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The New Literary Front: Public Diplomacy and the Cultural Politics of Reading Arabic Fiction in Translation

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Abstract

The novel *Girls of Riyadh* (*Banat Al-Riyadh*) by Saudi author Rajaa Alsanea, first published in English by Penguin in 2007, provides a valuable prism through which to examine an array of geo-political forces that govern the movement of literary texts between Anglophone and Arabic-speaking reading publics. This investigation seeks to contribute to the developing feminist scholarship on reading books by and about Muslim women, not just in the light of the long history of Orientalism but more specifically in the context of neo-imperial wars in the 21st century (Adams 2008, Zine 2007). The essay explores a wider range of questions posed by the subject matter, style, translation and marketing of this book. As the novel is written as a series of emails to an online chat room, it raises timely questions about how technology is mediating the social lives of young people across the Arabic-speaking world. The publication and promotion of this book is discussed in the context of the 2008 London Book Fair in which Arabic literature was the market focus. The role of the British Council in the event provides a window to examine the mechanisms of public diplomacy which provide the context for understanding the convergence of the Anglophone publishing industry with media corporations, NGOs and policy makers. The essay then asks how we are to read modern Arabic fiction in translation, since it is virtually impossible to approach it outside these tentacles of geo-political power.

The New Literary Front: Public Diplomacy and the Cultural Politics of Reading Arabic Fiction in Translation Introduction

Dreams and misconceptions

In April 2008 the London Book Fair garnered an unusual amount of publicity due to its special focus on Arabic literature. Throughout the week of the fair, a predominantly commercial annual event, seminars on different aspects of contemporary publishing and literary trends in the Arabic-speaking world brought together established writers, whose work was relatively unknown in English, with potential publishers and translators as well as new readers. The converging interests of the publishing industry and international relations were clearly spelt out in publicity advertising the discussions, interviews and readings that took place throughout the week.

Commenting in the English edition of the Cairo-based *Al-Ahram*, David Tresilian drew attention to two contrasting aspects of the enterprise – the commercial and the diplomatic: ‘In his remarks at the “chairman’s breakfast” that opened the Arab focus events,’ he wrote, ‘Amr Moussa, speaking in his capacity as secretary-general of the Arab League, said that events such as the London Fair could “enlarge understanding and contribute to dialogue between nations,” as well as correct the “stereotypical picture of Arabs and Muslims” that has sometimes circulated in western countries.’ (2008b)

Author and journalist Ahdah Soueif noted that the choice of Arab Literature as the Fair’s market focus, thanks to three years of planning by the British Council, could ‘be read - and praised - as an effort to check the slippage back into the bad old days when the Arab world served merely as a locus for western imaginings, self-invention and ambition.’ Reflecting on the significance of the cultural aspects of the fair, she wrote that, ‘The counterpoint to the ongoing wars of aggression and the drumbeat heralding a “clash of civilisations” is the desire of ordinary people in the west and in the Arab world to engage with each other.’ (Soueif, 2008)

One of the panel discussions held during the week of the Fair focused on women writers, and featured Aroussia Naluti from Tunisia and Raja Alem from the Arabian peninsula. I had gone to this discussion eager to listen to writers whose works are rarely translated into English and, if they are available, unlikely ever to be reviewed in the British media. But more than this, I was curious about the framing of such an event, wondering how the stereotypes of Arab women as victims of patriarchal Islamic cultures would be dealt with, if at all. (Ware 1992, 2006). While the convergence of interest between commercial and cultural agencies is hardly surprising, less well-known is the way that the idea of culture - in many shapes and forms - has become an indispensable instrument of foreign policy and international relations. As the exigencies of the Cold War have given way to the new polarities defined by the Bush era, the question of incompatible cultures fixed in ‘tradition’ is constantly pitted against the liberating forces of ‘modernity’ on the other. At the heart of this insidious ‘culture talk’ there has been a consistent emphasis on questions of sexuality and women’s rights. (Mamdani 2000; Ware 2006)).

Although Saudi author Rajaa Alsanea was not due to speak at this seminar, her debut novel ‘Girls of Riyadh’ had received salacious attention from British media commentators intrigued by its daring portrayal of contemporary life in the Arabian peninsula, the seat of Wahabism. The *Sunday Times*, for instance, introduced an interview with the author with a paragraph enshrining the binaries of tradition and modernity in classic form: ‘Saudi Arabia has a new minister for women. She’s 25, likes designer labels, lipstick and cars. Rajaa Alsanea is, of course, not in government, for in her country it’s not really the done thing for females to air their opinions. They are not allowed to drive, let alone have employment or voting rights.’

(Thomas, 2007). Here Alsanea's modernity, measured in her attributes as a recognisable consumer, serves mainly to entrench western notions of the backwardness of her (Islamic) culture. In other words she becomes a phenomenon, one more likely to confirm Anglophone readers' perception of themselves as free agents rather than educate them about life for young people somewhere else. This acclaim represents some of the dilemmas facing those who are reduced to simple categories such as 'Arab women', 'Muslim women' or women from 'the Middle East' (Lazreg 1994).

The seminar at the London Book Fair began by dispelling any ideas that Arab women's writing was a recent phenomenon. Radwa Ashour, who is also a novelist and professor of literature at Ain Shams University, Cairo, spoke as chair: 'In the last third of the 19th century women, writers were involved in salons and periodicals all over the Arab world, in Alexandria, Aleppo, Damascus, Cairo, for example.'¹ However, she explained, in the modern period the situation differed from one Arab country to another, although she outlined some of the general challenges facing women writing in Arabic today. 'The first,' she observed, 'is the question of communicating with such a rich literary heritage. It is a challenge for women to draw on this, and how to affiliate with a tradition mainly forged by men.' Women, she suggested, 'tend to address different themes and write in different modes.'

The first speaker, Naluti, held a post in the Ministry of Education in Tunisia as well as being a writer. In her presentation she stressed the intuitive aspects of creative fiction that distinguished it from programmatic writing, regardless of gender: 'The problems of the world will be in the deep soul of the writer and will appear unexpectedly in writing'.

Raja Alem was introduced next as one of the most prolific writers of her country, with two novels translated, one in Spanish and one in English. She immediately took issue with the topic of the panel, declaring in a forthright manner that she wanted to dissociate herself from 'the label of the Saudi woman.' Her presentation, delivered emphatically in Arabic but simultaneously translated into rather monotone English over the headsets, laid out the reasons why the category of Arab woman writer was such a burden. 'When you are female and don't cry for empowerment, don't cry to be rescued, you are out of the scene. For me this was a disappointment. When I was asked to participate on this panel I took the opportunity to state that I am not here to give a history of writing in Saudi Arabia'. Alem also addressed the question of government censorship that was a common topic of debate throughout the week. Like Naluti she made a firm distinction between different kinds of writing: 'As a nation we consider ourselves as poets,' she explained, 'but when we write in newspapers we do so as social subjects.' Evidently aware of her country's negative image in western eyes, she spoke about her own experiences as an established author in a country that was routinely misunderstood, stating that the last ten years had seen 'an explosion of writing to dispel misconceptions of Saudi Arabs.' Her closing words captured the predicament of artists who are acutely aware of their location but who hate their work to be interpreted through relativist notions of 'culture' or 'difference': 'As writers we allow ourselves to be defined. This takes from our role as dreamers, travellers, trying to communicate outside of religion, countries, places. I am one with a dreaming movement in the world.'

