

Constructing Female Agency in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*: A Digital Humanities and Feminist Analysis

Maha S. Alanazi¹, Mohamed Fathi Helaly²

¹ Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, College of Sciences and Humanities, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia

² Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, College of Sciences and Humanities, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Maha S. Alanazi, Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, College of Sciences and Humanities, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Al-Kharj, Saudi Arabia.

Received: March 30, 2026

Accepted: June 19, 2026

Online Published: October 23, 2026

doi:10.5430/wjel.v17n1p368

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v17n1p368>

Abstract

This study examines how Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* constructs female agency through digital narrative form. It investigates how the novel's formal lexical architecture, rather than thematic content alone, generates a feminist argument about mediated communication, patriarchal discipline, and women's self-assertion in the Saudi context. Methodologically, the study adopts an interdisciplinary qualitative approach that integrates Digital Humanities with feminist literary criticism. The English translation of the novel was analyzed as a single corpus of 82,616 words using Voyant Tools. Attention was given to the distribution of the six terms: *love*, *mail*, *phone*, *marriage*, *shame*, and *freedom*. The study findings reveal three important patterns. First, *love*, the most frequent term in the corpus, is concentrated late in the narrative: Segments 9 and 10 hold 44% of its occurrences, which indicates delayed rather than absent affective fulfillment. Second, the shifting balance between *mail* and *phone*, with *phone* overtaking *mail* in the second half of the narrative, uncovers a shift in the mode of female digital agency. Third, *shame*, present at a low level throughout the first six segments, clusters in Segment 7, which suggests that patriarchal moral discipline, though constant, intensifies at moments of social rupture. The study concludes that the novel's digital form is constitutive of its feminist logic and offers a replicable model for future corpus-based research on Saudi women's fiction.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, *Girls of Riyadh*, feminism, female agency, Saudi fiction, Rajaa Alsanea, Saudi Vision 2030

1. Introduction

Saudi Arabia has experienced a significant transformation in the past decade as part of Vision 2030. Women's mobility, employment, legal rights, and participation in public life have enriched not only the lives of women but also the social discussion of gender, citizenship, and visibility in the Kingdom (Alessa et al., 2022; Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023; Rizvi & Hussain, 2021; Sholihah et al., 2023). As a contemporary Saudi literary text, Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* is unique. The novel, published in 2007, tells the story of four Saudi women from the upper class living in an environment of marriage, divorce, friendship, class, and social status, and in the context of gender inequality. The novel's significance is not just in its content but also in its form. It uses an email-based epistolary structure to organize female experience through a digitally mediated narrative style that highlights communication, intimacy, and public visibility.

From the perspective of English literary studies, *Girls of Riyadh* demands attention not simply as a social text about women under patriarchal constraint, but as a formally self-conscious narrative in which medium and meaning are inseparable. Its digital architecture shapes how female subjectivity becomes speakable, shareable, and socially legible. The novel's literary force, therefore, cannot be reduced to thematic representation alone; it must also be examined through the formal structures by which its feminist argument is produced. This is precisely where an important critical problem emerges. Although the novel has attracted sustained scholarly attention because of its treatment of female agency, desire, and social change, the relationship between its digital form and its feminist meaning remains underexamined.

To address this critical limitation, the present study adopts an integrated theoretical framework that brings Digital Humanities (DH) into direct conversation with feminist literary criticism. The rationale for this combination is both conceptual and analytical. DH clarifies how formal textual structures produce patterned meaning across the novel as a whole, whereas feminist literary criticism explains how those structures become legible within a gendered field of power. Neither framework is sufficient on its own. Computational evidence without interpretive grounding remains descriptively limited, while close reading without formal evidence cannot adequately demonstrate how narrative patterning sustains the representation of agency, discipline, and mediated selfhood.

More specifically, the study aims to examine how the novel's digital narrative form constructs female agency, identify its central lexical and thematic patterns through Digital Humanities tools, interpret the four protagonists as differentiated models of negotiation and self-assertion within patriarchal conditions, and assess how the novel may be read in relation to later discourses of women's

empowerment in Saudi Arabia without collapsing literary anticipation into retrospective resemblance or ideological alignment with Saudi Vision 2030.

This study is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the literature review of the study, in which detailed discussions on socio-cultural and gender readings of *Girls of Riyadh*, cyberfeminism and digital readings of the novel, Vision 2030 and women's empowerment studies, and digital humanities and feminist literary criticism are provided. Section 3 offers the methodology of the study, in which a mixed digital-literary method that integrates Digital Humanities methodology through a corpus-assisted interpretive analysis with feminist literary criticism is used to examine how Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* constructs female agency through digital narrative form. Section 4 presents the analysis and discussion, comprising a corpus overview and character-based subsections on Gamrah, Michelle, Sadeem, and Lamees, followed by a discussion that relates these results to the scholarship reviewed in Section 2. Section 5 concludes the study by summarizing the key findings, reflecting on the novel's formal feminist logic, and outlining the implications of the study for future corpus-based research on Saudi women's fiction.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Socio-cultural and Gender Readings of *Girls of Riyadh*

