

## Winds of Change: Heterotopias in Nimah Nawwab's *The Unfurling*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines a Saudi Arabian poet, Nimah Ismail Nawwab's collection of poetry, *The Unfurling* (2004). It suggests that her poetry upend traditional stereotypes of Arab and Saudi women as they demonstrate a relationship between the literal and figurative space and social change, particularly in relation to gender and culture. Thus, they occupy and define what Michel Foucault describes as a heterotopic space - a space that stands apart from others. The creation of the space allows for a new understanding of Arabic culture, particularly in relations to the experiences of women. Through a thematic analysis of the poems, the paper contends that Nawwab's poems uniquely reflects heterotopia as they document social changes, particularly in relations to gendered shifts in the Saudi Arabian landscape. As women experience transgressive responses to social change around the world, they not only create a space that retains a strong connection to the patriarchal history of the Middle East and the Muslim world, that space in itself is a unique space within a space. Nawwab puts women at the centre of each experience, demonstrating the creation of a larger space for the female self while physically maintaining the same order of the society.

**Keywords:** gender; heterotopia; Saudi Arabian poets; feminism; Nawwab

### INTRODUCTION

Poet Nimah Nawwab is a prominent emerging voice in Saudi Arabian poetry, and is the first Saudi woman to have a book of poetry published in English in the United States. Her works address topics such as art, calligraphy, mysticism in the natural world, gender, Saudi customs, femininity, motherhood, the Islamic faith and women's experiences of it, as well as broader subjects like poverty, bigotry, and war. In her first work published in English, *The Unfurling*, Nawwab documents the impact of change and cultural evolution in Saudi Arabia, particularly invoking time and the Saudi landscape. Time is a prominent theme in traditional Saudi Arabian poetry, and Nawwab's work demonstrates the continuation of this tradition in the modern age. She is cognisant of change and interrogates its impact throughout her work. Nawwab's poetry exemplifies the sociocultural condition of women in Saudi Arabia in its insistence on defining the experience from a lived perspective while retaining all reverence and respect of religious and cultural traditions.

Nawwab's poetry aligns to Michel Foucault's (1986) concept of heterotopia, or alternative spaces that exist outside the dominant ones. It demonstrates that she has anticipated the current winds of change in Saudi Arabia, as understood through heterotopia. Heterotopias can be defined as "other spaces," or spaces layered with meaning, both reflecting and disturbing dominant spaces. Nawwab's poetry reflects those dominant spaces from inside her own alternative space as an Arab woman. Examining a text in this way allows for "an understanding of the particular ways in which relations between people, things, and processes are set up and contrasted to the 'problems' that the utopian visions seek to address" (Venkatesan, 2009, p. 78). Her poetry also upsets the dominant space by challenging long-held misperceptions about the experiences, culture, and lives of women in Saudi Arabia, and

in doing so, achieves the goals of writing from a heterotopic space by "destablizing the ground on which knowledge is built" (Topinka, 2010, p. 54). This paper analyzes Nawwab's work by applying Foucault's theory of heterotopia in the reading of the poems in *The Unfurling* to examine how they complicate the public images of Saudi Arabian women to offer a new insight of the social change they exemplify.

In Nawwab's poetry, these heterotopic spaces are found at the intersection of race, gender, and religion. The space that Nawwab occupies has strong connections to the history of the Middle East and the Muslim world, but it is a space within a space, as her poetry invites the reader inside the smaller space that women occupy within a larger cultural framework. The postmodern concept of heterotopia describes spaces as both physical in location and mental in perception and time, while operating as parallel spaces comprised of "Othered" bodies within particular spaces that make utopias possible, and as spaces in which social ordering is created. Nawwab's poetry describes the experiences of women in this physically and mentally ordered space comprised of female bodies. While this "othering" that sets Middle Eastern women apart from a larger society is oppressive in both public and private spaces, it also allows for access to spaces in which women share experiences and are free from repression. Nawwab suggests that the Middle Eastern and Muslim culture is a patriarchal space, yet she is able to invert it by placing women's experiences at the center. In this way, women occupy the larger space while physically maintaining the structure of the society.

