

Cleansing Fire—Language, Gender, and Tribal Critique in Saudi Feminist Poetry: The Case of Hind al-Mutairi’s “The Romantic Spring Protest”

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Abstract—This study examines Hind al-Mutairi’s 2015 poem, “The Romantic Spring Protest”, as a feminist act of resistance against Saudi Arabia’s tribal patriarchy. The poem critiques gender inequalities and restrictive tribal customs, highlighting the challenges women face. By analysing linguistic and performative elements, this study explores how Saudi women poets challenge patriarchal norms. Despite growing interest in Arab feminist literature, Saudi women’s poetic resistance remains inadequately studied, particularly in performative contexts. This study employs textual, performance, and reception analysis. A close reading reveals al-Mutairi’s use of repetition, metaphor, and verb tense shifts as defiant strategies. Performance analysis examines her Jeddah International Book Fair recitation, where vocal delivery amplified the poem’s impact. Reception analysis assesses media reactions and institutional backlash, showing how poetry provokes discourse. The poem’s transition from submission to rebellion exposes patriarchal contradictions. Using Butler’s performativity and Foucault’s power-knowledge, this study argues poetry is both literary and performative resistance, reshaping Saudi gender discourse.

Index Terms—Saudi women, Saudi poetry, Arab women’s literature, Saudi literature, feminist literature

I. INTRODUCTION

According to an Arab proverb, “poetry is the register of the Arabs” (الشعر ديوان العرب). This has been true since the pre-Islamic era when Arabs used poetry both to boast of individual or tribal achievements and to critique others. Poetry was celebrated as a widely practiced oral literary form, and today, the Arabian Peninsula perpetuates this tradition with festivals such as *Suq ‘Ukaz* (سوق عكاظ), where poets and audiences gather to share and assess poetry based on literary merit (al-Afghani, 2008). The annual *Suq ‘Ukaz festival* is particularly notable for its mixed-gender participation, reflecting a long history of Arab women’s involvement in poetic gatherings. In the pre-Islamic era, women poets were renowned not only for their creative contributions but also for their dynamic performances and linguistic critics (Jabir, 2018). Saudi women have continued this legacy, producing poetry in both Modern Standard Arabic (الفصحى/الفصحى) and the Saudi dialect (العامية). Despite this, Saudi women poets have faced significant challenges in asserting their voices, particularly when diverging from classical forms like the *qasida* (القصيدية)—a hallmark of Arabic poetry.

This paper builds on the legacy of such poetic resistance, focusing on Hind al-Mutairi’s 2015 poem, “The Romantic Spring Protest” (ثورة الربيع القلبي). Al-Mutairi’s poem critiques tribal patriarchy and its discriminatory practices against women, navigating themes of shame, rebellion, and liberation. Her work reflects broader societal tensions, as Saudi society is deeply rooted in obedience to authority, whether familial, educational, or tribal. Within this structure, challenging norms is fraught with difficulty, making al-Mutairi’s critique particularly bold and significant. Al-Mutairi is a university professor, with a background from one of the most well-known tribes in the Arabian Peninsula and her poem demonstrates the courage behind Saudi women’s expressions. On the other hand, al-Mutairi’s poem is also exceptional because it criticizes the tribal culture, the overregulation of women, and how it negatively impacts not only Saudi women but also women in other Arabian Gulf states.

This study explores how Saudi women poets use language and performance to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms, focusing on the intersection of gender, poetry, and societal critique in Saudi Arabia. This paper argues that Hind al-Mutairi’s “The Romantic Spring Protest” exemplifies the transformative power of poetry as a medium of feminist resistance, employing innovative linguistic and literary strategies to critique tribal and societal norms. By analysing her poem’s themes, language, and public reception, this study demonstrates how Saudi women poets navigate and resist sociocultural constraints, redefining the role of poetry in Saudi Arabia. The central questions guiding this paper are:

- 1) How do Saudi women poets, particularly Hind al-Mutairi, employ poetry as a medium of resistance?
- 2) How does the act of performing poetry amplify its impact as a tool for social critique?

Though the scholarly study of Arab and Muslim women has increased exponentially in the twenty-first century, Saudi women—and especially Saudi women’s writing and other artistic expressions—remains seriously inadequately researched. In 2013, Saudi scholar al-Rasheed (2013) claimed that the academic knowledge in social science on Saudi women, specifically Saudi feminist issues is greatly inadequately studied, and today the situation has not changed as Saudi women’s gender issues remain one of the least studied in the region. Within the fields that cover Arab women’s writing,

there is relatively little on Saudi women's literary expressions. In fact, there is almost no rigorous academic work on Saudi women's expressions of resistance let alone the use of performance-based critique. This lack of study of Saudi women, especially their literary work, points to the crucial need for more studies and analysis. In addition, most existing Arabic works on the subjects follow a methodology that falls into the descriptive approach, therefore lacking critical engagement, interpretation and contextualization. This study aims at addressing this missing element in the scholarship, by studying literary expressions—including performance-based critique and linguistic innovation—in Saudi women's writing through a rigorous theoretical framework and analytical method. Even if some recent studies have tried to describe Saudi women as agents of change (Almuthaybiri, 2024; Sirri, 2024), this paper aims at also contradicting the general depiction of Saudi women—especially in the English language—as complacent and obedient rather than agents of change (Pharaon, 2004; Sonbol, 2014; Al Alhareth et al., 2015).