In the discussion that followed the writers' presentations, members of the audience asked predictable questions: is gender relevant? Was it a problem finding a publisher, being a woman? Are women expected to write about particular topics as women? In reply the authors expressed their frustration at the ways in which their work was often exoticised, pigeonholed or marginalised as a result of their constraints of being identified as 'women writers', despite the fact that they came from very different national cultures. There was little time to develop these and other strands of debate that emerged during the seminar, but it was clear that there was a tension between grouping the authors as Arab women and expecting them to talk as individual artists untrammelled by the burden of identity.

Rather than focus on the gender politics of writing in the Arabic-speaking world, however, this essay will ask a different order of questions about the power of books to create channels of communication, not ‘outside of religion, countries, places’ but between parts of the world deemed to be politically unfathomable or culturally incompatible. While Alem and Naluti articulated the frustration of the writer whose imaginative work is trapped within confines of nationality, gender or social status, Pankaj Mishra has pointed out that once a literary text has been identified as a potential bestseller it acquires a life of its own regardless of the author’s dreams. Commenting on the 2009 London Book Fair, at which India was the market focus, he wrote:

Only incorrigible puritans will deny that the book, once ingested by the machinery of publishing, distribution and publicity, turns into a commodity like any other, no matter how otherworldly or ascetic the original authorial impulse may have been. The success of a book as a commercial product is contingent on a whole lot of things its author never thought of: the vagaries of domestic and international markets, changing cultural fashions, not to mention geopolitical shifts. (Mishra 2009)

Mishra illustrated this last point by drawing attention to the prominence of Pakistani fiction in English which, he suggested, is due at least partly to ‘the great fear and anxiety that Pakistan arouses in the west’. Maintaining a focus on the Arabic-speaking world, this essay will now explore the forces that bring national or regional literatures into view as the direct result of a convergence of fashions, shifts and markets that is taking place on a global scale. Although I will use one particular book as a prism that reflects some of these different forces at work, my interests lie not so much in the dreams and aspirations of its author but the promotion of reading literature in translation as an aspect of international relations.

Banned bestsellers

Rajaa Alsanea’s novel, *Girls of Riyadh (Banat al-Riyadh)*, was first published in Saudi Arabia in 2005, where it was quickly withdrawn and placed on a list of banned books. Before the ban was overturned in a court case, photocopies were said to be changing hands for \$500 (Ahmed 2007). After being republished in Beirut it became the number one bestseller on the regional equivalent of Amazon, and Alsanea was voted Intellectual Person of the year in the Arab World for 2006 by the top online Arabic online newspaper, www.elaph.com. The novel was reprinted seven times in two years in Arabic, has been translated into more than 20 languages, and hit bestseller lists in Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, Italy and Germany.¹¹ In 2007 it was published in English by Penguin in the US and launched in 2008 in the UK.

The marketing of the British edition of the novel provides a useful starting point for examining how this spectacularly successful book has been positioned to attract a particular demographic readership outside the region. It boasts a striking pink and purple cover dotted with handbags, hookahs, fast cars and stilettos, alerting readers to its genre and subject matter. The phrase ‘sex and the city’ also appears on the cover and the analogy is picked up in all full length reviews:

Rajaa Alsanea’s Saudi take on *Sex and the City* is an irresistible and thought-provoking confection. This cheeky and salacious portrait of the loves and lives of four privileged twentysomething girls in Riyadh, banned on publication in Saudi Arabia in 2005, has become a controversial best seller across the Middle East. Unlike Bushnell’s columnist heroine Carrie Bradshaw, Alsanea’s narrator must remain anonymous, posting each chapter to a yahoo group. (Adil 2007)

But it is not just the themes of hyper-femininity and hedonism identifying the book as routine ‘Chick Lit’ that are suggestive. The jacket is also covered with pithy extracts from reviews

that spell out a slightly different but potentially titillating recipe of seclusion and secrecy. A quote from the *Financial Times*, for example, reads, 'A novel that captures it all...a revealing study of one of the world's most secretive societies'. The *Metro* echoes this refrain: 'Boldly explodes Western preoccupations of life in one of Islam's most repressive societies', while the *New Statesman* assures readers that the book 'Will tell you more about one of the world's oddest and most closed societies than a library of books...excellent'.

The inside back cover of Penguin's UK edition confirms the novel's incendiary power from the moment of its first publication: 'Originally released in Arabic in 2005, *Girls of Riyadh* was immediately banned in Saudi Arabia due to its controversial and inflammatory content. Black-market copies of the novel circulated and the daring originality of *Girls of Riyadh* continues to create a firestorm all over the Arab world and has been a best-seller across much of the Middle East.'

So without actually reading it, all signs point to the currency of this book that goes far beyond the virtues of its literary style, plot, characterisation and so on. The implication that it was banned is bound to intrigue, especially in the context of a veil-ripping yarn set among Arabs. This is the second aspect of the book's skilful marketing that requires investigation. An article about the court case in KSA, written in 2006 by Brian Whitaker, author of *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Love in the Middle East*, complicates the story of the notoriety of *Girls of Riyadh* by reporting the high-level support that the book received in the author's country of birth as well as the hostility. It is worth quoting at length because while it conveys useful details about the controversy in Saudi society, it feeds British expectations of sex and censorship in the same breath.

Whitaker begins by evoking *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: 'There were echoes of this historic British battle in Saudi Arabia yesterday when the Court of Grievances [rejected](#) a complaint brought by two traditional-minded citizens against the hottest novel ever allowed to circulate in the kingdom.' (Whitaker 2006).

Whitaker explains that the novel centres on the lives of four young women 'grappling with the conflicting demands of tradition and modernity', and its provocation is that it shows them challenging the kingdom's strict social and sexual conventions. He also points out that the book challenges established literary conventions since it is written as a series of emails incorporating Saudi slang and snatches of English. He quotes two unnamed citizens who complained to the court that the book is 'an outrage to the norms of Saudi society.' Whitaker continues:

The book also allegedly "misinterpreted" verses from the Qur'an, according to a lawyer representing the complainants. "This is a clear violation of the publication laws of the kingdom which state that books should 'promote the beliefs of our religion and its teachings and good deeds in addition to promoting anything that spreads culture and knowledge'," the lawyer said.

The fact that the ministry of information decided to allow it together with its popularity among readers, shows that attitudes are changing in the kingdom - though the pace of change is still painfully slow.

Interestingly, Ms Sanea has garnered some high-level support. Ghazi al-Qusaibi, the Saudi minister of labour, who is also a renowned poet, described the book as "a work that deserves to be read" and the minister of culture, Iyad Madani, said it reflects the way many young people in the kingdom actually live.