To analyze Nawwab's creation of heterotopia in *The Unfurling*, this paper examines the crisis of heterotopia in relations to the changing role of women in the poems "Gentleness Stirred," "The Hidden Layers," and "Winds of the Market." While these poems address the crisis of heterotopia through the role of women in a physical space, the crisis of heterotopia is also invoked less literally in "Life Imprisonment," "Indomitable Lady," "Equilibrium," and "The Unfurling." The first three poems emphasise the role of women in public space through the lens of the crisis of heterotopia, while the latter poems engage with Foucault's idea of the heterotopia as a space that can be free from oppression, particularly applying it to gendered spaces. In a similar manner to current Arabian culture and how it negotiates western influences of modernity and its own cultural tradition, so, too, can Nawwab's poetry be understood through both the postmodern concept of heterotopia and the tradition of Arabian poetry. Arabian poetry represents a substantial literary heritage, as well as a tradition of documenting culture and cultural changes due to historical developments (Elinson, 2005). Furthermore, poetry has long been a part of Arabic culture used for discussion of politics (Galvin, 2002). In this way, while Nawwab's poetry signifies a long-standing cultural tradition, her gendered position as a female poet adds on to its richness.

## FOUCAULT'S HETEROTOPIA

Michel Foucault (1986) theorizes heterotopia as an alternative space, one that possesses strong connections to other places, and more so than is immediately evident. Of heterotopias, Foucault writes that they are:

real places - places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted Utopia in which the real sites, all the other sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. (1986, p. 1)

A heterotopia can stand in for a utopia, an idealized space, or it can represent a parallel space that contains that which permits a utopia to exist, such as a prison, a homeless shelter, or a mental hospital. Heteropic spaces differ from utopian ones, Foucault insists, as

they are real spaces, and he explains that utopian spaces are "never intended to refer to real urban sites" and his references to them "pertains exclusively to textual representations of these sites" (Knight, 2015, p. 141). Foucault theorized six types of heterotopias. The first of these is the crisis heterotopia, in which those who are in transition or in crisis are relegated to an alternative space. A heterotopia of deviation is one in which individuals who do not adhere to social standards or norms are placed. Heterotopias can also represent several spaces in one (Foucault, 1986). Heterotopias of time are those which contain historical elements from various periods and are less vulnerable to the effects of time than other physical spaces. Heterotopias of ritual or purification meanwhile, are spaces that are isolated and set apart. Finally, Foucault defines the last heterotopia in terms of two functions: the heterotopia of illusion, which creates an illusory space, exposing real spaces, and the heterotopia of compensation, which creates a real, alternative space. Heterotopia can, according to Foucault, be a place where individuals are confined or set apart, but it can also represent a means for individuals to access spaces free from repression.

While Saudi women are relatively new to the landscape of published works, Nawwab's work stands out in the way that it shatters stereotypes of Arabian women by relating their experiences to those of other women around the world. Her works offer a new understanding of the experiences of Middle Eastern women and the public and private spaces they occupy, reordering them into heterotopic spaces of social change. Examining Nawwab's writing within the framework of heterotopia as representative of social change requires an understanding of how Foucault viewed heterotopia as spaces that bridge the gap between regular social order and resistance while offering space for resistance and change to occur. A heterotopic space is intrinsically tied to the dominant spaces in which they exist while creating alternative spaces for resistance and change. While utopias are imagined, unreal spaces, heterotopias are real spaces in which all spaces are "simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault, 1986, p. 22). They are both located within dominant spaces, reflecting them and yet are completely different from them. Foucault uses the example of a mirror, which both makes clear where one is oriented within a space and yet reflects an image of a space in which one is not. Heterotopias are located in time and space and yet are removed and therefore different from those spaces entirely, and Nawwab's work is the reflection of the dominant space around women in Saudi Arabia who exist in the in-between spaces of tradition and modernity and between reverence and rebellion. Beckett (2017) explains that "social movement heterotopias are different types of space that facilitate practices of resistance and transgression" (p. 169), and Nawwab's works offer a personal view of those spaces and how they are experienced by Arabian women. In Nawwab's case, specifically, her works highlight the space between a patriarchal culture and understandings of western feminism, detailing how Arabian women transgress the norms of their culture in subtle yet powerful ways. It is an Othered space that stands with a foot in two worlds: past and present as well as tradition and modernity, but uniquely situated in Eastern cultural practices and understandings.