The paper will show how the work of Hind al-Mutairi employs poetry as a medium of resistance and how her act of performing poetry has amplified its impact as a tool for social critique.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study examines how Saudi feminist poetry functions as a form of resistance within a patriarchal tribal system. To analyse this phenomenon, the study employs Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990, 1993) and Michel Foucault's concept of power-knowledge (1975, 1976), both providing a lens for understanding how gender and power are constructed and challenged. These theories will be applied to the case of Hind al-Mutairi's poem "The Romantic Spring Protest", which critiques tribal patriarchy and uses poetic performance as a means of defiance.

Judith Butler's concept of performativity (Butler, 1990) argues that gender is not an inherent identity but a repeated performance of socially established norms. For Butler, gender is performative, continuously enacted through behaviours, language and rituals. She also adds that there is no "true" gender identity behind the performance, as the act of performing constitutes identity (Butler, 1990). When individuals or groups disrupt these gendered performances, they expose the constructed nature of gender, making resistance possible. Butler's concept of performativity is crucial in understanding how Saudi women, through poetry, challenge and subvert the gender norms imposed by tribal and patriarchal traditions.

Foucault (1977) contends that power and knowledge are interdependent, shaping social structures and individual subjectivities. Power operates through institutions, discourse, and societal norms, producing accepted truths that govern behaviour. Within Saudi society, the tribal system enforces power over women through social and legal constraints, making poetry a space where women can generate counter-discourses that challenge dominant power structures.

Butler's theory of performativity is relevant for this study as it highlights how Saudi women poets challenge traditional gender norms through their linguistic and performative acts. Similarly, Foucault's theory of power-knowledge helps explain the institutional and discursive mechanisms that enforce patriarchal norms in Saudi tribal society. The combination of these theories provides a comprehensive framework for analysing both the content and performance aspects of feminist poetry.

Using Butler's framework, this study examines how Hind al-Mutairi's poem "The Romantic Spring Protest" subverts patriarchal expectations. The poet's use of performative speech, repetition, and verb tense shifts mirrors Butler's notion of performativity, where identity is reshaped through linguistic acts. Similarly, Foucault's power-knowledge concept applies to the poem's critique of tribal systems that dictate women's roles through socially constructed "truths" (1976). The poem's reception, mainly the backlash against its public performance, highlights how power is exercised to silence dissenting voices and maintain social control.

This theoretical framework provides a foundation for analysing the linguistic and performative strategies used in Saudi feminist poetry. By employing Butler's and Foucault's theories, this study will explore how poetry becomes an act of resistance against entrenched power structures. These theories will guide the analysis of Hind al-Mutairi's poetry, demonstrating how literary expression is a mechanism for challenging gender norms and disrupting patriarchal discourse.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on Hind al-Mutairi's poem "The Romantic Spring Protest" due to its linguistic richness, thematic relevance, and the controversy surrounding its performance. The poem was chosen for its direct critique of tribal patriarchy, its use of poetic devices to construct resistance, and its public impact, particularly following its recitation at the Jeddah International Book Fair. Given the scarcity of academic research on Saudi feminist poetry as performative resistance, this poem serves as a representative case study.

This paper employs a qualitative research methodology, focusing on literary analysis and discourse analysis to examine how Saudi feminist poetry, particularly Hind al-Mutairi's "The Romantic Spring Protest", functions as a form of resistance within a patriarchal tribal system. The study applies Judith Butler's theory of performativity and Michel Foucault's concept of power-knowledge to analyse the linguistic and performative aspects of the poem, as well as its reception within Saudi society. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of Hind al-Mutairi's poem as both a literary text and a performative act. By incorporating textual, performance, and reception analysis, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how feminist poetry challenges and reconfigures power structures in Saudi society.

The research is designed as a textual analysis combined with a performance analysis. By examining both the written text and the poet's public recitation, the study aims to highlight the intersection between literary content and performativity in feminist resistance. The research follows a multi-step approach, including close reading, performance analysis, reception analysis and theoretical application.

The close reading implies a detailed textual analysis of "The Romantic Spring Protest", focusing on linguistic strategies such as repetition, metaphor, verb tense shifts, and rhetorical questions. Close readings of literary texts reveal both their aesthetic practices and their connection to social protest. My feminist analysis builds on the methods of Buthayna Sha'ban (1999) and Hoda Elsadda (2012), both of whom examine how women's voices, often overlooked, are expressed through literary techniques. Like them, I analyse Saudi women's poetry as a form of resistance, focusing on linguistic and stylistic strategies that assert liberation. Elsadda's approach to linking protest with artistic expression informs my study, which explores how Saudi women use poetry to break societal constraints and redefine freedom.