So was it banned or not? And how can anyone outside the region, who does not speak or read Arabic fluently, even begin to interpret its provocative effect in the country that produced it? However tempting it is to dismiss the publicity surrounding the banning of *Girls of Riyadh* as

pure marketing hype, censorship remains a significant problem affecting contemporary Arabic literature. (Safouan 2007) It was an important theme running through the London Book Fair, and an issue frequently raised many of the writers invited to represent the Arabic-speaking world. In this context Jordanian poet Amjad Nasser wrote:

If you were to ask any Arab writer today about the main problem facing Arab culture, he or she would say without a second thought: "Censorship." This, of course, is not a new problem. It is one of the oldest difficulties that has confronted freedom of expression in the Arab world in general and cultural freedom in particular, and this continues to be the case. (Soueif 2008)

Since this essay is more concerned with the novel's readers in English than the conditions under which it was written, it will not pursue this aspect of Penguin's marketing strategy beyond noting its significance as an eye-catching ploy. Given the other directives that suggest that the book contains valuable anthropological information, a more important question for those of us who read it in translation (whoever 'we' are), might be: how does this book affect our preconceptions of life for young women in Saudi Arabia? Although I am primarily concerned with the conditions that create or sustain reading publics rather than with an analysis of the text itself, this inquiry demands a slight theoretical detour. Why is the prospect of sex in this particular city so compelling?

Pre-modern Sexuality

Sandwiched between the laudatory quotes from reviews, the marketing blurb on the back of the novel's cover alerts potential readers to another dichotomy designed to entice. It manages to suggest that the girls of Riyadh are bound by the country's strict cultural traditions and 'trying to be good little Muslim girls' by pleasing their families and their men, while at the same time, dating, shopping, watching American TV, having fun, and more significantly 'sneaking out behind their parents' backs'. It ends with the question, printed as a single line after this descriptive paragraph: 'But can you be a twenty-first-century girl *and* a Saudi girl?' (emphasis in original). As Judith Butler has argued recently, the question of sexual politics lies at the heart of the serious political contestation about 'who has arrived in modernity and who has not?' (Butler 2009, 102) While the notoriety of *Girls of Riyadh* is based on its effective challenge to notions of female passivity and 'traditional' customs in what many outsiders perceive to be a pre-modern society, its power to influence perceptions of contemporary youth culture among wealthy young Saudis is tempered by the weight of expectations that greeted it. Butler continues, '...very often claims to new or radical sexual freedoms are appropriated precisely by that point of view – usually enunciated from within state power – that would try to define Europe and the sphere of modernity as the privileged site where sexual radicalism can and does take place.' (102) Read in this light, the implication that a modern Saudi girl cannot exist in the twenty first century is deeply troubling, even though it is intended as a provocative invitation to buy the book to find out.

Where Butler deconstructs the Orientalist temporality of sexual repression and cultural backwardness found in anti-immigrant discourse, particularly in Europe, Joseph Massad has added rich complexity to the discussion of sexual politics as a terrain of intense political contestation between East and West. Although his book *Desiring Arabs* takes into account broader manifestations of sexuality and sexual desire that fall outside the firmly heterosexual codes of *Girls of Riyadh*, his evocation of the dilemmas faced by Arab writers is instructive.

There is, as we have seen, a rich and spectacularly diverse (in terms of ideology, genre, and intellectual discipline) literature on sex produced in the Arab world in the twentieth century. It is true that much of it is compromised by an unavoidable engagement with western imperial endeavours from Orientalism to the ostensibly

“benign” ethnocentrism of human rights. Close attention to these works, however, confounds the repressed/licentious binary imposed on the sexual desires and practices of Arabs (dubbed “Arab sexuality”) by the spectrum of western commentators. While Arab intellectuals, following Orientalism and the colonial encounter, came to perceive the existence of the Arabs principally in terms of civilisation and culture, there emerges in the literature they produced an elaboration and an occasional contestation of the place of sexual desires in wider discourses and practices of modernity. It is at these rarer moments when the imposition and seduction of western norms fail that the possibility of different conceptions of desires, politics, and subjectivities emerges. (Massad, 2008, 418)

Massad’s study offers an analysis of another recent best-selling title that was first published in Arabic, *The Yacoubian Building* by Egyptian writer, Alaa Al-Aswany, a book that has been criticised both for being homophobic and for writing about sex between men in provocative manner. *Girls of Riyadh* is undeniably more conventional and therefore falls into a different category of writing about ‘Arab sexuality’. Although it promotes the idea of romantic love within strict heterosexual norms it can also be read as a riposte to the ‘repressed/licentious binary’ associated with women’s writing (in English) about life in the Arabian peninsula. Yet another extract from a review on the cover of the British edition – ‘love and lust, men and money’, this time from the *Daily Telegraph* – asserts that this is resolutely not an updated version of *Princess: a true story of life behind the veil in Saudi Arabia*, the international bestseller by Jean Sasson first published in 1993, nor does it resemble the more recent and no less sensational *Inside the Kingdom: my life in Saudi Arabia* by Carmen bin Ladin which appeared in 2005. Where both these books were written by foreigners outraged at the treatment of women in Saudi culture, Alsanea’s novel offers a voice of ‘ordinary’ Saudi youth, adept at manoeuvring within and outside the local constraints much like their peers in any country.ⁱⁱⁱ In this sense it is a contender for a ‘rare moment’ where ‘different conceptions of desires, politics, and subjectivities’ might be glimpsed. However, any ethnographic reading of Alsanea’s story must contend with the extraordinarily modern medium of digital technology which both shapes the narrative and delivers the book into the familiar, futuristic world of web 2.0.

New media etiquette

The structure of *Girls of Riyadh* does not just revolve around the weekly posting to the fictitious email group. As the novel progresses, the author replies to comments she receives from readers who are drawn to the site as its notoriety spreads. They challenge her interpretation of events, try to guess which one of the four main characters is her, and beg for more information. A glossary at the back of the English-language edition explains the significance of the mail group’s name, ‘Seerehwenfadha7et’, which was a direct reference to a Lebanese talk show whose title means ‘a story told’. By changing one consonant of this word, Alsanea explains that she was able to insinuate a story of a more scandalous nature. The letter 7 is one of several routinely used to refer to certain Arabic letters that have no counterpart on an English keyboard, a standard practice in Internet and SMS language. The significance of the novel’s format and terminology confirms that the region’s linguistic conventions as well as social etiquette are being transformed by digital technology much like anywhere else.

In an article describing how important Valentine’s Day is for young Saudis, commissioned by the *New York Times* shortly after her novel was published in 2008, Alsanea, by then living as a graduate in Chicago, provided a description of romantic conventions among her peers in KSA,

These days, Saudi relationships start on Facebook or through Bluetooth. We “date” over the phone or by instant messaging, and we enjoy exchanging gifts — through our chauffeurs or housemaids.

