

The Laugh of the Snake Woman: Reclaiming the Female Body from the “Monstrous-Feminine” to *Écriture Féminine* in Raja Alem’s *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*

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Received: February 11, 2026

Accepted: June 11, 2026

Online Published: September 9, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v17n1p52

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v17n1p52>

Abstract

This article examines the figure of the snake woman in Raja Alem’s *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* (2002) through the lenses of feminist psychoanalytic theory and mythic reinterpretation. Drawing on Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Creed’s conception of the “monstrous-feminine”, and Cixous’s notion of *écriture féminine*, it investigates how the novel reimagines the hybrid female body through transforming monstrosity from a marker of exclusion into a source of feminine agency and self-representation. While antiquity frequently frames serpentine female figures, most notably Medusa, through a patriarchal gaze that equates feminine fluidity with monstrosity, the analysis shows the ways in which *Fatma* destabilizes such traditions. The heroine’s transformation into a snake woman becomes an ambivalent and multivalent site through which the meanings of the female body oscillate between monstrosity and beauty, and between abjection and power. The study demonstrates that the heroine’s serpentine transformation simultaneously draws on feminist reclamation of Medusa and on Arab serpent traditions associated with knowledge, renewal, and feminine power. It offers an original theorization of how contemporary Saudi fiction participates in and extends the global feminist reinterpretation of female mythic monstrosity with new insights into the politics of serpentine embodiment in Arab women’s writing.

Keywords: Medusa, monstrous-feminine, *écriture féminine*, abjection, Raja Alem, *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia*

1. Introduction

The Gorgon Medusa appears in Greco-Roman mythology as a terrifying creature, typically cast as a monstrous embodiment of female sexuality and retribution. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (2018), Medusa is depicted as having once been a beautiful woman, but after being raped by Poseidon in Athena’s temple, she is transformed into a monstrous figure with serpentine hair and a deadly gaze (Book 4, lines 770–803). The Gorgon’s monstrosity derives from the association between femininity and serpent symbolism, which highlights the danger and transgression of “snake women” (Giallongo, 2017, p. 6). This connection is further reinforced by the Judeo-Christian tradition through the tale of Adam and Eve, in which a serpent tempts Eve to eat fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, leading to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In this way, both serpents and Eve (and women by extension) are constructed as evil, regarded as sources of sin and temptation. This negative connotation, as well as the petrification induced by Medusa’s gaze, “sheds light on the meanings of male fears” (Giallongo, 2017, p. 5), contributing to the framing of Medusa as “the archetypal castrating female” (Gilbert, 1993, p. 30). Elements such as her “flowing hair, snakes, [and]...gaze” combine to constitute the “integral parts of stories featuring evil femininity” (Giallongo, 2017, p. 6). This triad of features evokes the image of the Medusa as a monstrous-feminine archetype and an emblem of threat.

Feminist critics have challenged the patriarchal representation of Medusa as a monstrous creature who is punished for being raped. In her seminal essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous (1976) evokes the mythical creature as a feminist symbol of power and subversion, declaring that Medusa is not fearful but “beautiful” and “laughing” (p. 885). The myth of Medusa thus becomes an allegory of transformation rather than mere punishment. While Cixous (1976) rejects the patriarchal identification of Medusa as fearful and deadly, suggesting that “you only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly” (p. 885), other feminist reinterpretations accept both aspects and view Medusa as encompassing oppositional meanings: She appears as “an ever-changing rhythm of creation and destruction” (Walker, 1983, p. 629), variously portrayed as a symbol of vitality and ruin. Her very gaze triggers polyvalent significations, oscillating from “welcoming” to “threatening,” “sad” to “seductive,” and “primitive and deranged to beautiful and cruel” (Giallongo, 2017, p. 8). She encompasses not only the dual motifs of “fascination and petrification” but also “the creative and (re)generative energies which have increasingly influenced her literary representation” (Gilbert, 1993, p. 30).

This article extends feminist reinterpretations of the Medusa myth to Arab women’s writing by examining the representation of the snake woman in Raja Alem’s *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* (2002) as a figure that challenges patriarchal constructions of femininity and female embodiment. Although the myth of Medusa originates in Greek mythology, Alem (2002) reworks the figure of the monstrous woman

within a Saudi cultural setting to address questions of gender, male dominance, and female subjectivity specific to contemporary Saudi society. Situated in Mecca, the novel revolves around the transformation of its eponymous heroine into a snake-like woman after being bitten by the deadliest serpent in her husband's collection, which he keeps for venom extraction. Fatma is initially portrayed as a lonely, simple girl whose female relatives are deceased, leaving her isolated in a world dominated by oppressive men. She undergoes a process of transformation after the snakebite, gradually enabling her to reclaim selfhood within the confines of her domestic world.