For the reception analysis, the paper reviews the audience reactions, media responses, and institutional backlash to the poem's performance. At last, the theoretical application will integrate Butler's performativity and Foucault's power-knowledge to interpret how the poem challenges patriarchal discourses.

For the data collection, the study relies on four types of sources, including the original text of "The Romantic Spring Protest" as published and circulated online; Video recordings and transcripts of Hind al-Mutairi's performance at public literary events; Media reports, interviews, and online discussions related to the poem's reception. These materials provide insight into how the poem's message shifts between written and spoken forms and how poetry functions as a site of sociopolitical contestation in Saudi Arabia.

A thematic approach is used to analyse the data through linguistic and stylistic analysis, which identifies the poem's key themes, metaphors, and literary techniques. Performance and performativity will include investigating how the poet's delivery transforms the poem into an act of resistance, using Butler's framework of gender performativity. Finally, it examines the power and disciplinary structures, examining how the poem's reception reflects Foucault's power-knowledge concept and the enforcement of patriarchal norms. The study applies a multi-layered qualitative approach, combining: 1) Close textual analysis—Examining repetition, metaphor, verb tense shifts, and rhetorical questions as tools of resistance; 2) Performance analysis—Assessing voice modulation, gestures, and delivery to understand how performance enhances resistance; 3) Reception analysis—Investigating media responses, audience reactions, and institutional backlash, linking them to Foucault's power-knowledge framework.

IV. RESULTS

A. Performance Reception and Public Response

Hind al-Mutairi's 2015 poem, *The Romantic Spring Revolution* (ثورة الربيع القلبي), critiques the tribal patriarchal system (القبيلة, *al-qabilah*) in Saudi Arabia. Her work, which challenges deeply rooted social hierarchies and gender norms, has sparked significant controversy, particularly her bold public performance at the Jeddah International Book Fair (al-Mutairi, 2015b), which was also broadcast on national television.

The reception of *The Romantic Spring Revolution* was distinct from other works presented at Saudi literary festivals, which, in recent years, have increasingly welcomed female poets to share the stage alongside their male counterparts. Despite this progressive atmosphere, al-Mutairi's poem was met with resistance, both during and after her performance. Figures who have historically supported Saudi women's contributions to literature, such as His Highness Prince Khaled al-Faisal—himself a poet and artist—and Saud Katib, former director of the Jeddah International Book Fair, did not extend the same support to al-Mutairi in this instance.

The backlash, however, was not merely about her participation but tied directly to the poem itself. Its critique of tribal traditions, amplified through performance and subsequent broadcasting, ignited a systematic attack against the poet. Unlike the gradual acceptance of literary evolution initiated by earlier writers, al-Mutairi's bold act of performing her poem disrupted the literary and societal norms, drawing from the same circles that had previously welcomed the inclusion of women.

This divergence underscores the distinction between written and spoken poetry. In al-Mutairi's case, the act of performance was inseparable from the content of her poem. By strategically amplifying specific words and phrases through vocal inflection, she emphasized the urgency and defiance embedded in her message. This dynamic interplay between content and performance elevated the poem from a static literary critique to an embodied symbolic protest, resonating deeply with the audience and provoking strong reactions, both supportive and oppositional. As will be explained in the discussion, this act of resistance exemplifies Judith Butler's concept of performativity, where gender and power are constituted and contested through repeated acts that can construct—or deconstruct—existing systems.

Al-Mutairi's critique of the tribal system drew sharp reactions, including a ban issued by the governor of the region, Prince Khalid Al-Faisal Al Saud, prohibiting her from reciting poetry at local events (Almanatiq News, 2015). Following the ban, her poem *The Romantic Spring Revolution* became widely known as *Woe to the Tribe* (وبح القبيلة)¹. Al-Mutairi asserts that her audience ascribed this alternate title to heighten its dramatic impact (Sabq News, 2015). The poem was

¹ The poem with its original title was published in the Saudi newspaper *al-Medina* (al-Mutairi, 2015a) and in her poetry collection *Aljawza* (al-Mutairi, 2015c).

inspired by the real-life story of Salma, a wife and mother of five, who was coerced into divorcing her husband due to the disparity in their social status—her tribal lineage contrasted with his lack of it (Sabq News, 2015). Such cases reflect broader societal inequalities in Saudi Arabia².

While al-Mutairi does not explicitly name any particular tribe, her critique elicited widespread backlash, culminating in her exclusion from poetry festivals across Saudi Arabia. Her work stands as a testament to the role of poetry and its performance as a medium for social critique and the challenges faced by women poets in patriarchal societies.