### **HETEROTOPIA IN THE WORK OF NIMAH NAWWAB**

The education of women in Saudi Arabia has traditionally posed challenges to the government, due to the role of religion in culture (Alhareth & Al Dighrir, 2015, p. 121). However, recent positive sociocultural changes in Saudi Arabia have shifted the landscape for women. Hamdan (2005) explains that while the education of girls in Saudi Arabia was once under the purview of the Department of Religious Guidance in order to ensure that girls were taught to fulfill their roles within the Islamic faith as good wives and mothers, changes in 2002 expanded access for girls with goals of college and career preparation. As a result,

literacy rates among women has risen dramatically and Saudi Arabian women's participation in the workforce has also risen. In the past forty years, women's rights in Saudi Arabia have shifted so dramatically that while they were formerly not allowed to conduct business without a male representative present to owning more than forty percent of the nation's wealth. In 2017, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia announced a monumental decision to lift the ban on driving for women. The royal decision affects not only women who makes up of almost 49 percent of the population, but it is further expected that women's education, lifestyle, employment opportunities, national and international contributions, are also about to change. In addition to changes in public spaces like businesses and education, the roles and experiences of private spaces have also transformed. It is noteworthy that Saudi women empowerment (in education, employment, guardianship) is emerging from the government itself, and a societal willingness for a moderate religion to unravel cultural misconceptions. Women are working more outside the home and are less dependent but are still constricted by cultural standards. It is within this moment in time that the work of Nawwab explores the experiences of women in Saudi Arabia, a reflection of Foucault's "epoch" of the 1980s in which he said the world stood "in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed" (Foucault, 1986, p. 47). Women exist in a state of flux in Saudi Arabia, both respecting tradition and operating in new spaces of greater freedom. This juxtaposition is where the poetry of Nawwab lives and her writing defines it from the perspective of Saudi Arabian women.

Both Elinson (2005) and Galvin (2002) discuss the tradition of poetry in Arabic culture. Elinson (2005) examines the 12<sup>th</sup> century works of Al-Saraqusti and describes how his writing subverts "the traditional metaphoric obscurity of poetry and the clarity of prose" (2005, 1). Nawwab's use of poetry as a political tool for Arabian women in their own interpretation of feminism and change extends this tradition, providing an example of how traditions can be used as a guide to create change while also ending them. Galvin (2002) describes the tradition of poetry as a political tool in Arabic countries, saying that the practice is an essential aspect of Arabic culture, and Nawwab carries on that tradition by painting an intricate picture of life from the view of Arabian women in a time of great social change globally and locally.

Nawwab's writings also highlight the experience of social change for women in Saudi Arabia as a transgressive response to social change around the world. Al Fassi (2016) explores how Saudi women writers have responded to shifts in gendered norms globally while retaining an appreciation of their rich culture and history. While Al Fassi (2016) does not use Nawwab's work as an example, she can be seen as uniquely exemplifying this through her embrace of traditional cultural practices, such as veiling, as both a choice as well as a form of oppression. Nawwab's brand of feminism is resistant to western definitions and standards, creating a new, heterotopic space for feminism that honors traditional norms and considers the experiences of women in predominantly Muslim cultures.

Alghadeer (2013) examines the work of Nawwab and concludes that she introduces "authentic cultural portrayals of Muslim women to dismantle the prevalent representations of Muslim women living in the Arab/Muslim world" (p.16), rupturing stereotypes by offering glimpses into the experiences of Muslim women from their own point of view and exploring the barriers that Saudi women face in their movement toward social change. Both of the themes can be seen in the readings of Nawwab's poetry, providing readers with a different conceptualization of women in Saudi society and how they define their experiences, reflecting Foucault's heterotopia. Arabian women exist in an in-between space both globally and locally, and Nawwab's uncovering of this space provides the reader with an understanding of its order.

