

THE IMPACT OF ULTRA CONSERVATIVE READINGS ON THE RECEPTION OF CONTEMPORARY SAUDI NOVELS

Noura Algahtani

This paper identifies the combination of factors that have conditioned reader responses to particular Saudi novels. It draws on Fish's concept of 'interpretive communities', which argues that interpretation is an institutional practice, and that consequently readers hold shared prior assumptions that constrain their interpretive strategies (Fish, 1980, 306). Not surprisingly, then, some responses to Saudi authors are based on the ideological belief that their novels consist of acts of rebellion against a conservative culture. A close reading of the conflict between Saudi novelists and the social responses to their works can reflect how cultural and social contexts shape the reception of contemporary Saudi novels, and can also help to construct public attitudes towards these texts. Saudi novelists have faced a number of social constraints and have even, in some cases, been imprisoned, factors which have affected the development of the novel in Saudi Arabia. For example, works by al-Gosaibi, Munif, Khal, al-Hamad, al-Mohaimed, Alsanea and al-Juhani have all been banned because they were seen to pose a major threat to the dominant, patriarchal Saudi ideology. While the social controversy around these writers was raging, some other writers applied self-censorship to avoid touching upon what were perceived to be the most sensitive issues. However, some writers continue to criticise extremist discourse and social tradition in their writings, the best-known examples being al-Hamad and Khal. This paper explores the impact of ultraconservative readings on the reception of their novels.

Keywords: Saudi novels, Ultraconservative readings, Interpretive communities, Reception theory, Ideology