B. Linguistic and Stylistic Analysis

In her poem, al-Mutairi employs a range of linguistic and poetic techniques to deliver a searing critique of tribal traditions and the men who perpetuate them. Her use of evocative and provocative language—such as terms like *ويح* [woe], *عار* [disgrace], and *ثورة* [revolution]—Al-Mutairi creates a powerful vocabulary of resistance that challenges patriarchal tribal values. The word *ويح* [woe], used in the title and throughout the poem, serves as a scornful address to the tribe, positioning her as an arbiter of justice against oppression. The repeated use of *عار* [disgrace] highlights the internalized shame imposed on women, reinforcing the suffocating weight of patriarchal norms, while *ثورة* [revolution] signals both personal defiance and a broader call for systemic change, linking her critique to historical liberation movements like the Arab Spring.

Her manipulation of verb tenses strengthens this resistance, with past-tense verbs like *أفقت* [I woke up] and *تمردت* [I rebelled] marking her personal awakening, while future-tense verbs like *سأهجو* [I will satirize] project her ongoing rebellion. By placing these charged words at critical points in her verses, she amplifies their emotional and rhetorical impact, mirroring classical Arabic poetic techniques while subverting them to challenge the very norms they traditionally upheld. Through this bold linguistic strategy, al-Mutairi's poetry becomes both a critique of entrenched social structures and a call to action. Her explicit and confrontational language forces the audience to confront the realities of oppression, solidifying her work as a transformative act of resistance.

As mentioned before, the two titles of Hind al-Mutairi's poem reflect its widespread appeal to people in Saudi Arabia and some of the contours of the depth of complaint within it. Both the official and the popular title focus on protest, but with slightly different meanings. The title that the poem has come to be known by, and through which it became popular since going viral in 2015, for example, *Woe to the Tribe* (*ويح القبيلة*), focuses on her attack on the tribal system. It names the tribe right in the title itself—utilizing the word, (*ويح*) [woe] which is used generally to reprove or scold someone for doing something wrong. The “official” title under which it was first published focuses on the inspiration of the so-called Arab Spring protests (*ثورة الربيع العربي*) that swept through the region in 2011. This title replaces two letters, which results in the title, *The Romantic Spring Revolution* (*ثورة الربيع القلبي*) so that the protests become those of the “Romantic Spring” or “Spring of the Heart”. This official title emphasizes the revolution and links it to love, marriage and assisting an emotional depth to it. It also begs certain questions, for example, by using the word “romantic”, is she fighting for her right to be in love and/or to marry someone of her choosing? She uses the topic of love as a pretext to take aim against the tribe's traditions.

Hind al-Mutairi opens this poem by explaining that in school she learned that she is “shameful” (*عار*) and that the tribe neither accepts nor forgives people who act in ways that are outside its norms. She details that the tribe instead washes away such shame by fire, which is indicative of the aggressive treatment towards women in the tribe; first, by seeing women as “shameful” and second by insinuating that this shame must be washed away not with water but fire. The first and most obvious question to be posed here is: What does al-Mutairi mean when she describes herself as “shameful”? Is she referring simply to the fact she was a girl and is a woman? Is she referring to the old tribal traditions of the pre-Islamic era, when it is said that females were not accepted and were buried alive (*wa'd*) (*وآد*). Perhaps she begins her poem in this manner to introduce the bloody history of tribal tradition before proceeding to describe how she became aware of the brainwashing of the tribal system and how it should be challenged.

From the very beginning, she links gender discrimination to tribal ideology before she explains in more depth how this ideology affects Saudi women who live within their tribes' traditions. The two titles of this poem—both the official one and the popular one—can be read as an act of protest in and of themselves. Right from the opening lines, from which the poem's popular title was taken, al-Mutairi opens fire on the tribe in all of its complexity. She then enumerates the reasons for her attack on the tribe; she is protesting against injustice towards women and the tribes' double standards when it comes to tribesmen, because of how the whole system is based on the patriarchy.

Some of the first and most obvious vocabulary items drawn upon and repeated in the poem I have already mentioned above for example the word (*عار*) [shame]; the poet uses repetition of this word throughout the poem:

تعلمت في حجرة الدرس أنني عار
وأن القبيلة لا تقبل العار
كلا
ولا تغفر العار
بل تغسل العار بالنار
تمحو الجريمة

[I have learned in the classroom that I am shame

² Nadav Samin has shown more examples of what is called (*تكافؤ النسب*) in legal discourse. (Samir, 2012).

and the tribe does not accept shame
 No!
 ...does not forgive shame
 Instead, it washes shame away with fire
 ... cleans up the crime.] (al-Mutairi, 2015a)

In the lines cited above, the poet repeats the word (عار) [shame] in four of six lines, at the end of the line in all but one, where it is rhymed instead with the word (نار) [fire]. How the word shame is used and repeated has several effects. One is that it emphasizes the word and concept itself, drawing attention to it. This in turn is immediately linked to gender, we see that it is not a poem about shame per se but the shame of being a woman or girl. The movement in the poem is present here, because it takes the reader/listener to the classroom and a young girl learns not just about shame but that she *is* shameful. This in turn emphasizes how girls and women are not accepted within the tribe and the tribal system. In the second line of the poem, this reiteration is made even stronger using the emphatic negative “كلا” in the third line.