Existing scholarship on *Girls of Riyadh* may be grouped into three broad strands. The first approaches the novel as a representation of Saudi women's lived experience within a patriarchal social order. Several studies in this strand focus on the novel's critique of social practices that affect women's lives, such as marriage, tribal honor codes, class expectations, and gender inequality. Al-Wadhaf (2025) reads the novel as a representation of Saudi Arabia's "velvet class" and the aspiration, frustration, and emotional burdens of young women during a period of social change. Based on Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the Other, Giti and Mohajeri (2020) argue that the novel shows how women are subordinate to men in their society. Shihada (2013) also points out the hypocrisy of tribal honor codes in relation to divorce and female sexuality. From an Islamic feminist perspective, Bendouma and Kerboua (2023) argue that Alsanea takes on religious and feminist ideas in order to critique patriarchal practices while at the same time remaining connected to local culture and religious values. Collectively, these studies are valuable in clarifying what the novel says about gendered life. Their limitation, however, is shared: they privilege thematic interpretation over formal explanation. The novel's social critique is persuasively identified, yet the textual mechanisms through which that critique is structured remain comparatively underanalyzed.

2.2 Cyberfeminism and Digital Readings of *Girls of Riyadh*

The second strand is more closely aligned with this study because it highlights the novel's cyberfeminist and digital features. Abdullah and Rasheed (2024), Hurley (2021), Khamis (2022), Al-Natour (2024), and Alanazi et al. (2026) all recognize that digitality is central to the novel's cultural force and that mediated visibility contributes to the articulation of female dissatisfaction, circulation, and resistance. Compared with the first strand, this body of work moves beyond social content and acknowledges that form matters. Even so, its critical advance remains partial. Digitality is usually treated as a thematic context rather than as a formal narrative system. Email circulation, serialized address, mediated narration, and the implied online readership are acknowledged as meaningful features, but they are not examined as structuring principles through which the novel organizes affect, temporality, agency, and social critique across its full arc. Al-Natour (2024), for example, takes *Girls of Riyadh* and Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Nessyane.com* as paired case studies of how digital space enables gendered performativity in Arabic literature, yet here too digitality functions as setting rather than as structure. In other words, digitality is recognized, but not methodologically demonstrated.

2.3 Vision 2030 and Women's Empowerment Studies

The third strand is the status of Saudi women in the context of Vision 2030. Alhawsawi and Jawhar (2023), Alqahtani (2024), and Sholihah et al. (2023) discuss how social and political changes in Saudi society have changed perceptions of Saudi women's role, visibility, and participation. On the other hand, Aldossari & Calvard (2021) and Aldossari & Chaudhry (2024) examine the barriers to Saudi women in the workplace when patriarchal labor policies are in place. Compared with the first strand, this body of research provides a stronger understanding of the broader social and political contexts. Compared with the second strand, it offers a more historical perspective on the discourse of change. However, it also has a limitation. Most studies view women's empowerment as a result of policy reform rather than as a cultural imagination already emerging in literary texts before these reforms become institutionalized. As a result, *Girls of Riyadh* is often interpreted as a text that reflects later reform narratives instead of one that anticipates and explores their emotional and symbolic foundations. Taken together, these three strands reveal one specific gap: no prior study has combined corpus-level computational analysis with feminist close reading to examine how *Girls of Riyadh*'s formal lexical architecture, the distributional patterns of its key thematic terms across the narrative arc, constitutes an argument about female agency that anticipated the Vision 2030 reforms. This study addresses that specific gap.

2.4 Digital Humanities and Feminist Literary Criticism

According to DH, literary meaning is determined by form, circulation, and textual patterning (Berry, 2012; Klein, 2015). This is relevant to *Girls of Riyadh*. The epistolary structure of the novel is fundamental to its narrative. Digitality, in this story, is not merely convenience in the contemporary world. It is a mediating framework through which intimacy, visibility, seriality, and communicative address are structured. The novel's implied online audience and digital narrative form situate it within mediated storytelling. In addition, its textual form is used to construct meaning (Berry, 2012; Gwynne, 2013; Klein, 2015). Feminist literary criticism is concerned with how these formal arrangements intersect with patriarchal structures. In the novel, marriage, kinship, moral scrutiny, class expectations, and restricted mobility are the

conditions under which the four female characters live. Thus, feminist criticism helps in identifying these challenges as expressions of an order that shapes acceptable forms of femininity and regulates deviation (Bendouma & Kerboua, 2023; Giti & Mohajeri, 2020; Shihada, 2013; Tyson, 2015). These frameworks enable us to look at the novel as a digitally mediated text. The female agency in *Girls of Riyadh* is not only thematically represented, but also structurally constructed through narrative sequencing, lexical distribution, and mediated address.