Ten years ago, though, before the Internet and cellphones, we had less room to maneuver. Guys took their chances by handing out their land-line numbers to any nearby female, just in case there was an eligible young woman hidden under that shapeless abaya and niqab.(2008b)

It is worth noting the interest of the *NY Times* in the subject matter of Alsanea’s piece. Less than a week later the paper launched a new series entitled ‘Generation Faithful’ examining the lives of youth across the Muslim world ‘at a time of religious revival.’^{iv} From 2008 to 2009 articles on issues facing young people from romance to politics and faith-based conflict appeared on a regular basis. These were organized on a dedicated webpage, accompanied by maps and charts explaining the demographic profile of Muslim-majority countries and offering interactive dialogue through a dedicated forum known as The Majlis, a word meaning ‘parliament’ in Farsi. This intervention is significant here for several reasons. First, its ostensible aim is to draw young American Muslims into conversation with each other on the relatively public terrain of the *NY Times* website. A by-product of this might be that it seeks to allay fears of the more mainstream *NY Times* readers that young Muslims are inevitably attracted to jihad and anti-US sentiment wherever they may live. However, rather than hazarding a guess as to the editorial motivation for ‘Generation Faithful’, it is more useful to examine the context in which this focus on youth in the Middle East emerges.

In his book *Children of Jihad* (subtitled ‘a young American’s travels among the youth of the Middle East’) Jared Cohen describes his experiences in Tehran in 2004 that are similar to the courting conventions described by Alsanea (Cohen 2007). Finding himself in the middle of a spontaneous party that erupted in one of the city’s notorious traffic jams he noticed that young people all around him were throwing bits of paper from one car to another. His companions explained that these contained phone numbers and that this was a standard way of trying to get people’s attention. Cohen quickly realised that he was surrounded by new forms of social etiquette.

In the same traffic jam, boys and girls used their mobile phones to send anonymous Bluetooth text messages to one another, electronically flirting and courting...Parties, meetings, gathering, protests, are all organized anonymously by Bluetooth messaging. The cell phone is both a way out and a way in for Iranian youth as they seek to express themselves, while at the same time circumventing the state intelligence apparatus. (71)

Cohen’s description of the creative techniques of young Iranians to evade the strict laws of an Islamic government is not intended to show his companions in an exotic light, but to demonstrate how much young people have in common wherever they live – a particularly significant point given that 70% of the population in the region are under 30. His book concludes: ‘They are the ones who can be reached by breaking down the traditional means of communication and speaking a language so that this generation everywhere can communicate their hopes and ideals...’ (274)

We might note in passing that Cohen is currently working for the US government in the Office of Policy Planning, and that he is responsible for counter-radicalization, youth and education, public diplomacy, Muslim world outreach, and North Africa. A frequent contributor to influential online websites such as the US-based Huffington Post, Cohen represents one of the most consistent voices urging the US government to target public diplomacy strategy in the digital environment and is responsible for introducing terms such as

'Facebook diplomacy' or 'dorm room diplomacy', referring to transnational communication among college students (Cohen 2008).

Unlike previous diplomatic initiatives, however, Cohen's project emphasises that communication must not simply represent the interests of American youth. He argues that the new tools are invaluable to US diplomacy because they facilitate young people living with oppressive regimes in their efforts to challenge out-dated laws and values. In one post he wrote: 'In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are using online social networks to petition for driving rights and are uploading onto YouTube videos of themselves driving in the rural areas. In Egypt, young people are using Facebook to stand up for their political rights and organize nationwide strikes.' (Cohen, 2008)

This prompts us to ask where we might find a deeper analysis of the comparable impact of new media in the Arabic-speaking world, mindful of Alsanea's critics who declared her book to be 'an outrage to the norms of Saudi society (Whitaker 2006). While a number of books have explored developments such as the phenomenal rise of blogging in Farsi since 2001 (Alavi 2005), and the transformation of public space for many Muslim women who have even limited access to computers (Nouraise-Simone 2005), analysts working within the overlapping academic fields of Media and Cultural Studies have had to acknowledge the struggle to keep up with 'contemporary mediated culture' in the region (Sreberny 2008). Annabelle Sreberny explains that the rapid pace of change constitutes the first dilemma for those wishing to define even the object of 'Media Studies' as form, function and technology converge: 'with broadcasting and narrowcasting over the internet and with mobile telephony as conduits of personal and public messages.' (8-9) The implication of her comment is that young people are more adept at using new communicative technologies than analysts are at estimating their influence. There is also the question of studying how particular forms of media etiquette emerge within different national, regional or social contexts. Breaking patterns of methodological nationalism (Gilroy 1993) is one urgent task for media analysts, Sreberny argues, but it is also imperative to clarify new terms such as transnational, trans-cultural and even global as they are often used so loosely that they lack analytical bite. In other words, it may not be sufficient to affirm that Bluetoothing, Facebook and Twitter have become the standard tools linking young people regardless of location, or indeed the medium of communication between dissidents within a country and supporters all over the world, as we saw in Iran after the elections in June 2009. The application of technology to mediating gender relations in local situations is influenced by many different factors, not least specific social norms and the degree of policing encountered by participants.

A third question that Sreberny tackles is that of defining the Middle East as a geo-political term, an essential move for anyone engaged in serious discussion about the region. The 'Middle East' she writes, 'is a demarcation by colonial fiat, through lines in the sand'...The region reveals remarkable differentiation along almost any indicator one cares to choose.' (11) Add to this the economic realities of the oil industry, and the immense differences within the region become even more evident. ^v

Sreberny's point about the difficulties facing media analysts who specialise in the area known as the Middle East become more pertinent when militarised conflict is taken into account as well. In the context of the 'war on terror' initiated by the Bush administration, it is essential to chart the content and orientation of new youth-oriented satellite channels emanating from the US, such as Arabic MTV, a joint venture between MTV Networks and Dubai-based multimedia shingle Arab Media Group launched in 2007. The launch of this channel followed an earlier initiative to counter what then president George W. Bush referred to as 'hateful propaganda that fills the airwaves in the Muslim world'. (Snow 2009: 50). In 2004 a US government-funded Arabic language network was founded, called Al-Hurra ('The Free One') and based in Virginia. The BBC meanwhile has also moved its resources into the region by launching the first publicly-funded global TV news channel, BBC Arabic, in 2008. The

following year saw the launch of BBC Persian, a daily eight hour service, intended for audiences in Iran, Afghanistan and the wider region.