The verb tenses then help the poem emphasize this point through movement by using several present tense verbs. The two verbs in the negative, “does not accept” (لا تقبل) and “does not forgive” (لا تغفر) are then followed by two more without the negative particle: “washes away” (تغسل) and “cleans up” (تمحو). The conjugation of the verbs—the feminine singular—also reveals a great deal: she does not associate injustice with a specific individual or even a group of tribesmen. Instead, she refers to the tribal system and blames the ways in which tribes were built from traditions, culture, and rules. However, negative and positive verbs aimed towards the same object (العار) here are ironic and sharp in both ways. In the negative verbs, the tribe neither accepts nor forgives the shame, whereas women are the shame. They are not accepted or forgiven, in either their being and existence or in their actions. The positive verbs then become more intense as the tribe’s actions towards “shame” are directed at cleaning it up and washing it away. The poet shows with her words how aggressive the tribe is by using the verb “to cleanse” and linking it with fire rather than water. This verb attached to water has positive connotations, but when paired with fire it implies an aggressive and violent act. This linguistic usage by al-Mutairi is one location in which it is clear how the tribe as a structure is intolerant of women.

Beyond the concept of shame, al-Mutairi delves into a deeper discussion of other kinds of words that connect to the concept of fear, and even horror, that women experience in certain ways when living within the tribal system. One specific passage describes the feeling of being a woman living in fear of what the tribe is capable of should she fall in love. She has specified that this poem is about a woman who is married and has children with someone from outside the tribal system – a beloved husband whom the tribe forced her to divorce (Sabq News, 2015). The use of multiple varied words to describe her situation is notable in this passage:

وصرت أهاب الخطيئة
 أخاف اقتراف المحبة
 وأخشى ولوج دروب الهوى
 هيبية، خيبية، خشبية، رهبة
 وطنونا عقيمة

[I have become afraid of the sin
 afraid of committing love
 fear entering the paths of love
 fear, disappointment, dread, horror
 and futile doubts.] (al-Mutairi, 2015a)

The English translation above does not capture the number of different words used to express the depth of meaning al-Mutairi expresses in relation to fear, dread, and horror. No word is repeated here—unlike the passage discussed above where repetition is used to emphasize her points. In this passage, her technique is to display a range of vocabulary meaning “the same thing” to further enhance and underline the range of emotion that is connected to fear. One example of how she also expands meaning through her extensive use of vocabulary is by pairing words and concepts in unusual ways. In the second line, for example, she uses the verb commit (اقتراف) to talk about practicing love or being in love, as you would talk about committing a crime. When she is afraid of “committing love” (أخاف اقتراف المحبة) she speaks about it as if it were a criminal act. This is a searing indictment of the kinds of ways the tribal system cultivates a culture wherein women are in fear of ‘committing’ a natural emotion.

She opens her poem by questioning herself as “shame” and reveals the fear that comes with living within a tribal system, that is actively upheld by men, to make the transition into two distinct stages: revelation and liberation. Indeed, after coming face to face with the ‘fire’ and the ‘shame’, she transitions into the first stage of revelation. Here, she realizes the truth: that the tribe is just an illusion. The second stage—liberation—occurs when she finally wakes up from this illusion to rebel against the tribe and its men. Fighting, she goes on in the conclusion of the poem to declare war against the tribe and its men:

ولكنني بعد عمر طويل،
 أفقت، تمردت،
 أعلنت ثورة عشق عظيمة،
 تدكّ جميع الحصون القديمة،
 وحررت من داخلي ألف مقاتل،

وجهزت خيلي بجنح الظلام،
لتغزو القبيلة،

[After a long life,
I woke up, I rebelled,
I announced a great revolution of love
That demolished the ancient fortress
I liberated thousands and thousands of warriors inside me
And prepared my horses in the darkness
To invade the tribe.] (al-Mutairi, 2015a)

All the verbs that refer to the poet here are in the past tense; those verbs present the awakening of the poet after she was brainwashed. Verb choices here are strong and active, she is not only waking up from an illusory state, but she will also fight back by announcing a revolution. Along with this awakening, she is preparing for an invasion to demolish the “old fortress”, a reference to outdated customs and traditions that she has been inculcated into since she was a child. When she speaks of the “many thousands of warriors liberated inside her” and “preparing her horses”, she is indicating that she intends to start a new war and invade (لتغزو) the tribe.

Another way in which al-Mutairi constructs her poem to convey its expression of disagreement through forms is by using questions. Questions are often repeated in her poetry, recalling her repetition of other vocabulary items. In the section of the poem cited below, she uses the same question word (كيف), meaning “how?”, three times in a row at the beginning of a line:

ويح القبيلة،
كيف تقصد أرواحنا
كيف تسرق أعمارنا
كيف تقسم أحلامنا كالغنيمه؟!