It is important to examine Nawwab's works as a retelling of these traditional stories in order to shape our understanding of them from a new perspective. Female writers in Arabic cultures challenge hegemonic notions of femininity and social change in these spaces, and their voices give all new meaning to the canon of Arabic literature and poetry. It is through this lens that heterotopia can be examined through Nawwab's works; her use of poetry is rooted in Arabic tradition while her prose offers an entirely new view of it.

## PUBLIC IMAGES OF WOMEN AND THE SEQUENCES OF CHANGE

One of the most significant changes found in Saudi culture involves the role of women, as is evidenced in Nawwab's own position as an educated woman who is regarded as a social and cultural leader. Al Fassi (2016) points out that Saudi women began to have a literary presence only fifty years ago, arguing that as gendered understandings continue to change within Saudi culture, the literature of Saudi women writers represents self-discovery and reinvention within this context. This position of women in Saudi culture also connects to Foucault's idea of the crisis of heterotopia, as women bear the brunt of gendered social change and can be understood to occupy an alternative space. This also echoes tradition which has kept women and men formally segregated in many public spaces. As women integrate public spaces and show more independence, they create an alternative space around them.

### WOMEN IN PUBLIC SPACES: MODESTY AND CHOICE

Nawwab's work uses time and place to trace these changes in the public role of women and to reflect their positioning relative to crisis of heterotopia. For example, "Gentleness Stirred" begins with a girl who is:

Striding through the gates of learning  
Wrapped warmly in her black *abaya*  
Modestly cloaked head to toe...  
Holding her head up high  
Thinking of the future  
Arms laden with books.

(Nawwab 2004, pp. 3, 1-3, 5-7)

This girl is meeting social expectations of retaining modesty while she is also excited to study and to attend school, "[b]lissful, brimming with expectations" (Nawwab 2004, p.3). The reader understands that this event takes place in relatively recent history, as the girl is attending school, and women were not traditionally educated outside of the home. Her traveling to school can be understood as entering into a heterotopic space due to her gender. This is reinforced in the next stanza, as she is accosted by a man who finds that she is "flout[ing] convention," as her *abaya* has slipped (Nawwab p.3). A crowd gathers and watches as the man yells at her. The girl wonders:

Has she missed a prayer?  
Has she been a disobedient daughter?  
Cheated, lied, stolen  
Beaten a child, an animal, been cruel to another soul?

(Nawwab, 2004, p. 4)

These are, Nawwab implies, offenses that could warrant rebuke and public humiliation, rather than a slipped scarf, "an unforgivable transgression/ in the eyes of the Controllers" (Nawwab, 2004, p. 4). This poem clearly depicts a power differential as a young girl is reprimanded by a bearded man who verbally assaults her in public with "the police by his side" (Nawwab, 2004, p. 3). It is unclear whether the young girl may or may not have

independently chosen to veil herself, but eventually, the question of choice is of little significance. As the poem illustrates, women in this era are forced by men to veil in a certain way. This question, therefore, is not left to girls and women, which causes this expectation to be oppressive, as it is externally enforced. Nawwab ends by alluding to this with the last lines of the poem: “The mind is strange, the spirit stranger yet / the Rebellion begins” (Nawwab, 2004, p. 4). This implies that women will go on to rebel because they are actively being oppressed by men in the guise of religious authority, and it anticipates social changes in Arabia. As the girl enters the school, she symbolizes women entering the heterotopic space that they create within the educational system, and as a heterotopia of compensation develops around their presence, the image of the repressive guard depicts patriarchal resistance to this change.