Despite growing scholarship on *Fatma*, little attention has been paid to the figure of the snake woman as a feminist reconfiguration of monstrosity and bodily resistance. The article, therefore, addresses the following research questions:

- How does the heroine's transformation reveal the ambivalent meanings associated with the figure of the snake woman?
- In what ways does Alem reinterpret the figure of the snake woman in relation to Medusa and the broader tradition of serpentine female figures?
- In what ways does the serpentine female embodiment challenge patriarchal constructions of femininity and female subjectivity?

This study contributes to scholarship on Arab women's writing by illustrating how Western feminist theories are reworked within a Saudi cultural context. Drawing on feminist psychoanalytic criticism—specifically, Creed's "monstrous-feminine," Kristeva's concept of abjection, and Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*—the study positions the heroine's transformation into a snake woman as ambivalent, encompassing contested meanings of the female body that fluctuate between abjection/monstrosity and beauty/power. It argues that the snake woman functions as a subversive feminine figure and shows how the female body is reconstructed to embody the ethics and aesthetics of enduring feminine power.

2. Literature Review

Existing scholarship on *Fatma* addresses a wide range of critical perspectives, including magical realism (Cooke, 2007; Asayesh, 2017), feminist resistance (Al-Sharqi, 2016; Alshehri, 2022), subalternity (Allogmany, 2025), and female sexuality (Zannoun, 2015). While these studies offer valuable insights into Alem's representation of gender and power, they have paid relatively little attention to the symbolic ambivalence of the heroine's transformation into a snake woman and the ways in which her serpentine embodiment negotiates competing meanings of monstrosity, abjection, and feminine self-representation.

The majority of studies have interpreted the heroine's transformation as a magical realist strategy through which Alem (2002) challenges patriarchal constraints. Asayesh (2017), Al-Sharqi (2016), and Alshehri (2022) contend that magical realism enables the heroine to challenge patriarchal structures and transcend social limitations. More specifically, Al-Sharqi (2016) interprets the snake woman as a figure of "heroic female agency" (p. 60), while Alshehri (2022) highlights the use of magical realism to elevate the female voice and create an alternative world for self-growth. Relatedly, Asayesh (2017) conceptualizes the genre as a literary tool that permits feminist resistance to patriarchal control, underscored by the heroine's ability to cross human, animal, and divine boundaries. Although these readings highlight how transformation facilitates female empowerment, they tend to overlook the extent to which Fatma's serpentine body is marked by ambiguity, excess and monstrosity.

Other studies move beyond magical realism to examine the novel's socio-political dimensions. Allogmany (2025) frames the heroine as an example of "gendered subalternity" whose bodily change disrupts the temporal logic of petro-capitalist modernity. This reading situates the novel within debates surrounding power and marginality, yet its primary focus remains political rather than symbolic. Consequently, it leaves the cultural meanings behind serpentine femininity largely unexplored.

Fatma's transformation has also been examined through the lenses of healing, regeneration and feminine vitality. Zannoun (2015), for instance, explores the liberatory and erotic aspects of the heroine's physical change and describes it as a "journey of healing" (p. 46), whereas Al-Sudairy (2013) contends that in ancient Arabian and Near Eastern traditions, women and serpents embodied the essence of life and immortality. Despite the significance of Al-Sudairy's reading in situating the novel within a broader cultural history of feminine spiritual authority, it pays limited attention to the relationship between regional serpent symbolism and contemporary feminist reinterpretations of female monstrosity. To address this gap, the present study argues that Alem's depiction of the snake woman extends beyond motifs of liberation and cultural memory. Rather, this hybrid figure is reimagined as a complex manifestation of feminine power that challenges patriarchal constructions of the female body. Furthermore, the analysis complicates existing readings of Fatma's transformation by integrating both Arab mythological traditions and feminist reinterpretations of monstrous femininity.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

To effectively examine how *Fatma* reimagines the complex symbolism of the snake woman as a figure that simultaneously evokes beauty and horror, empowerment and abjection, the analysis draws on Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, Barbara Creed's concept of the monstrous-feminine, and Hélène Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine*. Kristeva (1982) defines the abject as that which "disturbs identity, systems, order...the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (p. 4). Abjection marks the border between self and other and confronts the subject with what must be expelled to maintain social order. The subject has predominantly been associated with the fluid, childbearing maternal body, which becomes the site of separation and exclusion. Creed (1993), drawing on Kristeva's theory of abjection, analyzes representations of women in horror films, in which they appear not only as victims but also as sources of fear. She expands on

the conception of abjection to encompass the monstrous-feminine, a figure intertwined with female sexuality and reproductive capacity who becomes a threat at the limit of the symbolic. Creed (1993) notes that “the function of the monstrous remains the same—to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability” (p. 11). She further refers to the *femme castratrice*, a monstrous-feminine figure who retaliates against male sexual violence (p. 132), thus challenging patriarchal construction and turning abjection into a form of power.