[Woe to the tribe,
How does it steal/ruin our souls?
How does it steal our lives?
How does it divide our dreams like spoils?!] (al-Mutairi, 2015a)

The poet uses these three repeated questions to underline her accusation that the tribe indoctrinate not only the men who are implicated in upholding its patriarchal system but also its women. It ruins their souls and spirits, and also steals their lives and ruins their dreams.

It is relevant to note further here that the three questions are formed using the present continuous tense (فعل مضارع), rather than questions and statements in the past tense that are used in previous sections such as those quoted above. This indicates the persistence of these actions—they are still ongoing and not a mere thing of the past. Moreover, they could very well be happening right now. The use of expressed and implied pronouns is also important in a full analysis of the poem. As mentioned above, the word for tribe (القبيلة) is a feminine singular noun, so the accompanying question plus verb is framed in the third person, feminine singular and could be translated as “she” or “it”. As mentioned above, the poet is referring to the tribe in the singular feminine with all its traditions and patriarchal rules that harm women. Further, the objects of each of these three verbs—the tribe is doing things to (تقسم، تسرق، تقصد)—are all expressed in the first-person plural. Rather than referring to herself then, the poet uses “us” to encompass herself and others. This raises additional questions about who this “us” is.

However, to give a further sense of how this poem inscribes its protest message through the use of verb tenses, a fuller picture of the poem in relation to its use of verbs is needed. It is important to note that it opens with verbs used in the past: (أمنت، أذعنت، سلّمت، مارست، تعلمت) “I believed”, “I accepted”, “I practiced”, “I learned”, “I bowed”, “I surrendered”. It is marked, and also notable, that the verbs she opens with are ones that show her to be submissive, conformist, and part of a system that kept her passive. These are words also connected to her childhood as a girl. As she grows up, she still uses the past tense (كبرت، أدركت، امنت) “I realized”, “I believed”, “I grew up”, however we see that the kinds of verbs used to show her progression and coming of age—the more literal “I grew up” but how this is connected to having “realized” things. There is then the turning point when she shakes off what she sees as her ignorance and these verbs are still expressed in the past (أفقت، تمردت، أعلنت، حررت، جهزت، صبأت، كفرت، قررت) “I woke up”, “I rebelled”, “I announced”, “I became free”, “I decided”, “I disbelieved”, “I blasphemed”. They not only show her rebellion and her self-expression, but also even more powerfully that she became free and even “blasphemed” or “disbelieved”. The poem closes with the poet promising to continue what she started. In these lines, she changes tense and then writes in the future: (سأهجو، سيغدو) “I will satirize”, “I will write”, “my words will be...” This timeline of the verb tenses the poet writes her poem through is showing how this resistance has been built through al-Mutairi’s timeline, where she was brainwashed then she realized the illusion of the tribe, and finally she decides that she will attack and invade the tribe.

All of Hind al-Mutairi’s poetic strategies, the use of techniques of repetition, verb tense progression, vocabulary, and rhyme serve the poem’s message of resistance. It is clear from the outset, and becomes increasingly more so, that the protest is not just about men, but about the patriarchal system upheld by the traditional tribal system in Saudi Arabia. This contrasts with the way that women are treated, as men are not subject to the shame she describes at the opening of the

poem. She notes that men are forgiven even if they practice all kinds of obscenity, while women are a “shame” simply because of their gender.

One thing that made al-Mutairi’s poem of protest against this tribal system so popular is that she focuses on showing a direct and specific image of men who uphold it. The tribe always protects its image, no matter what its male members do. Al-Mutairi shows here the double standard in the way in which the tribe judges and deals with its members depending on their gender. For example, in contrast to the verse cited above in which she realizes she is a shame, in the following verse, she shows how the tribe ignores men’s crimes:

وحين كبرت عرفت الحقيقة،
وأدركت أن القبيلة وهم،
وأن رجال القبيلة كانوا
يدوسون أعرافها،
يفعلون الفواحش والموبقات الذميمة.
وأن قوانينهم من قشور، وقش،
وأن حبال التقى عندهم
من خيوط رميمة.

[When I grew older, I learned the truth,
I realized that the tribe is an illusion,
And the tribesmen were smashing its traditions,
They committed obscenities and the ugliest sins...
I realized that their rules are nothing more than straw and empty shells
and their supposed piousness was built on shaky ground.] (al-Mutairi, 2015a)

Here, al-Mutairi shows that though they control the tribal system and benefit from the patriarchy, men themselves do not respect the tribe’s traditions and dishonour the tribe by committing sins and being obscene. These verses refer to frequent stories one hears about tribes announcing the collection of donations to cover the costs of blood money, known as *diyya* (الدية)³ owed by male members who commit murder. This is rarely less than one million riyals and sometimes can even reach 50 million. While a man is in jail awaiting the verdict of *qisas*⁴ for having killed someone, the tribe contacts the family of the victim, usually from another tribe, to propose a sum of *diyya* to forgive the murderer and thus withdraw the penalty in the court. In this common scenario between tribes, men know they can literally get away with murder because their tribe will cover for them. As a result, murder for trivial reasons has become common among tribes.