In the poem “The Hidden Layers,” an image of women in Saudi Arabia also prevails, demonstrating the next stage in the cycle of change as women continue to integrate into public spaces. However, this image is one that reflects further social change even as it engages with questions of tradition. In this poem, the alternative space occupied by the woman who chooses to veil is examined in relation to a global perspective. Whereas “Gentleness Stirred” shows women being oppressed through religion by men, “The Hidden Layers” also addresses this position, but from a first-person perspective that challenges the assumption that such oppression is inherent in the practice of veiling. In this poem, the female narrator ruminates on the way that she is perceived by Westerners. This woman has chosen to cover herself as a religious expression of modesty, yet she is acutely aware that this garb is viewed as oppressive by those outside of her culture. She begins with the line, “Some think I am hiding,” (Nawwab, 2004, p. 5) as though she cannot directly engage with the world or express herself without displaying her body. The rest of the stanza goes on to describe the “long black coat” with “little narrow slits for [her] eyes/ cloaked in mystery, medieval modesty” (p. 5). The next stanzas also address the perspectives of those outsiders who are viewing her and who the narrator regards as “comfortable with their own tunnel vision/ construing their own scenarios/ little knowing that I am proud” (p.5). The narrator goes on to describe how she is “proud of [her] identity...[her] femininity...[her] spirit,” as well as “[h]er face...[her] mind and...[her] culture,” including its traditions (pp. 5, 9-11, 12-14). The next lines read:

But modest in my dress  
Modest in my demeanor  
Modest in my expectations  
Viewing the world with sharp eyes  
Viewing all with curiosity and a thirst to learn. (p. 5)

This stanza illustrates that modesty is not antithetical to intellectual curiosity and engagement with the world, and it does not have to contradict what many would view as feminism or equality.

As her dress is a site of contention that sets her apart in some ways, the image of the veiled woman is often presented as one occupying a heterotopic space, one that does not consider the subjectivity or agency of the veiled woman. She presents two possibilities based on the way that her dress has been perceived by outsiders “with pity and barricaded from the world” (Nawwab, 2004, p. 5); and on the other hand that of “opening up vistas of wonder...and exploration into the unseen” (p. 5). The narrator ends by saying that “the world is my oyster as it is for my unveiled sisters”; while she sees a difference because she is covered and other women are not covered, she sees that they are not so very different and are in fact “united by unbreakable bonds of sisterhood” (Nawwab, 2004, p. 5). This poem represents a change from the previous one because it does not show the image of a woman

who is solely and happily engaged with traditional culture or lamenting cultural change, but instead reflecting on the differences between her culture and that of others. Additionally, as Hessa (2013) notes, “[i]n vividly portraying a Muslim woman wearing her traditional costume—namely, the black abayas—this poem also alludes to the mistaken Western tendency to associate the veil with a mask of deception or symbol of ignorance” (p. 323). While the narrator is happy with her culture and its traditions, she is also aware that veiling as a tradition is viewed negatively by many within other, less traditional cultures.

This poem generates a different feminist argument that women who veil are not oppressed and can choose this form of modesty as a legitimate form of self-presentation and religious expression, one that does not hold them back. Instead, the narrator regards that she and other women, including women living in modern western society, all have similar experiences through being women and through the bonds of sisterhood. Furthermore, she sees that she and other women have a common bond of experience as women, which includes histories of oppression. This is a more modern take on Arabian womanhood than in the previous poem, not least because this poem presents a first-person reflection on women's roles. It also reflects social change because it engages with global discussions about the roles of women in dominantly Muslim countries, specifically; these discussions have often failed to include the perspectives and voices of the women themselves. The Western perception of women in Saudi Arabia is typically one in which women are oppressed and set out of view, as noted by Wilkins (1997). Thus, Nawwab offers a critique of the ethnocentrism inherent in much of western feminism, demonstrating that the Muslim female narrator understands all of these issues, including how her culture is misunderstood, and yet offers up a sentiment of sisterhood. Furthermore, the freedom she seems to find in being veiled echoes Foucault's argument that heterotopias can represent spaces outside of repression. While those outside of Muslim culture may see the practice of veiling as a means of setting women apart and oppressing them, the woman who chooses this practice can also escape from concerns of embodiment in the physical world.