While the monstrous-feminine is marked by exclusion and rejection, *écriture féminine* celebrates the corporeal aspects of the female body and embraces those deemed abject by patriarchal logic. Cixous (1976) advocates for *écriture féminine* and calls upon women to reclaim language and authorship, insisting that “woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing” (p. 875). According to Cixous, the act of writing is directly linked to the physical female body; this is why women must “return to the body” (p. 880). She argues that *écriture féminine* is an “antilogos weapon” deeply connected to the female body in terms of writing through senses, movement, and rhythm rather than through the male’s rigid and logical structures (pp. 880–81). Such a feminine-centered language aims to deconstruct the phallogocentric symbolic order and generate new ways of thinking, writing, and experiencing.

Considered together, these critical perspectives offer a framework for understanding the snake woman as an emblem that subverts patriarchal definitions of femininity by affirming fluidity, liminality, and sensuality. Cixous’s call “to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable” (p. 875) captures the essence of this endeavor by exposing and subverting patriarchal thinking on the one hand and foregrounding a feminine way of representing women’s experiences on the other.

3.2 Methodology

This article employs a close reading of Raja Alem’s narrative *Fatma: A Novel of Arabia* (2002), informed by feminist psychoanalytic theory and feminist reinterpretation of monstrosity. The theoretical perspectives of Kristeva (1982), Creed (1993) and Cixous (1976) offer complementary ways of examining the intersecting dynamics of female monstrosity, bodily transgression, and feminine self-representation, all of which are central to Alem’s portrayal of the snake woman. Given that *Fatma* is rich in magical realist elements, corporeal imagery, complex symbolism, and mythic allusions, close reading serves as the most effective analytical tool for this study. This method allows for sustained engagement with the narrative’s structure, recurrent motifs, and linguistic nuances and offers the precise critical tools needed to interpret the symbolic representation of the hybrid female body. In the analysis, particular attention is given to scenes of sexual violence and female transgression, key stages of the heroine’s metamorphosis into a snake woman, and moments of shifting power relations. Focusing on these themes ensures that the textual analysis remains anchored in the novel’s most ideologically charged moments.

The analysis is informed by the combined application of the three theoretical perspectives. Kristeva’s (1982) concept of abjection is used to examine instances of bodily ambiguity and boundary transgression; Creed’s (1993) framework is employed to analyze representations of female monstrosity and male anxiety; and Cixous’s (1976) notion of *écriture féminine* shapes the reading of embodiment, creativity and feminine self-expression. This theoretical synthesis reveals the ways in which Alem reimagines the snake woman as a complex figure whose representation disrupts patriarchal constructions of femininity and reconfigures the female body as a site of contestation, ambiguity and power.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Crossing Thresholds: Sexual Violence and Female Transgression

The heroine’s transformation cannot be fully understood through the lenses of abjection, monstrosity, and *écriture féminine* without first considering the social and corporeal realities that underlie it. Alem (2002) foregrounds Fatma’s transformation not as an isolated supernatural event but as a response to sustained experiences of isolation, male domination and sexual violence. These social conditions dictate how her physical change unfolds, particularly how the female body is initially constructed as a site of oppression before becoming a site of resistance, thereby underpinning the emergence of the snake woman as a figure of contested meanings.

The novel situates the heroine within a network of patriarchal constraints. Her experience with both her father and her husband reveals how female subjectivity is marginalized within male-dominated structures. We are told that “her soul...had been ruined by her father’s detachment and her husband’s cruelty” (Alem, 2002, p. 83). Fatma’s father appears briefly in the course of the narrative: “when her father died, she’d counted the times she’d seen him over the past twenty years. Three: the day she got married, the day he first got sick, and the day of his funeral” (Alem, 2002, p. 3). The father’s near absence constructs abandonment as one of the formative conditions of Fatma’s subjectivity. Rather than framing the father as a source of protection, he appears as a character whose very presence is defined by emotional neglect, contributing to Fatma’s vulnerability and isolation.

The narrative also reveals how female oppression is intensified by male aggression. Fatma’s marriage to Sajir is arranged suddenly by her father. Although she is taken by surprise, she embraces the idea of an abrupt change— “she liked the idea of sudden, drastic change” (Alem, 2002, p. 10)—possibly in hopes of a transition from her previously meaningless life with her father. Only a few pages later, this aspiration is quickly shattered by her husband’s sexual assaults: “he plunged brutally into her, battering the gate of her soul, breaking it open, smashing her tenderness and wrecking the path that led to the face she’d wanted to show him, her true, hidden face” (Alem, 2002, p. 14). The imagery of sexual violence transcends physical aggression to gesture towards the erasure of female subjectivity. The assault is depicted not only as an attack on Fatma’s body but also as an attempt to suppress her “hidden face” through which she seeks