There are two things to point out here. First, these developments signal a fundamental shift in what is broadly called ‘public diplomacy’, widely referred to as ‘the influence business’, (Fisher and Bröckerhoff 2008) or by Milton C. Cummings as ‘all that a nation does to explain itself to the world.’ (Schneider 2007: 147) Although this varies from one country to another, the fact that governments are now competing with privately-owned and corporate media conglomerations indicates how far they have ceded control of the flow of ideas and cultural expression. Far from abandoning efforts to influence targeted publics abroad, however, the strategies employed to represent national interests have become ever more diffuse. The old-fashioned mantra, ‘the battle for hearts and minds’ becomes literally true as information itself becomes a weapon in waging conflict on numerous scales (Snow 2009). Cohen puts it slightly differently: ‘Young people in the Middle East *are* reachable – and they could be waiting to hear from us.’ (275)

The second point is that the proliferation of satellite TV has been transforming Arabic language public culture for some time, not least by the success of news channels such as Al-Jazeera. Saad Eddin Ibrahim writes that ‘Arab satellites have done probably for the Arab world more than any organized critical movement could have done, in opening up the public space, in giving Arab citizens a newly found opportunity to assert themselves.’ (Lynch 2006: 29). There are currently over 800 satellite channels, more than 55 of which are devoted to music (Fordham 2009). This is the rapidly changing media environment that forms the context to *Banat Al-Riyadh*’s success across the region, to which we must add that the publication and distribution of books varies widely from one Arab country to another, for a variety of reasons.

Translating femaleness

Recognising the boundless power of the internet to connect young Arabs of a certain social stratum, Alsanea begins her book with an intimate challenge to her readers:

Under the subject line ‘I shall write of my friends’, she announces,

Ladies and Gentlemen: you are invited to join me in one of the most explosive scandals and noisiest, wildest all-night parties around. Your personal tour guide - and that’s *moi* - will reveal to you a new world, a world closer to you than you might imagine. We all live in this world but do not really experience it, seeing only what we can tolerate and ignoring the rest.’

This new world is to be revealed through chronicling the love lives of the nubile young women rather than creative use of the technology itself. But as the back cover announces, the girls’ social networks are shaped not just by the long reach of American TV into their own homes, or through access to the World Wide Web as they call it, but also by travelling and living in the West as well. One character spends a summer in her father’s flat in Kensington where she weeps her heart out over her lover’s betrayal, her suffering only alleviated by meeting other young Arabs living away from home. Another is more fluent in English than Arabic as her mother is American and they have moved between the US and Saudi Arabia all her life.

But the plot or characterisation are not my concern here. Despite the fact that it is easy to digest, the book raises awkward questions about how non-Arabic speakers might approach Arabic literature at this present time – when there is so little translated in English (according to Words Without Borders, the online magazine for International Literature, 50% of all the books in translation now published worldwide are translated *from* English, but less than 3%

are translated *into* English^{vi}). Most of us have scant context for gauging the literary climate in each country in the region, let alone the trends and obstacles shaping cultural production across the Arab world.

David Tresilian, author of *Brief Introduction to Modern Arabic Literature*, insists that it can be read ‘for pleasure and enjoyment, like any other literary writing (with allowance being made for the fact that it is in translation)’ (2008: 17). He adds that it is also read by students of Arabic as part of their linguistic training, although in some ways they are the least likely to appreciate it. Let us note here that English-speaking students of Arabic have traditionally provided useful recruits to the diplomatic service, rather than literary scholars, although a 2002 survey revealed a sharp decline in teaching Middle Eastern languages over recent years.(BRISMES 2002)^{vii} Since then immense resources have been poured into new programmes and courses that focus on the Muslim-majority world.

Since *Girls of Riyadh* breaks many conventions expected of writing standard or literary Arabic, it presumably presents a different kind of challenge for linguists. In an article written after its publication in English, Marilyn Booth, its US-based translator wrote: ‘It’s not just a question of what gets selected for translation. It’s also a question of how an Arabic literary work becomes an English literary work, and of what threads are left out as the novel’s texture is woven anew. (Booth 2008b). The passage of the book from an overnight sensation in the language in which it was written to its translation into English quickly revealed the complexities entailed in deciding what was to remain constant in both versions. ‘If *Banat al-Riyadh* is the first Arabic novel to fully exploit an email listserv format, it is also bold in its use of not one but multiple vernaculars (in a situation of diglossia where spoken Arabic varies markedly from place to place as well as from the “learned” or “literary” language.’ (Booth 2008a) However, Booth’s sensitivity to the linguistic tropes of women’s life-writing in the Middle East brought her into fierce conflict with the author, a dispute which she has since described at length. In short, Alsanea objected to Booth’s version, although it is not clear on what grounds, and the editors allowed her to change it without further consultation. Booth was presented with the final version which she was not permitted to change and subsequently offered joint credit as co-translator, along with Alsanea.

Booth has explained that her original translation attempted to do justice to the ‘linguistic poly-exuberance, structural experimentation, and globalized and local pop culture references and texts (which) are ... inseparable from the novel’s central themes.’ () She offers many examples of the discrepancies between her version and the author’s, but there is only space for one here. Above I quoted from the opening page of the book: ‘Ladies and Gentlemen: you are invited to join me...’ In Booth’s original version the word ‘girls’ was inserted after ‘ladies’. She writes:

In the changed version, omitting “girls” (or “young misses”) from the list of addressees effaces a preeminent thematic focus and desired audience, even as it substitutes the clichéd “Ladies and gentlemen” for the disruptive, quirky “Ladies, girls, and gentlemen”.(5)

For “girls” or “young misses” are the narrator’s and novel’s concern. “Girls” are her/its subjects and her/its world. Finally, “girls” at this theatrical opening moment contrasts beautifully with what will become a dominant structural component of the novel and a highly entertaining conduit of critique: these emails are dually addressed. (Ref?)

‘The published version,’ she argues, ‘lessens the text’s thoroughgoing emphasis on female experience and feminine perspectives...I felt that specifying femaleness was most often appropriate to this thematic focus on society’s female margins, albeit economically privileged margins.’ ()

Although there is no evidence of the author's particular concerns, other than rejection of the subtleties of Booth's feminist translation, it is perhaps indicative of the strength of her feelings that the first line of her acknowledgements reads: 'I would like to express my deepest gratitude towards everyone who has helped me edit the English counterpart of my Arabic novel.' Whatever perspective one takes in this dispute, however, Booth is correct to urge a more qualified appraisal of the processes that bring Arabic fiction to an English speaking market, especially if one agrees with Tresilian (2008a) that it is also perfectly natural to read the literature sociologically. He remarks that: 'Students everywhere are perhaps familiar with the kind of essay that asks them to consider what might be learned from a work of literature about attitudes to gender, or class, or ethnicity, in the society that produced it.' (16) This comment underscores – and plays down – the dangers involved in interpreting issues of gender in the context of literary representations of Islamic cultures. As suggested by the bitter clash between the young writer and her feminist translator, *Girls of Riyadh* is a book that demands a politically engaged reading of narratives about Muslim women as they are exported to countries that signed up to fight the 'war on terror' in 2001. (Ware 2006) 'Translation and interpreting are essential for circulating *and* resisting the narratives that create the intellectual and moral environment for violent conflict in the first place,' writes Mona Baker in the introduction to her book *Translation and Conflict*, 'even though the narratives in question may not directly depict conflict or war. 'Indeed,' she continues, 'some of these narratives may be packaged as disinterested, abstract scientific theories, others as literary texts, cartoons or innocent entertainment. (2006, 2)

But while *Girls of Riyadh* can hardly be said to be innocent, and some would quibble about its status as a literary text, its presence in our bookshops demands more than a cautionary approach to corporate publishing or cultural propaganda. Introducing her essay on 'Reading Desire: from empathy to estrangement, from enlightenment to implication', Lisa Taylor writes,

For those of us who turn to literature education to create spaces of sustained critical embodied reflection, there is a particular challenge to think through the kinds of reading practices which might intervene into the dual economies of antipathy and desire animating Orientalism in the age of Empire (Sharma & Sharma, 2003) and manifesting in the increasingly enthusiastic Western reception of 'Third World' and Muslim women authors (Amireh & Majaj, 2000) (Taylor, 2007: 298).