Finally, “Winds of the Market” shows yet another way that women relate to heterotopic space. In this poem, one sees a distinctly modern shopping experience as the narrator is “Stepping out of a shiny car/ Wrapped in black silk studded with glitter/ Face uncovered, hair modestly covered” (Nawwab, 2004, p. 19). Because only her hair is covered, this suggests that the narrator is living in the modern era, as do the next lines as she “strid[es] next to jeans clad teenage girls” (p. 19). The next stanza presents a chaotic mixture of different sounds and smells: “Clanking bracelets, crying babies...the sweet smell of waffle-like ice cream cones...pita bread brushed with *tahinah*... soda with mint leaves...smells merging” (p. 19). As in many regions, the shopping mall is a primary recreational center for teenagers. In this location, the narrator finds air-conditioned shops which are spotlit, featuring goods from around the world, including “Indian cushions, Italian shoes/ Swiss watches, and Danish Crystal” (p. 19). In this atmosphere, “[E]very need [is] catered for [and] every desire satiated” (p. 19). However, it is also “cold, stiff, formal, efficient”: the narrator enters the chaos of the mall and then leaves (p. 19). The mall itself is an alternative space that reflects change and cultural melding, one that is primarily populated by women and teenagers. Teenagers are in a literal stage of transition, and with changes to Saudi culture, women also occupy a transitional space.

The next stanza shows the difference between her mother's shopping experience and her own, as it begins with: “[M]y mother's realm of quaint shops/ lantern lights falling onto fresh sweet meats/ vendors balancing heavy bundles of Egyptian cotton” (Nawwab, 2004, p. 20). Immediately, the reader observes that the setting is more peaceful and calmer, and it also seems more connected to the narrator's culture than does the mall with its cold lights and goods from all regions. In the mother's shopping experience, one observes “graceful quick

hands/ Pulling on the widening circles of dough” (p. 20) and “Strollers passing by nodding to each other/ to the familiar and unfamiliar” (p. 20). The “beaming shopkeepers / softly inviting/ hospitality a must” present a stark contrast to the cold, efficient, yet noisy atmosphere of the modern shopping mall (Nawwab, 2004, 20). Whereas the mall features goods from the entire world to satisfy any whim, here, the shopper sees “wares from the region / Yemeni silver, Chinese brocade / Syrian lamb wool cloaks” (p. 20). While much of the popular imagination will situate the modern as being inherently better, this is not the image that Nawwab presents. Though convenience and efficiency may have been gained, certain aspects of culture and community are lost in this transformation. Nawwab documents the change between generations of women as they undertake traditionally gender-specific activities such as shopping. The narrator's shopping is very different from that of her mother's, whose experience is also presumably quite different from those who came before her.

In these poems, Nawwab addresses the changing public image of women in response to social and cultural change. This image is one that is situated between the traditional and the modern and one that does not necessarily regard modern social change as positive. The Arabic woman in Nawwab's poetry is acutely aware of how she is socially situated and regarded by others and how she relates to public space. Nawwab documents changes to roles by addressing particular cultural shifts in a reflective manner.

#### WOMEN IN PRIVATE SPACES: GENDER ROLES AND CHANGE

Additional poems in the collection also focus on the role of women in public space even as they focus more on women in private spaces, such as within the family. Nawwab addresses women's positions in various spheres of life. She criticizes the concept of “guardianship”, a social order in which women have no political or economic power, pointing out that damage can be done, particularly when men abuse the amount of power they are given. Within a space that represents a patriarchal utopia to oppressive men, women are relegated out of public spaces and to the domestic sphere, which can have disastrous consequences when their well-being is under the control of their husbands and male relatives. For example, in “Life Imprisonment,” Nawwab addresses “guardianship” to be an oppression of women in a way that is similar to “Gentleness Stirred.” The initial stanza depicts a woman who is utterly defeated and in torment as:

The world has darkened in her eyes  
She is left reeling  
Crushed  
Shattered  
Shackled  
Trapped in an iron-clad deadly web  
Attacked again and again by the vile tormentor  
Internal shrieks echo through her very being  
Endlessly. (Nawwab, 2004, p. 12)

This immediately grabs the reader's attention due to Nawwab's strong use of language and dynamic verbs. The stanza depicts an image of torture and despair. The next stanza reveals more of the context, as the woman described is:

Living in limbo  
Neither married nor divorced  
Murky, undefined state of being  
Former mate seizing all his powers of authority. (p.12)



Here, the reader can understand that the torment this woman suffers is at the hands of her husband, as social authority has come to heavily favor men in this environment. The next stanza shows the woman's despair growing as "The engulfing darkness grows / Heavier / Thicker" (p. 12). At the same time, the reader comes to understand that the woman's torment is psychologically reflected in lines such as "Helplessly watching / She turns about **looking** for a glimmer / A small ray of light in the darkening world" (p. 12). In this way, Nawwab demonstrates the effects of oppression and how psychological torments can be as torturous as physical torment. Because the reader is not sure of what is happening to the woman, he or she experiences the woman's torment before the context is clear. It is to be understood that this woman has a particularly abusive husband, as family members and friends comment on her situation as they "helplessly standby/ 'Oh, the poor girl, what can be done'" (Nawwab 2004, 13). Even if some degree of oppression is normalized in this political climate, the unnamed woman's treatment is harsh by these standards. She is completely dominated as:

Thirst for knowledge, need for work unrealized  
As permission to travel, learn, work  
Remain in her keeper's hands  
For daring to leave a living nightmare  
His fury unappeased  
He withholds it all  
Money, recognition, her very identity. (p. 13)

This suggests that the woman has attempted to leave this abusive situation and wasn't able to, and now because her husband has all of the social power, he has grown even more abusive in retaliation. As she is trapped, she comes to understand herself as "a nonentity" (p. 13). "Despair sets in," and the woman ultimately gives up. In this poem, Nawwab highlights the position of a woman in an abusive relationship, who is left without recourse, as she does not have the ability to leave and instead must be subject to the whims of her dominating husband. As this was historically the case for many women in this social context, Nawwab brings a modern perspective to this issue, even as she validates and affirms many traditional aspects of old Arabia. Thus, Nawwab situates herself as both embracing her culture and bringing feminist critique to some historical aspects of it.

The female character described in "Indomitable Lady" is also in service to her family, but it is not an enforced role. Rather, the poem shows an older woman, "her soft silver locks shining" who has spent "a life... in tireless toil" (Nawwab, 2004, p. 15). Though the woman was "Married off young / Bearing youngsters by the dozen/ setting out banquets fit for a sultan" (p. 15), she perseveres, even in the face of losing her husband and enduring family troubles. The woman is depicted as being noble due to her care for others and that her "Pride [holds] her up" (p. 15). At the same time, this depiction is poignant as she has endured "Long years of suffering without a murmur" (p. 16) and she turns aside from those who would finally return her attention and pampering. A gender differential is evident in this poem as well, as it is obvious that care for this family has been placed upon this woman as her role, and she has accepted it. She has endured a life of worry, hard work, and struggle. However, at the same time, her experience is very different from that of the woman depicted in "Life Imprisonment"; she is regretful that her husband has died, and she seems to find some level of enjoyment and purpose in caring for her family. While some of the expectations of this woman could be construed as oppressive, she is still able to enjoy her life. This woman and the previous woman could well have lived within the same time period, and these depictions could be considered to demonstrate different potential outcomes of social contexts featuring strict gender roles and expectations.

### WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA: "CAUGHT BETWEEN TWO WORLDS"

"Equilibrium" also exemplifies social change. This poem reflects the idea of the crisis of heterotopia yet again, as it traces the experience of grappling with two worldviews. The first stanza illustrates much of Nawwab's approach to Arabian culture, as she overtly describes the world she knows "chang[ing], alteri[ng], transform[ing]" (2004, p. 65). This stanza addresses change in that the narrator describes feeling:

Caught between two worlds  
The clamoring of each tugging at one  
Each pulling in a different direction  
The mind and heart at war. (p. 65)

The two worlds could likely be considered to be traditional Arabia and the new, modern Arabia. The mind and the heart could represent the split between modern culture, which would also entail gender equity, and tradition, in which specific roles have been strictly ascribed. The narrator finds the difference between these worlds, with their separate expectations and considerations, to be oppositional; she finds that:

Each puts forth arguments, logic, merits  
Espousing and advocating  
New thoughts, entrenched thoughts  
Different outlooks, familiar outlooks. (p. 65)

The last paragraph is optimistic, as the two possibilities the narrator puts forth are that the world will converge, bringing together these two different worlds and perspectives that have caused her to "balance on a tight tangled wire," or that they will "tear the fabric of [her] identity" (p. 65). While this latter option does not sound positive, the narrator explains it in terms of the potential of bringing forth a rebirth or allowing her to adapt to a new identity.

"Equilibrium" signifies the change that has occurred as the western world and modernity exist alongside traditional Arabian culture. Although this creates some dissension and dissonance for those who, like the narrator is attached to the traditional culture, yet values can be seen in the way of doing things in a more modern approach. Culture, as described by Hall (2003), involves representation, meaning, and language. Culture also bears inherent relationships to tradition and identity. The narrator points out that because these two perspectives have fundamental differences and are indeed oppositional in some ways, it is not a matter of simply combining them or permitting them to coexist side-by-side, as one might with cultural aspects that are more similar. The narrator is acutely aware that she is living in a time of change, and that tradition lingers from old times that have come before, but that the world in which she lives in is not fully modern. Her current position is one that she experiences as being somewhat precarious in this regard, and it doubtlessly reflects the experience of many within her cultural context.

"The Unfurling" can be read alongside the previously discussed poems to see an increasingly optimistic view of women's role in society as it has become more liberal. For example, the first stanza in "The Unfurling" reads, "Peeking out / Shyly striding into the light of day / A sliver of radiant hope finally dares to step out" (Nawwab, 2004, p.34). Here, the sliver of hope is personified, as stepping is a human movement. Therefore, hope itself can be standing in for a person. This becomes clearer in the next stanza, which reads:

The emotional tides  
Sweeping her inner core  
Bombarding her relentlessly

Till the stifling walls in her harden  
Harden, harden, harden and crack  
Ominously.

(p. 34)

“Bombarding” and “ominous” are not words that typically have positive connotations, but here they result in the cracking of “stifling” walls, which comes to suggest that the character will no longer be stifled once these walls have been broken. This is seen in the next stanza:

Emerging a woman strong  
Proud  
Confident  
Unafraid of her limitations  
Wise beyond her years  
Taming the tides  
Gracefully and skillfully  
Strong and ready  
To take on the coming storms of life.

(p. 34)

It is important to note that this female character is representative of the experience of women within Arabian culture. In response to social change, this woman is empowered and finds herself prepared to deal with these cultural changes. While the narrator in the previous poem found such changes to result in a feeling of uncertainty and sometimes imbalance, this character is capable of taking charge of her life. Thus, Nawwab demonstrates a shift that has occurred in the experiences and social position of women in response to social changes. This also verifies Foucault's assertion that heterotopia can also create a space free from oppression. The name “the unfurling” reflects an action such as that of a flower blossoming from a bud, which encloses the developing flower tightly and protects it until it is ready to brave the elements. Similarly, the development of women's spaces also provides a space to share experiences and be apart from men, which can be empowering, particularly when those spaces are created by women and willingly occupied.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout *The Unfurling*, Nimah Nawwab tracks changes to Saudi culture and the political landscape. She reflects social change as it has happened and is happening, signifying such a heterotopic space that allows for additional change. In this way, the author anticipates cultural and social change in a way that is unique, as it engages Foucault's heterotopia. In doing so, Nawwab also invokes the traditions of Saudi Arabia even as she exhorts the need for change, presenting a worldview that values tradition but is cognizant of developments that reflect a modernizing world; she thus belongs to a group of modern Saudi women writers who navigate spaces between traditional culture and feminist sensibilities. Particularly, her treatment of gender invokes Foucault's crisis of heterotopia, in relation to both physical and figurative spaces. Through her use of narration and description, the author situates readers in the positions of her narrators and characters, encouraging them to also inhabit heterotopic spaces.

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