2.5 The Gap This Study Addresses

Taken together, the existing literature reveals a more specific gap than has often been acknowledged. Prior scholarship has explained the novel's gender politics, recognized the relevance of its digital mediation, and situated it within broader discussions of Saudi reform; however, the interaction among these dimensions has not yet been examined through an integrated analytical model that combines corpus-assisted lexical observation with feminist close reading. Rather than claiming to account for the novel's full digital architecture in comprehensive terms, the present study focuses on a limited but analytically purposeful set of thematic terms whose distribution across the narrative offers measurable evidence for how mediated communication, discipline, and self-assertion are patterned in the text. Within these defined methodological limits, the study addresses a narrower gap by showing how selected lexical distributions can support and refine feminist interpretations of female agency in *Girls of Riyadh* as a digitally mediated literary text.

3. Methodology

The study is best described as a corpus-assisted interpretive analysis, or more broadly as a mixed digital-literary method, that integrates Digital Humanities methodology with feminist literary criticism to examine how Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* constructs female agency through digital narrative form. The methodological premise, which follows work in corpus stylistics (Mahlberg, 2013; McIntyre & Walker, 2019), is that computational observation and interpretive literary reading are complementary rather than competing modes of inquiry. Corpus-based tools are used to trace lexical frequency, relative prominence, segmental distribution, collocational patterning, and contextual recurrence across the text, whereas feminist close reading provides the interpretive framework through which these patterned observations acquire cultural and gendered significance within the patriarchal social world represented in the novel. The methodological contribution of the study, therefore, lies in the structured integration of measured textual evidence with literary interpretation rather than in the isolated use of either digital procedures or qualitative reading alone.

The primary corpus for analysis is Marilyn Booth's English translation of *Girls of Riyadh*, uploaded to Voyant Tools as a single plain-text corpus comprising 82,616 words and 11,728 unique word forms. Two methodological limitations deserve explicit acknowledgment. First, the study relies exclusively on Marilyn Booth's English translation of the novel rather than the original Arabic text. While this may affect the precision of certain lexical findings, particularly for terms whose semantic range in Arabic does not map directly onto their English equivalents, the translation was selected for two reasons: it is the version through which the novel reached its international readership and generated the scholarly debate this study engages, and it is the basis on which all comparative studies cited in this literature review were conducted. Findings should therefore be understood as about the translated text as a literary and cultural object rather than as claims about the Arabic original. Second, the six thematic terms, love, mail, phone, marriage, shame, and freedom, were not selected as an exhaustive lexical representation of the novel's full semantic complexity. They were identified through iterative close reading as the most consistently recurrent markers of the three analytical concerns that define this study: mediated communication (mail, phone), patriarchal regulation (marriage, shame), and female self-assertion (love, freedom). Their selection was therefore bound and purposeful rather than comprehensive, and the study makes no claim that these six terms capture the entirety of the novel's thematic or linguistic richness.

Voyant Tools (Sinclair & Rockwell, 2016), a web-based environment for computer-assisted text analysis (Rockwell & Sinclair, 2016), was selected because it enables corpus-level textual analysis while remaining compatible with interpretive literary inquiry. The core analytical procedure relied primarily on Trends to trace the distribution of the selected terms across ten equal-length text segments, while Contexts was used in a supporting capacity to verify frequency values and inspect the immediate textual environment of selected terms where needed. Relative frequency per 1,000 words was adopted as the principal comparative metric to ensure proportional comparison across segments, and raw counts and segment-level counts were taken directly from Voyant's term-frequency output for each query, with Contexts used to inspect individual occurrences. Cirrus served an exploratory role in identifying broad lexical prominence across the corpus, whereas Collocates was consulted selectively rather than used as a primary evidentiary layer in the reported results. To sharpen thematic visibility, function words, Arabic proper nouns, common prepositions, and narrative filler terms were excluded through Voyant Tools' built-in stop list supplemented by a custom list, and wildcard searching was used to capture morphological and inflectional variants of the selected terms consistently across the corpus. The computational findings were not treated as substitutes for interpretation. Rather, they functioned as empirical validators and structural amplifiers of the feminist close readings, enabling patterned lexical evidence to be connected to the broader narrative arc in ways that localized textual observation alone cannot adequately establish.

Counting and segmentation. Each term was queried with a prefix wildcard (love*, mail*, phone*, marriage*, shame*, freedom*), so that inflected and derived forms (for example, *loved*, *lovely*, *phones*, *shameful*) are included, while forms that do not begin with the search string (for example, *email* or *telephone*) are not. For each query, the corpus-wide count and the count in each segment were taken directly from Voyant's term-frequency output rather than read from the Trends graph. The ten segments were produced automatically by the Voyant Tools Trends panel, which divides a single document into ten blocks of equal length; for this corpus each segment contains approximately 8,262 words ($82,616 \div 10$). The segment boundaries are therefore mechanical: they fall at fixed word positions, often mid-sentence, and do not coincide with the e-mails into which the novel is divided. To make the segments interpretable, each boundary

was matched to the e-mail in which it falls, using the position of each e-mail's date-and-subject header in the corpus; the e-mails spanned by each segment are listed in the first row of Table 2. Where the analysis below refers to a segment as a narrative phase, it refers to the e-mails that segment spans and the events narrated in them, and such references are approximate. Two limits follow. First, a change in a term's frequency between segments shows where in the running text the term is concentrated; it does not by itself establish a change of narrative phase, which must be supported by close reading of the relevant e-mails. Second, the six terms differ greatly in frequency. For *love* (239 occurrences, a mean of about 24 per segment), a segment-level rise or fall rests on many tokens, whereas for *shame* (14) and *freedom* (13) the mean is fewer than 1.5 occurrences per segment, so a "peak" may consist of a handful of instances. Segment-level claims about these two terms are therefore reported with their absolute counts and treated as indicative rather than conclusive. The full segment-by-segment counts and relative frequencies for all six terms are given in Table 2, so that every distributional claim in Section 4 can be checked and the analysis reproduced.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Corpus Overview