Even though murder is the ultimate act that goes against the piety that the tribal system claims to uphold and protect, it is still not treated as an act that should be “cleansed with fire” in the same way that being a woman does. For a woman, simple, minor actions such as marrying someone from outside of a tribal family can provoke the entire tribe’s condemnation. Al-Mutairi makes this double standard clear in the poem. If a woman trends on social media for one reason or another, for example, she will shame her tribe. There are tribes that have already denounced women because of insignificant, daily actions like getting married to a man who is not from a tribal family, being shown dancing on social media or speaking for herself on the internet.

Every time al-Mutairi attacks the tribal system, she also takes their leaders to task:

ويح القبيلة،
وكل طقوس القبيلة!
أمنت أن شيوخ القبيلة حمقى،
وأن رجال القبيلة حمقى

[Woe to the tribe,
and all tribal rituals!
I believed that all tribe’s shaykhs are clowns
And the tribesmen are foolish] (al-Mutairi, 2015a)

ويح القبيلة،
وتباً لكل رجال القبيلة”

[Woe to the tribe,
and damn all tribesmen] (al-Mutairi, 2015a)

سأهجو القبيلة،
وشيوخ القبيلة،
وأهجو جميع رجال القبيلة

[I will satirize the tribe,
The tribe’s shaykh
And all tribesmen] (al-Mutairi, 2015a)

³ *Diya* is a concept evolving from the custom of blood revenge practiced in pre-Islamic Arabia. The Qur’an authorizes *diyya* as a kind of compensation for homicide, in lieu of *qisas*, in which the victim’s family pardons the offender (Ismail, 2012).

⁴ *Qisas* is a penalty in Islamic law. In the case of murder, *qisas* is the right to take the life of the murderer after court approval, unless the family of the victim forgives the murderer or accepts the *diyya* and waives the penalty.

These three examples—taken from different locations within the poem—all show how al-Mutairi begins with a mention of the tribe—often her same repeated “woe be to the tribe”—and then specifically targets its leaders. The curses are varied, yet they add up to the same thing. In the final example above, she confirms that she will attack them all – again, referring to all the men of the tribe, I have translated (جميع رجال القبيلة) as tribesmen.

This raises the question as to why al-Mutairi focuses on the men of the tribe instead of more directly critiquing the traditions and customs of the system, or its reliance on patriarchy. She does call out the leaders, who are always men, but why does she continue to focus on the people rather than the system? Her critique remains more focused on people—male people—throughout the poem, rather than the system that she indicts through them. For example, she proposes that tribal traditions were created by what she calls sick minds (عقول سقيمة) and while the customs and traditions were developed a long time ago, they were all made by men. Her critique is aimed primarily at the men who continue to practice these traditions today:

وَأَنْ الطُّقُوسَ الَّتِي كُنْتُ قَدَسْتُ
قَدْ وَضَعْتَهَا عَقُولَ سَقِيمَةٍ.

[The rituals that I praised
were put in place by sick minds] (al-Mutairi, 2015a)

The results of this study effectively address both research questions by demonstrating how Hind al-Mutairi employs poetry as a medium of resistance and how the act of performing poetry amplifies its impact as a tool for social critique. Through a detailed linguistic analysis, the findings reveal how al-Mutairi's use of repetition, metaphor, and evocative language constructs a powerful narrative of defiance against patriarchal and tribal norms, answering the first research question. Additionally, the performance analysis shows that her deliberate use of vocal stress, gestures, and body language transforms the poem from a written critique into a confrontational act of resistance, highlighting the performative dimension of her work. Together, these findings underscore the dual power of poetic content and performance in challenging entrenched societal structures, directly addressing the research objectives.

V. DISCUSSION

“The Romantic Spring Protest” by Hind al-Mutairi serves as a compelling example of poetry's transformative potential as a medium of feminist resistance. The findings of this study indicate that “The Romantic Spring Protest” is a compelling example of feminist resistance through poetry. Her innovative use of poetic styles and themes not only disrupts the dominance of traditional male-centred narratives but also reclaims poetry as a space for women's agency, self-expression, and resistance. The analysis of her linguistic strategies of resistance—particularly repetition, verb tense shifts, and rhetorical questions (Hill, 2018)—demonstrates how she constructs a language of defiance against Saudi tribal patriarchy. Her public performance at the Jeddah International Book Fair transformed the poem from a written critique into a confrontational act of resistance, amplifying its impact and igniting strong reactions.