self-expression and recognition. The cyclical nature of sexual violence is also underscored: “so the rules were set. Sajir would go on forcing himself on his bride, breaking her, burying her wildflowers under scars and heaps of rage. She could not understand where his rage came from” (Alem, 2002, p. 14). The phrase “would go on forcing himself on his bride” signals the relentless practice of masculine power, with Fatma trapped in a pattern of unending subjugation. More broadly, “the rules were set” transforms individual violence into a critique of patriarchal power, where sexual assault is portrayed as part of a social structure that normalizes male dominance and female submission within domestic spheres. Although Alem (2002) does not frame sexual violence as directly triggering Fatma’s transformation into a snake woman, it is rather one of the many factors that intensify her oppression alongside her isolation and domestic confinement. Sajir inflicts irreversible damage on Fatma, both physically and psychologically; he turns marriage into a site of suffering rather than a sanctuary. This also shatters the illusion of a “realist” escape from gender oppression that the heroine had hoped for before her marriage, leaving only the possibility of reclaiming her hidden self through magical transformation. As the narrative progresses toward the pivotal snakebite, Fatma endures many forms of oppression, making her transformation not just a reaction but a catalyst for emancipation. Rather than functioning as a simple escape from oppression, transformation emerges as an alternative mode of existence through which she renegotiates her relationship to her body and to the patriarchal structures that seek to regulate it.

The transformation of Fatma into a snake woman is initiated by an act of female transgression. Driven by curiosity, she defies her husband’s command “not to go into the east room” (Alem, 2002, p. 15) and enters the forbidden room. There, she discovers a hidden farm where Sajir keeps a large collection of snakes to harvest their venom for medical purposes. On the seventh night after her trespass, Fatma is bitten by one of the deadliest snakes: “a Great Horned Black escaped from its cage and slithered into bed beside her” (Alem, 2002, p. 19). Within the patriarchal code, the snakebite can be read as a punitive response to the heroine’s transgression. However, Alem (2002) redefines it as a tool that disrupts male control over female agency. By crossing the boundary of the forbidden room—a metaphor for male power and restricted knowledge—Fatma directly challenges male authority. This act of defiance not only manifests in her physical transformation into a snake-like woman but also marks her spiritual evolution as she gains access to knowledge once reserved for men: “the first time Fatma entered the forbidden room, she had been blinded by the sheer force of life” (Alem, 2002, p. 18). In the biblical story of Eve and the serpent, serpent symbolism is associated with hidden knowledge. Like Eve, Fatma crosses a boundary in an act of defiance against male/divine authority, leading to a violent disruption of the patriarchal order. Fatma’s subsequent transformation is not framed as punishment for her disobedience; rather, it constitutes a transgression that undermines male authority.

Fatma’s experience of isolation, sexual violence, and male control prepares the ground for her serpentine transformation and shows the progression from oppression and transgression to monstrosity and finally to feminine self-representation. The transformed body—discussed in the following section—should thus be understood as a symbolic response to the social and bodily constraints imposed upon the heroine.

4.2 Abjection, the Monstrous-Feminine, and Femme Castratrice

Alem (2002) repositions the female body from a site of oppression and vulnerability to a source of ambiguity, fear, and power. This situates the heroine within the realm of monstrosity and places her in a liminal space that destabilizes the boundaries upholding patriarchal structures. Fatma is thus rendered as threatening and disruptive in the eyes of patriarchy. According to Creed (1993), “the monstrous-feminine is constructed as an abject figure because she threatens the symbolic order” (p. 83). In this framework, abjection and monstrosity operate together; Fatma becomes monstrous precisely because her hybrid body resists the categories traditionally used to define gender, sexuality, and bodily integrity. At the same time, Alem’s representation of Fatma’s transformation complicates these theories by showing that monstrosity can turn into a source of female agency.

The heroine represents the monstrous-feminine, underscored by her liminality and hybridity, casting her as abject. She also embodies the *femme castratrice* in her retaliation against male sexual violence. This feminine serpentine embodiment exposes patriarchal fears and confronts the structures that seek to define and control femininity. As a border-crossing being, the heroine constitutes a threat to the stability of the symbolic order. Creed (1993) maintains that “the monstrous is produced at the border” and resides “between human and inhuman...the normal and the supernatural, good and evil” (132). It is through the snake woman’s liminality and in-betweenness that distinctions become blurred and “meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2).