To establish the quantitative basis of the analysis, the English translation of *Girls of Riyadh* (Alsanea, 2007, trans. Booth) was analyzed as a single corpus with Voyant Tools. Six thematic terms that are relevant in the novel were studied. These six thematic terms related to mediated communication, social control, and female subjectivity: *love*, *mail*, *phone*, *marriage*, *shame*, and *freedom*. Love was the most common thematic term throughout the whole corpus, followed by mail, marriage, phone, shame, and freedom. The distribution of these terms across the ten equal-length text segments showed three distinct trends. First, *love* was present throughout but most concentrated in the final two segments, peaking in Segment 9 (59 of 239 occurrences). Second, the balance between *mail* and *phone* shifted: *mail* was spread fairly evenly across the narrative (40 occurrences in Segments 1–5 and 33 in Segments 6–10), whereas *phone* was scarce in the first half (14) and concentrated in the second (46), peaking in Segments 6 and 8. Third, *shame* exhibited the most concentrated pattern of all: after a low but steady presence in Segments 1–6, 6 of its 14 occurrences fall in Segment 7, and it almost disappears thereafter. Together, these findings provide the quantitative foundation for the character-level results presented below.

At the level of overall corpus organization, the tracked terms are not evenly distributed across the text segments. Instead, each term displays a distinct distributional path across the ten equal segments used in the corpus mapping procedure. In the early segments, *marriage* and *mail* are at their most prominent relative to their overall frequency. The middle segments register greater fluctuation, particularly in the distribution of phone, freedom, and later shame. The later segments are marked most clearly by the delayed prominence of love, whose sharp rise in Segment 9 distinguishes it from all other tracked terms in the corpus. These observations indicate that the six selected terms recur with different degrees of concentration at different points in the segmented text rather than maintaining a uniform presence throughout. The resulting distributional profile provides a quantitative frame for the more localized results presented in the character-based subsections that follow, without assigning interpretive significance beyond the descriptive scope of the corpus evidence itself.

Table 1. Frequency and Narrative Distribution of Six Thematically Significant Terms in *Girls of Riyadh*

Term	Raw Count	Rel. Freq. (per 1,000 words)	Peak Segment	Distribution Shape
<i>love</i>	239	2.89	Seg. 9	Present throughout segs. 1–8 (6–31 per seg.) → peak seg. 9 (59) → high seg. 10 (46)
<i>mail</i>	73	0.88	Segs. 2 and 4	Peaks segs. 2 and 4 (12 each) → moderate segs. 5–8 → low seg. 9 → rises seg. 10
<i>phone</i>	60	0.73	Segs. 6 and 8	Low segs. 1–5 (14 in all; none in seg. 5) → peaks segs. 6 and 8 → high seg. 10
<i>marriage</i>	68	0.82	Seg. 3	High seg. 1 → dip seg. 2 → peak seg. 3 (17) → low segs. 4–6 → moderate return segs. 7–10
<i>shame</i>	14	0.17	Seg. 7	Low, steady segs. 1–6 (1–2 each) → peak seg. 7 (6) → near absent segs. 8–10
<i>freedom</i>	13	0.16	Segs. 5–7	Sparse segs. 1–4 (2 in all) → peak segs. 5–7 (3 each) → absent segs. 8–9 → seg. 10 (2)

Source: Author's corpus analysis of *Girls of Riyadh* (Alsanea, 2007, trans. Booth) conducted using Voyant Tools.

Note. The corpus comprises 82,616 words and 11,728 unique word forms. Relative frequency is expressed per 1,000 words. Segment numbers correspond to Voyant Tools' ten equal text segments (approximately 8,262 words each); segment-level values for every term are reported in Table 2. Raw counts were taken directly from Voyant's term-frequency output. Wildcard searches captured morphological variants of the selected terms. The raw count for love was cross-checked using the Voyant Tools Contexts panel.