It is these 'reading practices' that require investigation as we consider what brought this particular Muslim woman author to the attention of English-speaking readers. In her essay on the politics of reception, entitled 'Reading Lolita in Times of War,' Catherine Burwell writes, 'A Mother's Day display at a large chain bookstore I visited in the spring of 2005, for example, encouraged customers to buy 'Global Fiction for Mom.' (Burwell 2007: 281) This next section will consider how targeted reading publics are created and sustained in the context of a pervasive crisis of illiteracy.

Directed Reading

This convergence of the book industry with powerful cultural institutions is a trend visible across the Anglophone publishing world (Wright 2006). In 2003 the BBC launched an initiative called The Big Read that drew attention to the importance of reading by launching a search for the nation's favourite books. In an article entitled 'Watching the Big Read with Pierre Bourdieu: forms of heteronomy in the literary field', David Wright explained that the series provided material that was 'ripe for sociological analysis.' He concludes: 'The example of the Big Read shows the co-option of the book industry into doing the work of policy ... with echoes of historical connections between culture and person-formation. The

characteristics of the contemporary state imply changed processes of politicisation of the literary field which The Big Read reveals.’ (2007:19)

During the same year Channel Four ran a series called ‘Can’t Read, Can’t Write’ which highlighted the fact that over five million adults have a reading age of 12 or less. A similar initiative, also called ‘The Big Read’ was launched in the US in 2006 by the National Endowment of the Arts following a report entitled ‘Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America’. Research showed that there was a significant decline in reading across all age groups, most markedly in the young. The crisis was to be addressed through the promotion of reading as a public benefit, with community reading projects and online literature resources at the heart of its strategy of dissemination.

Leaving aside the immense influence of media personalities like Oprah and Richard and Judy, the phenomenon of book groups deserves special attention particularly as they disproportionately involve women. Discussing the success of particular texts popular with bookclubs in Canada, Burwell writes that, far from being ‘natural’ outcomes of a modern desire for collective reading, women’s bookclubs have a significant history, in north America at least. This demonstrates the effort needed to establish literary societies geared towards supporting women as readers. While research on contemporary women’s book clubs expands, academic focus tends to be on questions of identification, taste, cultural capital and so on. Burwell demands that we address the question why so-called ‘international’ novels and biographies are aggressively marketed towards women, especially through the medium of bookclubs instigated by the publishers themselves. (2007: 286) A prime example is provided by a website set up by Random House (UK) in 2009 to encourage an ‘online book community’. One of the first recommended titles featured on the new site was *The Consequences of Love* by Sulaiman Addonia, described as a compelling love story set in Jeddah^{viii}. We might also note that *The Kite Runner* was the UK Penguin readers’ groups favourite book of the year in 2006 and 2007.

Back in Britain, the rapid increase in literary festivals around the country has established further links between the industry, politics and the media.^{ix} Politicians and media celebrities with the most tenuous connections to literature are routinely invited to take part in events designed to benefit local economies as well as to encourage book-buying. The organization of lucrative prizes offered to different categories of literature every year is another vehicle for bringing both new and established writers to the attention of the reading public. While the most well known competitions attract enormous media attention through the announcement of shortlists weeks beforehand, there is rarely any comment on how the awards are actually funded. The launch of the International Prize for Arabic Fiction illustrates the extent to which powerful and wealthy forces are able to combine in the interests of raising the profile of cultural production. The first Man Booker prize for Arabic fiction was announced just days before the London Book Fair hosted the Arab world as its market focus.^x Officially announced in Abu Dhabi, UAE, in April 2007, in association with the Booker Prize Foundation, the initiative received significant support from the Emirates Foundation which funded the \$60,000 prize.

This award was indicative of the increasing resources being ploughed into publishing and translation in the Gulf region. The previous year another Abu Dhabi-based foundation, Kalima (which means ‘word’ in Arabic), announced plans to translate 500 classic books from 16 languages into Arabic by 2010. In 2008 Bloomsbury launched a new Arabic-language publishing house, Bloomsbury Qatar Foundation Publishing, in partnership with the Gulf state. "The emphasis so far in Qatar has been on literacy, and our second challenge is how to move from literacy to literature to create a culture," said Abdel-Rahman Azzam, a spokesman for the chair of the Qatar Foundation (Flood, 2008). In this final section I will explore the rapidly diversifying world of public diplomacy in an attempt to place these developments in a broader geo-political context.

Reader development

The British Council, which brought numerous authors - such as Alsanea, Alem, Naluti and Ashour - to the London Book Fair in an attempt to introduce their work both to publishers and a wider English-speaking readership, markets itself as the world's largest international cultural relations organisation.^{xi} It was originally founded in 1930s as 'as an organ of international propaganda' according to Nicholas Cull, historian of public diplomacy.^{xii} Having gone through many changes during the second half of the 20th century, today it occupies an important niche within the UK government's armoury of public diplomacy. In a restructuring of the diplomatic service after the events of 2001, the British Council, along with BBC World Service, was recognised as needing to maintain an arms' length relationship to government in order to underline its political independence.^{xiii}

The organisation's sponsorship was also a result of a new project that reflected a fresh approach to the cultures of the Near and Middle East following the British involvement in the military occupation of Iraq. In 1938 the British Council opened one of its first overseas offices in Cairo, where it remained functional throughout the Suez Crisis and the intervening years. Its remit in the region, and particularly in the Gulf states, was confined until recently to English-language teaching, but since 2006, the organisation has diverted significant resources to the area in order to combat negative perceptions of the UK, known in the trade as a 'deficit of trust'. The 'New Arabic Books' initiative was devised as an integral part of this policy shift since a focus on both reading and writing offer significant opportunities for intercultural work. New programmes involve supporting literary exchanges between Arabic-speaking countries as well as bilateral relations with the UK. In addition, the British Council website offers information about fiction and non-fiction in Arabic that is both available in and awaiting translation into English, as well as offering advice to literary translators and potential publishers.^{xiv}