After the snakebite, Fatma is depicted in a state of oblivion: Both the husband and the father “were unable to tell whether she was dead or alive” (Alem, 2002, p. 20). Her male relatives believe she must die to avoid any problems her survival might bring about: “the bride must die, otherwise she would turn into a freak, a changeling whose very existence would constitute an affront to nature” (Alem, 2002, p. 21). The association of the female body with the serpent realm renders it monstrous, unworthy of being recognized as human. Upon seeing Fatma’s body, her father notes that “*she has been cast beyond the pale, she is no longer a creature worthy of human consideration, she is evil-evil forever and ever*” (p. 23; emphasis original). The image of her body lying flat and the men’s anticipation of her death is the very meaning of abjection in Kristeva’s (1982) conception: “the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost abjection” (p. 4). This constitutes more than a violation of the boundaries between subject and object, or self and other; it creates a third state between life and death, “where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2). Fatma’s liminal state echoes the Islamic concept of *barzaqh*, which refers to “a third state that separates and then brings together the worlds of the living and the dead” (Cooke, 2007, p. 19). Fatma exemplifies the abject in that she exists “on the margins of places, between places” (Cooke, 2007, p. 19). In the liminal space of *barzaqh*, the female body enters a new realm—that of animality—and collapses the boundaries between the living/dead, and between the human/animal. While Kristeva’s abjection functions mainly as a mechanism of exclusion that threatens symbolic order, Alem (2002)

transfers abjection into a site of possibility rather than rejection. The liminal condition of Fatma can thus be understood through the notion of *barzaqh*, which simultaneously separates and connects opposing categories. Being a snake woman does not entirely place the heroine outside the symbolic order but enables her to occupy a space between human/nonhuman, woman/serpent, and monstrosity/power.

The heroine's liminal existence between beauty and monstrosity is emphasized, challenging the desire/dread opposition of the hybrid female body. The narrative exposes the monstrous-feminine as a symptom of male anxiety and the fear of losing power and control. Fatma's physical transformation, marked by the emergence of a striking blue line running from her chin down to the bottom of her belly, provokes fear and revulsion in her husband: "Sajir was disgusted by her snakey body and the snake-signs running like a dark blue river down from her chin to her nameless nowhere" (Alem, 2002, p. 119). His revulsion arises not only from her serpentine appearance but also from the symbolic implications of the mark itself, which serves as an enigmatic signifier that resists interpretation and control. In other words, her body becomes unknowable, unreadable, and uncontrollable. The very look of Fatma's mysterious physique defies the traditional male perception of the female body as pure and unmarked. In addition, Fatma's transformation has a perplexing effect on her husband, as he is simultaneously repulsed and attracted: "he was intimidated by her newly enhanced powers...but in a strange way he wanted her" (Alem, 2002, p. 132). This statement reveals how the heroine's transformed body occupies an ambivalent position that resists stable categorization. She is neither completely monstrous nor completely desirable; her power derives from this instability. This ambivalence exposes the inadequacy of patriarchal binary thinking, which seeks to divide women into fixed categories such as beautiful/monstrous, pure/impure, or desirable/dangerous. The ambiguity of the snake woman, therefore, subverts systems of classification that rely on fixed definitions of femininity.

The ambivalence of Fatma's body brings the argument back to the feminist repositioning of Medusa as embodying both beauty and terror (Gilbert, 1993; Giallongo, 2017). Like Medusa, Fatma's body becomes a paradoxical force, a source of temptation and destruction. Sajir furiously tells his wife, "You're poison...one scratch from you could drop a camel" (Alem, 2002, p. 28). This declaration frames Fatma as destructive in the eyes of her husband in that the smallest act can be deadly, hinting at male anxiety in the face of growing female power and the possibility of losing control. This male anxiety, in response to the female's rising power, manifests in the heroine's embodiment of a *femme castratrice*, in which the female body exhibits signs of retaliation against male sexual violence (Creed, 1993, p. 132).

Fatma's transformation into a snake woman reaches its peak in the chapter "The Revolution" (Alem, 2002, p. 142), in which her body becomes a site of vengeance. Here, the cycle of sexual assault is disrupted by Fatma's bodily rejection of intercourse, which culminates in Sajir's symbolic castration. In this sense, Fatma embodies "the all-powerful, all-destructive...*femme castratrice*" (Creed, 1993, p. 129), as the narrative reveals:

Fatma's body *made a decision on its own*: her muscles convulsed, becoming hard as emerald, and gripped his sword. He drew back in shock, but was unable to pull out. The Nurse's soft feminine sinews *had taken control*, ignoring Sajir's curses and threats, and Fatma's own surprise. *She was as helpless as he was.* (Alem, 2002, p. 142; emphasis added)

Sajir's symbolic castration can be read as an act to disrupt the phallic symbolic order and reclaim control over the female body. It is not just an act of physical destruction but also a figurative reversal of power; the same body that was once dominated and violated now exacts vengeance, severing the male's ability to continue the sexual violence. This imagery resonates powerfully with Cixous's (1976) call to "break up, to destroy" the symbolic structure of phallogocentric discourse (p. 875). Moreover, the suggestion that "Fatma's body made a decision on its own" and that "she was as helpless as he was" implies an instinctive reaction, as her feminine body has now attained the power to operate on its own terms. This involuntary act of retribution functions as a form of writing, making her body a site of authorship where the female physique becomes a text of rebellion. The symbolic castration signifies the end of male control and dominance, rendering the male powerless in the face of the new female force. Cixous (1976) describes femininity as a force of renewal that "breaks away from the old...more precisely, the (feminine) new from the old" (p. 875). The rise of the powerful snake woman marks a break from the patriarchal structure that previously confined the heroine, allowing a new feminine subjectivity to emerge. The new female arises when the hierarchical binary of superior male/inferior female is symbolically subverted. It is then that Fatma "took charge of the keys to her own cell" (Alem, 2002, p. 26). This statement demonstrates a power dynamic at play: now, she is in control and no longer a passive object of desire. The heroine is thus reconfigured as an active rather than passive figure by becoming a *femme castratrice*.

While Creed's (1993) archetypes of the monstrous-feminine and the *femme castratrice* shed light on patriarchal fear produced by the serpentine female body, Fatma diverges from these figures in that her monstrosity is associated with self-definition rather than with destruction alone. Consequently, the heroine's transformation does not conclude with the reversal of power. In addition to the capacity of the female hybrid body to disrupt patriarchal structures, Alem (2002) foregrounds new ways of feminine embodiment and self-expression that enable the heroine to articulate an alternative feminine subjectivity. The focus in the next section, therefore, shifts from the body as an object of fear to the body as a site of creativity, sensuality, and self-inscription.

4.3 Poetics of *Écriture Féminine* and Reclaiming the Female Body

After being perceived as a figure of monstrosity in patriarchal logic, the heroine's transformed body becomes a site of feminine self-representation. Cixous's notion of *écriture féminine* provides an essential framework to understand the process of writing through the body. Nevertheless, the analysis demonstrates that Alem's (2002) representation of female embodiment extends this notion by locating expression not only in language but also in movement, sensation, and corporeal transformation.

By shifting the narrative from death and decay to rebirth and renewal, Alem (2002) establishes a connection between Fatma and the

“creative and (re)generative energies” (Gilbert, 1993, p. 30) of the feminine serpentine representation. The belief in serpents’ renewal can be traced to the ancient idea that “snakes do not die of old age like other animals, but periodically shed their skin and emerge renewed or reborn into another life” (Walker, 1983, p. 903). Upon Fatma’s return to life, the transformed female body, which was marked as abject and monstrous, undergoes a form of regeneration in which she reappears to be “no longer a girl but a seductive woman overflowing with life, there was an unmistakable erotic twinkle in her eyes” (Alem, 2002, p. 23). This imagery evokes *écriture féminine* through its celebration of vitality and sensuality, reflecting on the rhythmic, excessive, and regenerative writing of the female body (Cixous, 1976, pp. 880–81). In a clear rejection of the patriarchal mark of abjection, the female body is reimagined as an erotic awakening. The “twinkle in her eyes” registers as a playful inscription of the body in which the erotic becomes a source of power in representing the feminine experience. Before this moment is even reached, the snakebite is initially described as an ecstatic experience in that pain is combined with sexual pleasure; as the narrator states, “she was delirious with pleasure when she felt its bite” (Alem, 2002, p. 19). When the husband notices this eroticism, he declares, “she was the most dangerous kind of snake, a woman-snake, and she was about to rise from her coils and strangle him” (Alem, 2002, p. 23). Together, the association with animalism and the rise in eroticism signal the heroine’s progression to a more powerful and sensual figure.

As the narrative develops, Alem (2002) draws considerable attention to women’s corporeal experiences, which appear to be associated with the poetic, creative, and liberating style of *écriture féminine*. This is clearly indicated in the title of chapter eight, “Her Body Rebels” (Alem, 2002, p. 90), which explicitly frames her bodily transformation as an act of rebellion. Significantly, the rebellion originates in the body itself rather than in external political action. By placing resistance within the embodied experience, Alem (2002) echoes Cixous’s assertion that women should reclaim the body as a source of expression and creativity (Cixous, 1976, p. 880). The narrative also follows what can be called “a serpentine structure” in its nonlinearity and fragmentation (Allogmany, 2025, p. 7), twisting and turning unpredictably, much like a snake. All of these elements reflect the ambiguity and hybridity of the snake woman figure and open new possibilities for writing the female body.

Alem (2002) extends Cixous’s (1976) call for women to write through the body by transforming the body itself into a mode of expression. The narrator’s detailed description of Fatma’s sensory awakening, as she gradually transforms into a snake woman, amplifies the vitality and fluidity of both the female body and language:

Fatma’s body began to change. She was able now to detect the heat of any approaching body. The dimmer the light happened to be, the more sensitive she was. She would sit still and let her senses locate every object in the house, itemizing them one by one, until finally she reached a state in which her body was able to pass through walls and travel some distance to locate things moving outside. (Alem, 2002, p. 35)

In this passage, Alem (2002) elevates sensory perception above rational knowledge. The heroine’s ability to “detect” humans and “locate” and “itemize” objects is intensified by the supernatural capacity “to pass through walls”. She seems to be shedding her human limitations—much like a snake shedding its skin—and embracing an existence beyond human perception. This description aligns the serpentine female body with the fluid and embodied modes of expression associated with *écriture féminine*. Through this process of transformation, Fatma’s body no longer exists as a passive object but as an active force; it is no longer an object to be observed but a source of knowledge and agency. The ability to pass through walls, for instance, suggests an escape from physical confinement and grants Fatma the freedom to move “outside” on her own terms. In doing so, she steps into a new reality that transcends societal constraints and redefines the boundaries of her existence.

The narrative also illustrates other instances of how female self-inscription connects language to the body itself. Alem (2002) portrays the heroine’s transformation as a form of embodied writing in which scent and physical change function as alternative means of expressing female subjectivity. As Fatma’s transformation gradually intensified, her musky scent began to saturate the entire space:

The scent of musk was soaking into the walls, into every crevice, wiping out the stench of amber, assimilating its power. The musk was coming from Fatma; her body was saturated with it. From that night on, wherever she moved, the scent of musk was all around her. She was possessed by its perfume; her very flesh seemed a distillation of its mist. (Alem, 2002, p. 25)

With the musky scent steeping into “walls” and “crevices,” it functions as if her body is marking every corner of the house and taking possession of it. This imagery transmits the fluidity and intrusion of Fatma’s transformed body; she has ceased to be confined to her human form and is expanding beyond it, merging with space itself. Alem’s (2002) use of olfactory language intensifies the uncanny nature of the heroine’s transformation, in that she is not seen or felt but sensed in a primal and inescapable way. Furthermore, the connection between musk and the animal realm—as well as the way she sounds like a “mixture of wind and the slithering of snakes” (p. 92)—aligns Fatma with the unhuman realm as she gradually transforms into a snake woman. These sensory details about Fatma’s corporeal transformation convey a sense of feminine expression that exceeds social and symbolic constraints, thereby challenging patriarchal logic and underscoring the feminist attempt to deconstruct the phallogocentric system.

4.4 Reimagining Female Monstrosity in an Arab/Saudi Context

The preceding analysis has demonstrated that the heroine’s transformation represents complex and contested meanings of female embodiment, moving from abjection and monstrosity to self-inscription and subjectivity. In this context, it is essential to consider how female monstrosity is reimagined in an Arab and Saudi cultural context. Medusa remains one of the most influential figures in feminist debates of femininity, monstrosity, and power. A close comparison between Medusa and Fatma reveals striking similarities, particularly

regarding bodily transformation and reclamation. In both narratives, sexual violence functions as a defining moment in their transformation, leading them to embody serpent-like figures of power and terror. Medusa's transformation makes her body lethal; her gaze can turn men to stone. Fatma's transformation follows a similar trajectory as her body turns into a weapon of destruction. Fatma and Medusa, therefore, embody "the all-powerful, all-destructive...*femme castratrice*" (Creed, 1993, p. 129). Both figures expose the ways in which patriarchy constructs hybrid female bodies as disruptive and dangerous. Despite this similarity, Alem (2002) does not simply reproduce the myth of Medusa. Rather than framing monstrosity as a warning against female transgression, the transformation of Fatma becomes a means of negotiating female subjectivity and subverting patriarchal constraints. Fatma does not remain a silent object of fear but acquires agency through bodily change and serpent symbolism. This transition from oppression to self-expression marks a departure from traditional male representations of female monstrosity, aligning the snake woman with contemporary feminist efforts to reclaim figures historically associated with female otherness.

Even though feminist reinterpretations of Medusa have advanced Medusa's image as an example of female resistance, the symbolic connection with the serpent goes beyond Greco-Roman mythology. Walker notes that Medusa was not always represented as monstrous but was once a "serpent-goddess...representing female-wisdom" (1983, p. 629). In Arabic and regional literature, the serpent emerges in association with wisdom, cosmic power and metamorphosis, as in the tale *Hāsib Karīm al-Dīn and the Queen of Serpents* from *The Thousand and One Nights* (Jarrar, 2018, p. 188). This snake queen, and other similar figures, appear as enchanted serpents that populate narratives as guardians of hidden knowledge, ambiguous desire, or spiritual transformation. The figure of the snake woman in *Fatma* participates in this broader tradition of serpentine femininity in which femininity is associated with renewal, knowledge, and spiritual power. Consequently, Fatma's transformation cannot be fully understood from a Western perspective of female monstrosity. It reflects patriarchal anxieties surrounding the female body while simultaneously drawing upon regional traditions that regard the serpent as a positive and sacred symbol.