Table 2. Segment-Level Frequencies of the Six Terms in *Girls of Riyadh* (Absolute Counts and Relative Frequency per 1,000 Words)

Term	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	Total
E-mails spanned	1–4	4–8	8–13	13–18	18–24	24–29	29–34	34–41	41–46	46–50	All
love (n)	6	14	20	31	13	19	11	20	59	46	239
love (per 1,000)	0.73	1.69	2.42	3.75	1.57	2.30	1.33	2.42	7.14	5.57	2.89
mail (n)	4	12	5	12	7	8	6	7	2	10	73
mail (per 1,000)	0.48	1.45	0.61	1.45	0.85	0.97	0.73	0.85	0.24	1.21	0.88
phone (n)	4	6	3	1	0	12	4	14	5	11	60
phone (per 1,000)	0.48	0.73	0.36	0.12	0.00	1.45	0.48	1.69	0.61	1.33	0.73
marriage (n)	11	4	17	5	3	2	7	3	7	9	68
marriage (per 1,000)	1.33	0.48	2.06	0.61	0.36	0.24	0.85	0.36	0.85	1.09	0.82
shame (n)	1	1	1	2	1	1	6	0	1	0	14
shame (per 1,000)	0.12	0.12	0.12	0.24	0.12	0.12	0.73	0.00	0.12	0.00	0.17
freedom (n)	1	0	1	0	3	3	3	0	0	2	13
freedom (per 1,000)	0.12	0.00	0.12	0.00	0.36	0.36	0.36	0.00	0.00	0.24	0.16

Note. Segments are the ten equal-length blocks (approximately 8,262 words each) produced by Voyant Tools; they are not chapters or e-mails. The first row gives the e-mails each segment spans; where a segment begins or ends inside an e-mail, that e-mail's number appears at the boundary of both segments. Counts were taken directly from Voyant's term-frequency output for the queries love*, mail*, phone*, marriage*, shame* and freedom*. Relative frequency = (count ÷ 8,261.6 words per segment) × 1,000. Row totals equal the corpus-wide figures in Table 1.

4.2 Gamrah

The corpus patterns most likely associated with Gamrah's narrative are based on the distribution of shame and marriage. Of the six terms tracked, shame is one of the two lowest-frequency terms in the corpus (14 occurrences, against 13 for freedom), but it shows the most concentrated distributional pattern. It is present at a low, steady level in Segments 1–6 (one or two occurrences in each) and reaches its highest value in Segment 7, which contains 6 of its 14 occurrences (Table 2). Segment 7 spans e-mails 29–34 of the novel (Alsanee, 2007, trans. Booth); because the peak rests on six occurrences, it is read here as part of the wider lexical frame of Gamrah's arc rather than as the marker of a single episode in it. The term marriage also has a similarly concentrated pattern that can be read in relation to her arc. It is already prominent in Segment 1, peaks in Segment 3 (17 of its 68 occurrences), and falls to its lowest levels in Segments 4–6 before returning at a moderate rate. Taken together, these two terms offer a quantitative framework within which the formal organization of Gamrah's story can be interpreted. Gamrah's path towards economic self-sufficiency and professional independence after her divorce also anticipates the emphasis that Vision 2030 would later place on women's labor-market participation, which it set out to raise from 22% to 30% (Vision 2030, 2016). More than a decade before that target was announced, the novel already presents women's economic agency as dependent on the loosening of guardianship structures, structures that Gamrah's arc exposes and resists (Aldossari & Calvard, 2021; Parveen, 2021).

4.3 Michelle

Michelle's story can be read most plausibly in relation to marriage, mail, and love. The term marriage peaks in Segment 3, decreases dramatically in the middle parts, and comes back in a moderate form in the later parts. The term mail reaches its highest values in Segments 2 and 4 (12 occurrences each), which fall in the part of the narrative in which mediated communication is most prominent. At the corpus level, love is the most common term in general, but it is strongest in Segments 9 and 10, which together hold 105 of its 239 occurrences. This late concentration provides a wider lexical context for Michelle's resolution rather than a pattern attributable to her story in isolation. Michelle's decision to pursue higher education abroad and not accept a compromised domestic arrangement is also congruent with Vision 2030's vision for the wider reaches of Saudi women in global education and free mobility. It also speaks to the reforms that the Saudi government has already made as it lifts male guardian consent for women's passports and travel in 2019. Michelle's narrative anticipated these institutional changes a decade earlier (Vision 2030, 2016; Sholihah et al., 2023).

4.4 Sadeem

Sadeem's narrative may be best understood in terms of *mail*, *shame*, and *love* distribution. The term *mail* has its highest values in Segments 2 and 4 (12 occurrences each), segments that span the phase of digitally mediated courtship. *Shame* reaches its corpus-wide peak in Segment 7, while *love*, present at moderate levels earlier, rises sharply in Segment 9. Unlike this earlier pattern of mediated intimacy, the late surge in love occurs only after the major disruptions associated with courtship, divorce, and reorientation have already unfolded. The clustering of these terms across distinct narrative phases, therefore, offers a structured interpretive basis for reading Sadeem's trajectory as strongly

patterned, while still requiring support from close reading beyond segmental distribution alone. Furthermore, Sadeem's ultimately self-directed marital decision, taken in full awareness of its social costs, corresponds to Vision 2030's view of Saudi women as autonomous decision-makers in matters of personal status. The 2019 reforms that allowed women to register marriages, divorces, and births independently gave legal form to the very agency that Sadeem exercises in the narrative, an agency that the patriarchal world of the novel attempts, but ultimately fails, to foreclose (Vision 2030, 2016; Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023).

