarifies that some guys marry according to their mothers' choice of a girl not their ones, which this might probably leads to atrocious upshots resulting in surging rate of divorce in the Saudi community, especially among the tribal people. For example, when Gamrah discovered, while navigating internet on her husband's computer that her husband Rashid was in relationship with a Japanese girl named Kari even before and after her marriage. When Gamrah meets Kari in order to encounter her why she does that to her husband, she- Kari- called Rashid and told him to come to the place where she and Gamrah are. On her way there, she warns the little demon in her head against persuading her to strangle this fallen woman the moment she sees her.

Kari ... came down into the lobby. The waiting had been killing Gamrah. This woman [Kari] put out her hand, but Gamrah didn't take it....

[After hot debates and discussions between them], Kari took out her cell phone and called up Rashid while his wife watched. She told him that she was in Chicago and was on her way to see him, and would come to wherever he was. (Alsanea 83-84)

After Rashid came, the truth of his fake love of Gamrah realized eventuating in slapping her face and slandering her and her family and acknowledging that his family pressurized on him to marry her not by his own choice and intention:

Rashid grabbed her arm and yanked. “Look, lady! You are the one who is going and you’re the one who is apologizing [for his beloved girlfriend, Kari]. And after that you are getting on the first airplane out of here and you are going back to your family and I don’t want to see your face here ever again. I am not a man that a woman like you is going to order around. That ‘maid’ [meaning Kari] is as good as you, and she’s worth your whole family, too, do you understand? At least her father didn’t come kissing up to my father so he could marry his daughter to a man who knew loved someone in America and had been living with her for seven years. This housemaid loved me and stood next to me and gave me a place to live when I wasn’t getting a penny from home, when my family refused to let us get married and cut off my money for three years! *She* didn’t run after me because of money and my family’s reputation! The one who you hate so much is more honest and more honorable than you are and more than you family is, much, much moral. (Alsanea 84-85)

After this familial conflict with Rashid, she returns to her country- Saudi Arabia- while she is pregnant and is divorced later on. Rashid chose to divorce Gamrah when she refused to apologize for Kari upon reviling her, which Rashid’s action reminds anyone how true love is always appreciated. He again fights against his family revenging the mistakes they made to him by choosing Gamrah for him without keeping in mind or asking him whether he loves her or not. Gamrah after months from her divorce and gave birth to Rashid’s son, she is engaged to Abu Musa’ed, who is over forty years old and a general in the army. Gamrah refrained from agreeing on this betrothment in addition to Abu Musa’ed refusal to not take her son with her if she agrees to marry him. Upon Gamrah’s interdiction, she is shocked when her father said to her, “it is required to marry Abu Musa’ed rather than staying at home as a divorced woman- a widow” (Alsanea 192). She after that went directly to her mother to let her know that her father and her uncle, they became angry when she left the room leaving Abu Musa’ed alone

without asking permission from them, might force her upon this marriage, but her mother's response was shocking when she said, "she can't interfere between her and her father":

Young girl has no shame! Um Mohammad [Gamrah's mother]! She is so spoiled. I say we go ahead and marry her to this man. There is nothing wrong with him, and praise be to God, the girl already has a son, that is, she isn't completely without children to fill her life. And we all know that leaving her here to sit around without a man to shield and protect her isn't a good thing. People is always talking, sister, and besides, we have other girls in the family who shouldn't pay for what people say about your divorced daughter.... Gamrah's boy we can leave here to grow up in your house. His mama can come and see him whenever she wants to, and I don't think that this man will forbid that.

[After her father and her uncle left the house], Gamrah remained at home, able only to rant at her mother. Provoked and agitated, she flung her words into her mother's face. "Why? Why do I need a man to shield and protect me? Does your brother think I am a disgrace, I can't protect my own self? You people don't realize that I am a grown woman now and I have a son! My word should count and I should be listened to.... He [her uncle] wants to dump me on that old defective junk of a man just so he can be rid of me and clear the way for good men to marry his daughters.... May he and every one of his daughters go to hell! (Alsanea 192-93)

Gamrah's mother, her father, and her uncle play the same rule of Capulet and Lady Capulet, representing the familial conflicts in addition to some parents, in reality, who sometimes refuse to listen to their daughters concerning their (dis)agreement of accepting marriage, resulting in breaking their daughters' feelings. In *Romeo and Juliet*, when Paris, kinsman to Prince Escalus, engaged Juliet without any primary knowledge of her secret marriage from Romeo, Juliet argues with her mother Lady Capulet to postpone her marriage which becomes something inevitable:

JULIET. Is there no pity sitting in the clouds,  
That sees into the bottom of my grief?  
O sweet my mother, cast me not away!  
Delay this marriage for a month, a week,  
Or if you don't, make the bridal bed  
In that dim monument where Tybalt lies

LADY CAPULET. Talk not to me, for I'll not speak a word.  
Do as thou wilt, for I have done with thee. (III. V. 196- 203)



In the time of Juliet's debates with her mother trying to neglect her marriage from Paris, she toils psychologically and physically and thinks of committing suicide. But Friar Lawrence gives her the suitable solution after she explained the situation to him in order to cancel this marriage by drinking the sleeping potion. Therefore, the potion was the best cure, a shift movement, for Juliet to start a new life with her true lover Romeo accompanying by overcoming from her marriage with Paris. So, Alsanea stated that Sadeem used a different cure to make her forget her true lover Waleed who, after that, divorced her without any logical reason:

Sadeem asked him [her father], though, to let her go alone and stay in their flat in south Kensington [in London]. She wanted to spend a stretch of time by herself, she said. After some hesitation, her dad agreed, and he furnished her with some telephone numbers and addresses... [of his friends].

Sadeem packed away her wound along with her clothes and carried it all from the Dust Capital of the World to the Fog Capital of the World... Sadeem had decided to take refuge to overcome the mental maladies overwhelming her after her experience with Waleed. (Alsanea 61)

After spending many days in London, Sadeem finally realizes that there is no need for sadness upon her love to Waleed which, therefore, decided to try forgetting him, putting him under the "memory of oblivion"; remembering the famous saying of Graham Swift's *Waterland* "history is a thin garment, easily punctured by a knife blade called Now" (36); this saying gave her urgency to think of starting a new life, free of him.

Intercultural customs can be a huge reason for making familial and psychological conflicts among members of any society. Alsanea did a great job of discussing this kind of customs which may be a leadable way for breaking families. Michelle, in *Girls of Riyadh*, is half American and half Saudi i.e. her mother is American and her father is Saudi. While her stay with her father in Saudi Arabia, she loved Faisal, but when Faisal knew that her mother is American, his family forced him to not engage Michelle resulting in his withdrawal, breaking Michelle's heart after she became eager to him. She went to America to try forgetting, like her friend Sadeem, this love. But, when she was there, her cousin Mathew liked her, making us remember the famous proverb "love has no religion", so much resulting, after that, in Michelle's father refusal to not accompany Mathew upon her arrival to Saudi Arabia. This act made Michelle bewildered what should she do to get married encountering these strange familial laws which she and her friends started criticizing some familial acts as well as describing them as complicated ones.

Some physical, psychological, and familial acts may separate between lovers, making them despair, bewildered, and surprised. *Girls of Riyadh* and *Romeo and Juliet* are examples of the best literary works that are really depicting sufferings, sorrows, and difficulties of lovers when they are far from each other. Furthermore, they discuss how some societal customs are so harsh and useless for developing or starting a family. Shakespeare and Alsanea perfectly wrote these two literary works that are overgeneralizing how love's power may lead to break these complicated customs among families, and do represent how Juliet, Sadeem, Gamrah, and Michelle become disobedient, representing the theme of disobedience, to their families shouting that their love can't be controlled by them because parents at all can't control their daughters' hearts because love is something out of their hands. Feminism is something vigorously expressed in characterization of *Girls of Riyadh* and *Romeo and Juliet* making clear that some girls have freedom in their actions bearing their consequent results ahead. In my point of view, Alsanea tried to create characterization similar to those characters in *Romeo and Juliet*, describing most themes which Shakespeare stated in order to rewrite them in a different way for simplification of their understanding hastily, in order to apply it on sufferings of Saudi women who got bored from some complicated tribal traditions, which until this time most Saudi families and tribes are abiding by, from choosing a husband or that husband must belong to a girl's tribe and so on. Therefore, Alsanea was insulted and criticized hugely when she depicted in her novel that some Saudi girls must have freedom in their choice, women vs. society and family, of her lover- her husband to-be- causing many arguments among Saudi critics. Finally, love is happiness, and happiness is love.

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