It is perhaps easy to overlook a significant section on children's books that asks: 'What are parents in the Arab World giving their children to read? Many more children's books are being published to overcome the story that "Arabs don't read"'.^{xv} Behind this statement lies an important component of the organisation's strategy to promote reader development in the region. This is not so much a method of combating illiteracy; it entails intervention in a country's fundamental approach to basic education. Recalling Azzam's comment on the need to move from literacy to literature, above, it is worth noting that the British Council's Cairo-based office is currently working with the Egyptian Ministry of Education on ways to teach critical thinking in schools. Although this is supported at the highest level, I learned in an interview with a British Council executive in London that the work entails 'a big shift in culture: young people need this approach but the older generation do not like it *when young people answer back or contradict*. It's a generational issue.'^{xvi}

One successful model of reader development, already implemented by other countries and being considered by the Egyptian government, is the British scheme called Bookstart. This is a national programme that provides free packs of books to every child born in the UK. The rationale on its website states that 'Sharing books with babies and toddlers is a wonderful way to increase language skills and help them understand the world around them. Research shows that babies and toddlers who love books begin reading sooner and go on to fare better at school, in all areas of the curriculum.' The evidence indicating that an early love of books increases chances of success in adult lives is irrefutable, and the current government has consistently supported the scheme not just by funding but by co-ordinating their work through social welfare programmes, such as HomeStart.^{xvii} In the world of international relations, however, the promotion of critical reading is also considered an essential tool to encourage democracy.^{xviii}

There is obviously a great deal more to say about the changing nature of public diplomacy, but it is essential that the forms of intercultural exchange promoted by governments are studied in a rapidly evolving context where diplomacy, propaganda and militarized psychological operations overlap. It is also important to track the differences between national models as well as to note the convergences. Here it may be useful to borrow analysts Fisher and Bröckerhoff's suggestion that the spectrum of public diplomacy comprises a range of official and unofficial activities that interact along a line that runs from 'listening' to 'telling', or as the diplomatic jargon would have it, 'direct messaging'. (Fisher & Bröckerhoff 2008) Although they were writing specifically about the UK context, their definitions apply to the US as well. Cultural diplomacy is placed between broadcasting (which is directly next to messaging) and cultural exchange, which is the mid point between the two extremes. The authors explain: 'As the emphasis shifts away from listening and increasingly towards the promotion of a particular perspective, cultural diplomacy is the act of presenting cultural goods to an audience in an attempt to engage them in the ideas the producer perceives to be represented by them.' (2008, 28)

What determines the underlying difference between diplomacy and exchange in the cultural sphere is the question of relative power among the parties involved. If there is no reciprocity there can be no genuine exchange – rather, the attempt to deliver a pointed message to a carefully targeted audience. Under the Bush administration, for instance, cultural diplomacy was officially defined as the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding. This approach not only belies the promotion of cultural exchange as a corollary to the threat of force, it also demonstrates the heavy-handed, 'messaging' approach to managing cultural relations. In 2005, for instance, a government report declared cultural diplomacy to be an effective means to 'demonstrate our values, and our interest in values, and combat the popular notion that Americans are shallow, violent and godless.'^{xix}

In the context of literary diplomacy, an example of the US approach to the field of intercultural relations is provided by the Global Cultural Initiative, an effort headed by former First Lady Laura Bush, whose former training as a librarian helped qualify her for her role as honorary ambassador for the UN's Literacy Decade.^{xx} One of the first projects was The Big Read Egypt/US which was launched during the International Book Fair in Cairo in 2007 as an offshoot of the national programme set up by the National Endowment for the Arts mentioned earlier. Its aim was to organize groups of Egyptian participants to read and discuss Arabic versions of three classic American novels (Ray Bradbury, Harper Lee, and John Steinbeck) while corresponding American readers are invited to read and discuss *The Thief and the Dogs* by Naguib Mahfouz.^{xxi} According to the website, the project was designed to 'create a forum for the citizens in Egypt and the United States to learn about each others' cultural history, traditions, people and civic life.'

At the time of writing it is too early to predict the fate of initiatives like The Big Read Egypt/US since they are programmed to run their course, but it is still important to chart their effects in both countries. Although President Obama dismantled the office of public diplomacy set up by his predecessor, he famously addressed the subject of relations with the Muslim world in his inaugural speech and gave his first official interview to the Arab television station Al-Arabiya, emphasising that 'the United States has a stake in the well-being of the Muslim world.' (Grand & Lorde 2009; Snow 2009). Jared Cohen has maintained his influence under the Obama administration, which was quick to promote the digital environment as a developmental tool in Iraq. In April 2009, for example, the US Department of State sponsored a delegation of representatives from the American technology industry in a mission to Baghdad in order to advise Iraqi counterparts on how to 'build local capacity, foster greater transparency and accountability, build upon anti-corruption efforts, promote critical thinking in the classroom, scale-up civil society, and further empower local entities and individuals by providing the tools for network building.' (Wood 2009).

The written word

Linking co-ordinated readings of established literary heritage through projects such as The Big Read Egypt/USA presents one kind of platform for mutual recognition, but there is insufficient evidence to discover whether the NEA's aims of encouraging readers to 'share each other's literary treasures' is having an effect.^{xxii} By way of conclusion I will return to the figure of the author who finds herself selected as a worthy candidate for publishing, distribution and publicity as a result of complex circuits of economics and political contingency. The prospect of being a cultural ambassador raises several urgent questions for contemporary writers, particularly those who are likely to be read sociologically, as well as ideologically, in translation. Where Raja Alem spoke of her yearning to be read outside the trappings of nationality and gender, she also registered her pride in being associated with Mecca 'which has done so much for humanity.'

Her younger compatriot, only 24 years old when her book was published, confronted these issues of representation head on in a preface to the English edition: 'the success of my book in the Arab world was enough to mark me as a member of Arab intellectual society, which seemed to come with certain responsibilities. Furthermore, coming from a family that values other cultures and nations, and being the proud Saudi I am, I felt it was my duty to reveal another side of Saudi life to the Western world.' (Alsanea 2008a, vii).

We have seen how *Girls of Riyadh* was marketed as a text that might inform readers outside the region as well as entertaining them. The question of whether it plays to cultural stereotypes or challenges them remains open, but Alsanea states explicitly that her Saudi heritage obliged her to embrace the opportunity to reach a wider audience, particularly because of prevailing images of KSA in the west. In her preface she writes: 'It never occurred to me, when I wrote my novel, that I would be releasing it in any language other than Arabic. I did not think the Western world would actually be interested. It seemed to me, that the Western world still perceives us either romantically, as the land of the Arabian Nights...or politically, as the land that gave birth to Bin Laden and other terrorists...'(Alsanea 2008a, vii)

Perhaps the most telling consequence of the burden that the young author finds herself carrying is conveyed in her attempt, by means of the preface, to direct her Anglophone readers towards a particular interpretation of her book. The characters are not representative of all of the girls of Riyadh, she claims, but they do represent many of them. Social mores in the Kingdom are very conservative, admittedly, which makes the lives of young women very different from their counterparts in the west, but there are universal elements at work too: 'women there...are full of homes and plans and determination and dreams. And they fall in and out of love just like women anywhere else.' (Alsanea 2008a, viii) Her efforts to dictate the terms within which the book is to be read evokes some of the problems entailed in translating creative writing without losing vital threads from the original fabric. (Booth 2008b) Her dispute with her original translator raises more complex issues than Alsanea may be prepared to admit. As Booth writes in retrospect:

If English-reading audiences are led to expect that they need not engage with other cultures on those cultures' own terms (for example, in *Banat al-Riyadh*, the ways Saudi youth verbalise global consumer culture in a local idiom), they will remain in their own comfortably isolated cultural easy chairs, unaware of the rich cultural specificities, political nuances, and beautifully jolting reading experiences passing them by. (2008b)

This essay has argued that literary and creative acts that explore gender relations in the Muslim-majority world cannot be read outside the contingencies of neo-imperial and nationalist narratives. As well as indicating a shift in marketing strategies which have previously favoured relentless tales of women who 'cry to be rescued', the promotion of

Alsanea as cultural emissary suggests that the audience for tales of sexuality and repression within the Muslim-majority world might be changing too. However, the gleeful revelation that the youth in Islamic countries enjoy ‘hot sex’ evidently provides a vicarious thrill for those who continue to believe that Western civilisation has all the cards in its hands. This development demands an ever sharper analysis of the centrality of sexual politics in contemporary ‘frames of war’ (Butler 2009).

A discussion of publishing and translating Arabic fiction into English can lead back, perhaps unexpectedly, to some uncomfortable home truths. The cultural practices of learning to read for pleasure are in jeopardy, not just in the Anglophone book-publishing world but more broadly as an aspect of human cultural experience. The ‘story’ is that the global book publishing industry is facing a crisis of alarming proportion, threatened by factors such as piracy, illiteracy and a marked decline in reading as a leisure pursuit. The future of books as mass-produced commodities cannot be taken for granted. In our age of digital communication which promises new forms of cosmopolitanism, the free flow of artistic and literary ideas is more important than ever. But the ability to navigate in cultural channels shaped by ideology, militarization, markets and social forces, requires immense effort on the part of critical thinkers who dream of a better world. And as we travel in our imaginations through careful reading of translated texts, we must stay open to what we learn about ourselves, as well as the conditions that determine both what and how we read, in the face of an uncertain and troubling future.

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ⁱ Author’s notes taken during the seminar.

ⁱⁱ This information is taken from the ‘Arab World Market Focus Seminar Programme, 14-16 April,’ published by the British Council, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ A review cited on the Penguin (USA) website called it “ A rare glimpse into ordinary life for young women in Saudi Arabia.”
<http://us.penguin.com/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9781594201219,00.html?sym=REV>

^{iv} The series began on February 17th 2008 with an article called ‘Stifled, Egypt’s Young Turn to Islamic Fervor’ by Michael Slackman.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/world/middleeast/17youth.html>

^v The imperative to differentiate within the region, and to analyse the way that generalisations serve political purposes both within as well as outside Arab-speaking countries is addressed in an article by Hoda Elsadda in a critique of the Arab Human Development Report published in 2002. (Elsadda, forthcoming)

^{vi} <http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/?lab>AboutUs>

^{vii} A HEFCE report on Middle East Studies carried out in 2002 found that there was an alarming decline in university courses in Arabic and regional studies in UK universities, a state of affairs which had caught the security services off guard.

^{viii} <http://www.readersplace.co.uk/>

^{ix} In 2009 over 100 literary festivals were listed on the UK website: <http://www.literaryfestivals.co.uk>

^x The first winner was Baba Taher for his novel *Sunset Oasis*. Taher wins the 'Arabic Booker' *Al-Ahram* 13 - 19 March 2008, Issue No. 888

^{xi} <http://www.britishcouncil.org/new/about-us/>

^{xii} 'Propaganda?' by Nicholas J. Cull. <http://www.britishcouncil.org/history-why-propaganda.htm>

^{xiii} The Carter Report defines public diplomacy as 'work aiming to inform and engage individuals and organisations overseas, in order to improve understanding of and influence for the United Kingdom in a manner consistent with governmental medium and long term goals.' Indicating the wider remit of this work, the FCO response to the report welcomed the involvement of other government agencies in the new Public Diplomacy Board such as the Ministry of Defence and Dfid, as well as organisations representing trade and industry (UKTI), tourism (VisitBritain) and the private sector.

Third Report from the Foreign Affairs Committee, Session 2005–06, Public Diplomacy Response of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, p. 3.

http://www.fco.gov.uk/Files/kfile/FAC_Report_PublicDiplomacy06.pdf

^{xiv} www.britishcouncil.org/newarabicbooks

^{xv} <http://www.britishcouncil.org/arts-newarabicbooks-books.htm>

^{xvi} Personal conversation with Sue Wallace-Shaddad, deputy geographical director, British Council, 2.06.08.

^{xvii} See also schemes like Storybook Soldiers where parents who are deployed overseas make recordings to be given to their children in their absence. This was copied from a similar scheme operating in prisons, and has been replicated across the armed forces.

http://www2.army.mod.uk/dets_a/aecs/10_aec/storybook_soldiers/index.htm

^{xviii} The history of the independent charity, Booktrust, demonstrates how the foundations were laid for promoting reading as a public good. 'In 1921, Hugh Walpole, the successful author of *Rogue Herries*, gathered together at his Regent's Park home a number of notable people (publishers Stanley Unwin and Maurice Marston, author John Galsworthy and politician Harold Macmillan among them) to found the Society of Bookmen. □ The Society's aim was 'the advancement of literature by the cooperation of the various branches of the book trade'. At one of the Society's early meetings, it was proposed that a National Book Council should be formed; several years and many arguments later, the first meeting of the newly formed National Book Council took place in Eastbourne on 11 September 1924. □ □ An early editorial in an *NBC News Sheet* declared, "we all inculcate in our children a belief in the toothbrush; we can just as easily make them believe in books, which are toothbrushes of the mind". Today Booktrust is part of a consortium of organisations and educational initiatives that include the British Council and Bookstart. Among their current campaigns is a programme to translate more foreign fiction into English.

^{xix} 'Cultural Diplomacy: the Lynchpin of Public Diplomacy' Report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, U.S. Department of State, September 2005, p. 3.

^{xx} The previous Under Secretary Karen Hughes was also involved in this.

^{xxi} Mahfouz's work is already published in English, while the three US authors of also part of a list of 100 books to be translated into Arabic through the auspices of Kalima, a new translation initiative launched in Abu Dhabi on 21st November 2007. 'The rest of the world enjoys a wealth of domestic and translated difference, why should the Arabic world be any different?' said Karim Nagy, Chief Executive of Kalima. 'Today's announcement is great news for Arabic readers all over the world who want a greater variety of quality writing in their mother tongue – something which they have been deprived of for so long. We can now start putting Arabic readers back in touch with great works of world literature and academia and begin filling in the gaps in the Arabic library.'

^{xxii} National Endowment for the Arts: guidelines and application instructions. <http://www.neabigread.org/guidelines-egypt.php>

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