4.5. Lamees

Lamees's narrative is most plausibly associated with *phone*, *love*, and the relative absence of *shame*. The term *phone* peaks in Segments 6 and 8, later than *mail*, and remains active into Segment 10. This makes it the most relevant communication term for reading Lamees's arc within the broader lexical patterning of the novel. At the same time, *shame* does not peak in the part of the corpus most strongly associated with her storyline, in contrast to the more concentrated shame-related pattern observed in Gamrah and Sadeem. The late surge of *love* in Segment 9 also aligns with Lamees's resolution arc, although that alignment is better treated as interpretive support than as exclusive proof. Her narrative may therefore be read as one in which communicative agency and affective resolution converge within the broader lexical structure of the novel as analyzed in *Girls of Riyadh* (Alsanea, 2007, trans. Booth). Furthermore, of the four protagonists, Lamees, who combines a successful medical career with personal fulfillment and social influence, most closely mirrors the goals that Vision 2030 would later advance. Her professional achievement is in line with Vision 2030's goal of increasing women's involvement in the healthcare industry and expanding the contribution of women in the development of the country (Vision 2030, 2016; Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023). In this sense, Lamees anticipates and embodies the educated, professionally accomplished Saudi woman that Vision 2030 would be promoting with its reform programs.

4.6 Discussion

Generally, the findings suggest that the novel's feminist argument is carried not only by theme but also by formal organization. The late concentration of *love*, the shifting balance between *mail* and *phone*, and the concentrated intensification of *shame* may be read as indicating that agency, intimacy, and patriarchal discipline are patterned across the narrative in ways that appear structurally significant rather than merely incidental. Within the limits of lexical distribution analysis, this patterning supports the interpretation that **Girls of Riyadh** may productively be read as a digitally mediated literary intervention in which female subjectivity is shaped through lexical recurrence, narrative sequencing, and mediated address.

The first major finding is the deferred surge of love in Segment 9 that has significant theoretical implications in the feminist context in which this study is based. Love is not absent earlier, since 134 of its 239 occurrences fall in Segments 1–8, but its sharpest concentration is reserved for Segments 9 (59) and 10 (46). Giti and Mohajeri (2020), drawing on Simone de Beauvoir, argue that the novel constructs women as social Others whose desires are always subordinate to patriarchal ones. What is also clear is that the lexical deferral of love is structural: the protagonists are not denied affective fulfillment but are held to wait until patriarchal barriers to it are met. This patterning is consistent with Bendouma and Kerboua's (2023) argument that Alsanea negotiates between Islamic feminist values and a critique of patriarchal excess. Abdullah and Rasheed's (2024) cyberfeminist reading of the novel's digital circulation as a form of feminist empowerment is also strengthened by this structural observation: the protagonists do not seek love passively but engage actively through mediated communication throughout the narrative before affective resolution becomes lexically dominant. Deferral, in fact, is an expression of agency rather than its absence.

The second finding relates to the shifting balance between *mail* and *phone*, which extends the study's theoretical engagement with Digital Humanities beyond descriptive observation. *Mail* outnumbers *phone* by 40 to 14 in Segments 1–5, whereas *phone* outnumbers *mail* by 46 to 33 in Segments 6–10. Gwynne (2013) argues that the novel's digital mediation is not peripheral but a function of how female disembodiment and spatial agency are organized. The shift from early *mail* predominance to later *phone* predominance extends that argument: as the narrative unfolds, female communicative agency is less dependent on the anonymity of the written epistolary mode and more visible through immediate vocal and telephonic communication. From Berry's (2012) perspective, which argues that digital forms play a role in literary meaning production, this distributional shift is not accidental but formal. The way female characters speak changes across the narrative arc, and that change has interpretive consequences. Hurley (2021) looks at the post-digital context and Arab women's social media empowerment and may see the transition from mail to phone as an early literary precursor to the more vocal and culturally visible digital selfhood that would be at the heart of gendered digital life in the Gulf region. This makes the novel's formal lexical architecture cultural work in and of itself well beyond its immediate fictional world.

The third finding, the peak of *shame* in Segment 7, is the most striking because it bears directly on the study's dialogue with feminist accounts of patriarchal regulation. Because *shame* occurs only 14 times in the corpus, and 6 of those occurrences fall in Segment 7 (Table 2), this concentration is read here as indicative rather than conclusive. Shihada (2013) considers the novel as a text that breaks cultural silence about honor codes, divorce, and female sexuality. The concentration of *shame* in a single segment, against a low background presence elsewhere, supports and extends this argument: patriarchal moral discipline in the novel is a response to a situation, and it is strongest at times of social reclassification (divorce or social exposure). Aldossari and Calvard (2021) show that patriarchal structures in Saudi Arabia function politically and are enforced, rather than being passive, diffuse norms. The concentrated peak of shame in the text reflects a similar phenomenon at the narrative level: disciplinary power is continuous at a low level but intensified episodically, which means it can be survived, negotiated, and eventually transcended. The novel's construction of *shame*, as a sharp intensification against a low background

rather than a uniformly heavy presence, thus provides a feminist case for the survivability of patriarchal discipline and agency in its aftermath.