A. Linking Findings to Theoretical Framework

The study's findings reinforce Butler's assertion that gender and power are enacted through repeated performances (1990). Al-Mutairi's transition from passive acceptance to active rebellion, marked by the shifting tenses in her poem, represents a performative break from socially imposed norms. More significantly, her public recitation underscores the transformative nature of performativity—through the act of speaking, she not only critiques the patriarchal system but also actively defies it. The resistance inherent in her poetry is thus not only textual but embodied. By strategically amplifying specific words and phrases through vocal inflection, she emphasized the urgency and defiance embedded in her message. Her purposeful gestures and embodied presence did not merely express resistance but actively disrupted the normative framework that silences women's voices in Saudi tribal society. This act of resistance exemplifies Judith Butler's concept of performativity, where gender and power are constituted and contested through repeated acts. Al-Mutairi's performance exposed the constructed nature of patriarchal authority by defying its norms in both content and form, demonstrating how the act of speaking itself can become a mode of resistance. Foucault's concept of power-knowledge is particularly relevant in understanding the institutional response to al-Mutairi's poem (1975, 1976). The official backlash—ranging from public criticism to performance bans—illustrates the disciplinary power exerted over women's voices in Saudi society at the time. By challenging accepted truths about gender and tribal honour, al-Mutairi's poem disrupts the dominant discourse, necessitating institutional mechanisms to reaffirm control. The reaction to her poetry is thus a manifestation of how power regulates knowledge and expression.

B. Broader Cultural and Social Implications

Saudi society has been built on obeying authority rather than opposing or challenging it which makes any opposition or criticism unwelcome. This indoctrination of obedience begins in the family home where children are raised to obey their parents without questioning or challenging their authority (Albeshr, 2013). Moreover, the tribe in Saudi society structure is a very powerful and strong authority, where the society itself counts as a tribal society (Albeshr, 2013). Thus, the tribe is not an exception in the authority circle, within this larger context of obedience and fear change, al-Mutairi has nonetheless operated in a way to challenge the tribal system and its norms. The poet uses the metaphor “washing shame with fire” to symbolize the harsh and punitive process of redemption imposed on women, whose actions are perceived as

sins within the tribe's rigid moral framework. As al-Mutairi uses this expression in her poem, the verb itself (washing) linked to be cleansing with the water as a positive element, yet the poet emphasizes the violent act of washing with the fire. The poet refers to this action of cleansing to the patriarchal tradition of the tribe. This metaphor vividly conveys the extreme punitive measures imposed on women who challenge traditional tribal norms. Fire symbolizes both destruction and purification (Charteris-Black, 2016), implying that the tribe erases perceived female transgressions with violent force rather than acceptance or forgiveness. The image evokes a deep emotional response by highlighting the brutality of honour-based societal expectations.

Al-Mutairi's poetry challenges the prevailing stereotype of Saudi women as submissive and apolitical. It amplifies the voices of Saudi women in a global context, fostering cross-cultural understanding. Her work demonstrates that Saudi women have historically engaged in resistance through creative expression. Her case further suggests that poetry is not merely an artistic medium but a critical space for feminist intervention and societal critique. It positions their creative works as part of a larger, global conversation about women's empowerment and the role of art in societal change. This aligns with global feminist movements, where spoken-word poetry has catalyzed for political and social change (Chepp, 2016; Levy & Ayalon, 2024).

The implications of this study are both literary and sociocultural, highlighting the transformative power of Saudi women's poetry in challenging societal norms, redefining gender roles, and fostering cultural change. Al-Mutairi's critique of the tribal system exposes the contradictions within patriarchal structures. The double standard she highlights—where men's transgressions are overlooked while women's actions are policed—demonstrates how tribalism operates as a mechanism for gendered control. Her poetry disrupts this system by revealing its inherent hypocrisy and challenging its legitimacy. The reception of "The Romantic Spring Protest" can be compared to feminist literary resistance in other regions. Like poets in the Arab world and beyond, al-Mutairi employs poetry as a means of reclaiming voice and agency (Montefiore, 1983).

VI. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Saudi feminist poetry, particularly "The Romantic Spring Protest", functions as both literary critique and political resistance. By applying Butler's and Foucault's theories, it becomes clear that al-Mutairi's poetry is not just about content but about the act of speaking itself—a performative challenge to patriarchal norms. Her case underscores the power of poetry as a transformative space where women can reclaim their voices despite societal constraints.

The results of this study show how Hind al-Mutairi employs poetry as a medium of resistance and how her performance amplifies its impact as a tool for social critique. Linguistic analysis reveals that her use of repetition, metaphor, and evocative language constructs a powerful narrative of defiance against patriarchal and tribal norms. Additionally, performance analysis highlights how her vocal stress, gestures, and body language transform the poem into a confrontational act of resistance, emphasizing the performative power of her work. The findings contribute to a thin but growing body of scholarship on feminist literary resistance emphasizing that poetry is not merely an artistic pursuit but a form of activism that shapes cultural and gender discourse. By continuing to explore these themes, future research can further illuminate the evolving role of Saudi women in shaping their literary and sociopolitical narratives.

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