This alternative symbolic framework is especially significant within Arab cultural contexts. Al-Sudairy argues that in Arabian traditions, "both serpents and women were viewed as sacred symbols of life" (2013, p. 57), suggesting a historical connection between women and serpents. There is also a linguistic connection that is equally significant. Al-Sudairy (2013) observes that "the female serpent is called *Raqsha*," in Arabic, a word whose embellishing meanings call forth beauty, not ugliness, of the serpent (p. 55). Moreover, the Arabic words *Hawa* (Eve/woman), *hayat* (life), and *hayya* (serpent) share the same etymological root, underscoring their sacred alliance in contrast to the negative trio of woman-serpent-devil. These associations challenge religious and patriarchal traditions that construe both women and serpents as embodiments of temptation and danger. Rather, they point to a more ancient symbolic framework of life and renewal that connects women and serpents to fertility and the cycle of life.

In addition, Arab cultural traditions connect serpents with the unseen and the domestic realm. Alaki (2026) examines serpent imagery in Arabic literature, arguing that snakes frequently appear as *jinn* or "demons in disguise," particularly as *al-Qareen*, "one's spiritual double" (p. 559). She adds that the serpent serves as a symbol of concealed identities and desires, as well as of feminine awakening (p. 559). Alaki (2026) also proposes that serpents represent the in-between, positioned at the juncture of the seen and the unseen, of the known and the unknown (p. 559). This ambiguity is especially relevant to Fatma's transformation. Similar to the spiritual double, the snake woman expresses parts of the self that are silenced or made to lie dormant by patriarchal systems. Beyond Fatma's physical change, her spiritual transformation signifies the emergence of an alternative identity, or hidden self, that had formerly been suppressed.

Alem synthesizes the disparate symbol systems and reimagines the snake woman as a source of feminine power rather than a figure of fear. As Zannoun notes, the novel "rewrites the snake as the source of healing and transformation" (p. 47), thereby reclaiming the negative symbol of dangerous, excessive, and transgressive femininity. Rather than representing female monstrosity as a means of punishment or moral failure, it becomes a means of resisting structures that seek to confine and control the female body.

The novel ultimately places Fatma on a longer historical continuum of female power. Al-Sudairy (2013) asserts that Fatma "embodies her female ancestors; she is Innana, Ishtar, and the Arabic pre-Islamic goddess, Allat" (p. 57). This interpretation indicates that the heroine's transformation exceeds personal determination; it serves to restore suppressed feminine histories. This is evident in the heroine's representation as a queen of serpents who possesses both beauty and power, as the narrative states: "bit by bit, everything in the small world of Fatma's house became hers. She came to reign over a kaleidoscopic kingdom of poisons, danger, and surpassing, deathless beauty" (Alem, 2002, p. 28). As a queen of serpents, Fatma is connected to figures of female power and authority who predate patriarchal and religious narratives. The serpent woman thus appears not simply as a reclaimed Medusa; she is a Saudi Arabian and Arab reconceptualization of feminine power that combines local cultural traditions and contemporary feminist rethinking of female monstrosity.

5. Conclusion

Through its exploration of feminine serpentine embodiment, the study set out to demonstrate how the hybrid female body occupies an ambivalent position of subversion and progression, functioning as a disruptive means of conveying transformative potential. While the fluidity, liminality, and sensuality of the heroine's body in *Fatma* cast her as monstrous and abject in the eyes of patriarchal logic, these very means turn her body into a site of vitality, beauty, and power, comprising an expressive way of writing about female experience. The fluid, transcendent, and disruptive description of the hybrid female body aligns with the idea of *écriture féminine* in the way the female body writes itself to interrogate and destabilize the patriarchal order.

Bringing the theories of abjection, the monstrous-feminine and *écriture féminine* into conversation underscores the need to read feminine embodiment as a complex, interconnected process rather than as isolated or discrete categories. The representation of the snake woman also unsettles the assumption that monstrosity and empowerment are inherently contradictory. The novel illustrates that what has traditionally been marked as deviant and dangerous is reworked as a site of feminine self-representation and cultural reimagination.

By reading the figure of the snake woman in *Fatma* within transnational feminist theories and Arab cultural and symbolic traditions, the study contributes to discussions of myth revision and Arab women's writing. Rather than functioning as a simple adaptation of Medusa, *Fatma* draws on Arab and regional understandings of the serpent as a symbol of renewal and spiritual authority. This underscores the need to interpret Arab women's writing through its own symbolic traditions while remaining engaged with wider feminist debates.

Acknowledgments

The author extends her appreciation to Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia for funding this research work through grant number: 26UQU4350373GSSR01

Authors' contributions

Not applicable

Funding

This research work was funded by Umm Al-Qura University, Saudi Arabia under grant number: 26UQU4350373GSSR01

Competing interests

The author declares no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Not applicable

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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