The character-based analysis reinforces this conclusion by showing that each protagonist occupies a distinct position within the novel's formal economy of agency. Gamrah's arc is structured around marital failure and concentrated shame; Michelle's around mediated intimacy and deferred affective resolution; Sadeem's around digital courtship, moral discipline, and delayed self-assertion; and Lamees's around socially legible agency linked to late-stage communicative and emotional resolution. The differentiated positions these characters occupy within the novel's lexical architecture suggest that female agency is not represented as a uniform condition but as unevenly distributed across class, social risk, and communicative mode. The integration of Voyant Tools with feminist close reading, therefore, makes it possible to demonstrate, rather than merely assert, that the novel formalizes women's negotiation with patriarchal society at the level of textual architecture.

These findings also sharpen the study's broader claim regarding anticipatory cultural discourse. The novel does not simply depict women seeking autonomy within restrictive social conditions. Rather, it organizes that struggle through a digital and lexical architecture that renders female agency measurable, patterned, and narratively cumulative. In this sense, the text may be understood not only as a representation of women's experience, but also as an early formalization of social possibilities later associated with reformist discourse in Saudi Arabia. Taken together, these three analyses demonstrate that corpus-based feminist criticism can produce results that are not only descriptive but also theoretically generative, connecting local lexical patterns to larger discourse over gender, discipline, mediation, and social change.

5. Conclusion

This study's findings suggest that the feminist dimension of *Girls of Riyadh* is reflected not only in its characters and narrative events but also in its form. The distribution of the six chosen terms indicates that themes of digital communication, emotional fulfillment, and patriarchal control are not merely events in the novel but are built into it. Nor are they separate: they are interwoven in ways that shape the reader's understanding of female agency. The study confirms that the novel's digital epistolary form is not only a sign of modernity. It is a mechanism through which intimacy, delay, visibility, and control are organized.

Love is the most striking result. Although the most common thematic term in the corpus, love does not appear evenly across the narrative. It appears at moderate levels throughout the first eight segments and rises sharply only in Segment 9, which, together with Segment 10, holds 44% of its occurrences. This, we believe, indicates that love fulfillment is postponed and not denied. The novel does not just depict women seeking love under restrictive conditions; it postpones the language of fulfillment until a late stage, and delay is part of the text's feminist logic. Desire is still there but is interrupted by negotiation, injury, adaptation, and mediated self-fashioning.

A second key result is the shifting balance between *mail* and *phone*. *Mail* predominates in the first half of the narrative and *phone* in the second, revealing a change in the mode through which women engage in communication. Digitally mediated expression is not static; it develops from a more textual and epistolary form of intimacy to a more immediate and socially active mode of communication. From a Digital Humanities point of view, that matters because technology is not just a background for the context; it is connected to the progress of female agency.

The peak of *shame* in Segment 7 provides a third insight. *Shame* is present at a low level throughout the first six segments, but 6 of its 14 occurrences cluster in Segment 7. This concentration indicates that patriarchal moral discipline, though constant, is activated with particular force at decisive moments. This is especially evident in the cases of Gamrah and Sadeem, where social reclassification after divorce becomes central to their trajectories. Patriarchal control, therefore, appears both atmospheric and episodic: a constant background that intensifies at moments of social reclassification.

At the character level, the findings show that the four protagonists occupy different positions within the novel's economy of agency. Gamrah's arc is shaped by concentrated shame and the early trap of marriage, making her story the clearest example of discipline followed by mediated self-assertion. Michelle's trajectory is defined by failed marriage prospects, mediated intimacy, and deferred affective resolution, positioning her between tribal restriction and transnational possibility. Sadeem presents the most layered arc, combining the strongest relevance of mail, the sharpest activation of shame, and the delayed release of love. Lamees, by contrast, occupies the least shame-saturated and most professionally integrated position, with phone rather than mail dominating her communicative development. The novel, therefore, does not offer a single model of female agency. It distributes agency unevenly across class, mobility, emotional experience, and social risk.

These findings support a measured claim about the novel's broader cultural significance. Rather than directly prefiguring later reform discourse, *Girls of Riyadh* imaginatively stages forms of female visibility, mediated communication, and self-assertion that resonate with later debates on gender and social change. Computational evidence identifies recurring thematic patterns, while feminist criticism explains why those patterns matter within a patriarchal context. Together, the two approaches show that the novel's digital form participates in producing feminist meaning. The findings align with the study's objectives by showing that female agency is constructed through digital narrative form, measurable lexical patterning, differentiated character trajectories, and a culturally situated representation of Saudi women's social consciousness.

Acknowledgment

The authors extend their appreciation to Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University for funding this research work through the project number

(PSAU/ 2025/02/35123).

Authors' Contributions

The authors contributed equally to writing, editing, and proofreading the manuscript. They also approved the final version of this manuscript.

Funding:

This study is supported via funding from Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University project number (PSAU/ 2025/02/35123).

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

AI Use Disclosure

No AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. All research content, arguments, data interpretation, corpus analysis, reference selection, and writing are the sole work of the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the manuscript.

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.

Open access

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

References

- Abdullah, F. J., & Rasheed, L. A. (2024). Internet and cyberspace as a means of feminist empowerment: A cyberfeminist study of Girls of Riyadh by Rajaa Alsanea. *Journal of Language Studies*, 8(10), 329-345. <https://doi.org/10.25130/Lang.8.10.18>
- Alanazi, S., Hans, A., & Mohsen, H. Y. A. (2026). Emails from young Saudi females: A postmodernist reading of the English-language edition of *Girls of Riyadh*. *World Journal of English Language*, 16(3), 380-395. <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v16n3p380>
- Al-Natour, M. (2024). Lucidity of space and gendered performativity in Arabic digital literature. *Humanities*, 13(5), 112. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h13050112>
- Al-Wadhaf, Y. H. (2025). Girls of Riyadh: Narrating the "velvet class" in Saudi Arabia. *Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 16(2), Article 10. <https://doi.org/10.53542/2522-2279.1432>
- Aldossari, M., & Calvard, T. (2021). The politics and ethics of resistance, feminism, and gender equality in Saudi Arabian organizations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 181(4), 873-890. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-021-04949-3>
- Aldossari, M., & Chaudhry, S. (2024). Gendered precarity in Saudi Arabia: Examining the state policies and patriarchal culture in the labor market. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 31(6), 2698-2716. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13119>
- Alessa, N. A., Shalhoob, H. S., & Almugarry, H. A. (2022). Saudi women's economic empowerment in light of Saudi Vision 2030: Perception, challenges, and opportunities. *Journal of Educational and Social Research*, 12(1), 316. <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2022-0025>
- Alhawsawi, S., & Jawhar, S. S. (2023). Education, employment, and empowerment among Saudi women. *Gender and Education*, 35(4), 401-419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2023.2189917>

- Alqahtani, M. H. (2024). Women in Saudi secondary school EFL textbooks: A critical study of women's empowerment as enshrined in the Saudi Vision 2030. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 9, Article 1307623. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2024.1307623>
- Alsanea, R. (2007). *Girls of Riyadh* (M. Booth, Trans.). Penguin Books. (Original work published 2005)
- Bendouma, N., & Kerboua, S. (2023). Islamic feminism at the crossroads between apologetics and defending women: Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* in context. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 25(1), Article 11. Retrieved from <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss1/11>
- Berry, D. M. (Ed.). (2012). *Understanding Digital Humanities*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230371934>
- Giti, S., & Mohajeri, M. (2020). A study of feminist ideas in the *Girls of Riyadh* novel by Rajaa Al-Sanea based on Simone de Beauvoir's theory. *Universidad y Sociedad*, 12(1), 251-258. Retrieved from <https://rus.ucf.edu/cu/index.php/rus/article/view/1450>
- Gwynne, J. (2013). The lighter that fuels a blaze of change: Agency and (cyber)spatial (dis)embodiment in *Girls of Riyadh*. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 37, 46-52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2013.01.012>
- Hurley, Z. (2021). #Reimagining Arab women's social media empowerment and the postdigital condition. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2), 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211010169>
- Khamis, S. (2022). Shifting cyberfeminism and gendered activism in the Gulf: A Saudi feminist spring? *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 12(1), 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2022.2207238>
- Klein, J. T. (2015). *Interdisciplining digital humanities: Boundary work in an emerging field*. University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/dh.12869322.0001.001>
- Mahlberg, M. (2013). *Corpus stylistics and Dickens's fiction*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203076088>
- McIntyre, D., & Walker, B. (2019). *Corpus stylistics: Theory and practice*. Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474413220>
- Parveen, M. (2021). Women empowerment: New paradigm shift of Saudi women into labor workforce. *Society and Business Review*, 17(1), 66-91. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SBR-10-2020-0123>
- Rizvi, L. J., & Hussain, Z. (2021). Empowering woman through legal reforms: Evidence from Saudi Arabian context. *International Journal of Law and Management*, 64(2), 137-149. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJLMA-03-2021-0068>
- Rockwell, G., & Sinclair, S. (2016). *Hermeneutica: Computer-assisted interpretation in the humanities*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9522.001.0001>
- Shihada, I. M. (2013). Breaking silence in Rajjaalsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*. *International Journal of English and Literature*, 3(2), 59-74.
- Sholihah, N., Ummah, A. K., Wargadinata, W., & Jannah, H. (2023). Transformation of the roles of Saudi Arabian women post-implementation of the "Saudi Vision 2030" in the perspective of modernism. *CMES (Center of Middle Eastern Studies)*, 16(2), 201-210. <https://doi.org/10.20961/cmcs.16.2.69354>
- Sinclair, S., & Rockwell, G. (2016). *Voyant Tools* [Web application]. Retrieved from <https://voyant-tools.org/>
- Tyson, L. (2015). *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315760797>
- Vision 2030. (2016). *Saudi Vision 2030*. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Retrieved from <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa>