



# The Suppression Of Female Liberty In Arabic Literature

QUDAMA KHAMEES HAMMOOD

Ph.D. Research Scholar, School of Languages, English Department, Gujarat University, Ahmedabad. Gujarat. India.

DR. VIDYA RAO

Associate Professor Bhavan's Seth R.A. College of Arts and Commerce, Khanpur, Ahmedabad. Gujarat. India.

## Abstract

The status and situation of women in the Arab world has become a synonym with the word oppression. Sexism is prevalent, dominant and embedded in the Arab culture over a millennia. So much so that, misogyny, male chauvinism and objectification have become an intrinsic part of the Arab way of life. Authors Leila Aboulela, Hanan al-Shaykh and Fadia Faqir have weaved stories that are inspired, and at times, depict true events. Some incidents have been experienced either by the authors themselves, or others, who they knew or were acquainted with. The depiction of the life of protagonists is very relatable to the women in the Arab world. And through their novels, the authors have brought to light the plight, discrimination and the inhumane treatment that is meted out to women. Unfortunately, the perpetrators are either male family members or the justice system that denies women any chance of being treated equal to men. Even with the odds stacked against them, the women, through their innate courage, endeavour to break free from the shackles of enslavement at the cost of risking their lives. The authors have created characters who are compelled to act out of their desire to be free from bondage and live their lives in peace - a birth right - that is denied to them, by bigoted men and a culture that is abusive, in every sense of the word.

**Keywords:** misogyny, chauvinism, sexism, culture, women, realism

## Introduction

The stories of scarred souls of the women in *The Translator*, *Coloured Lights*, *Beirut Blues*, *The Story of Zahra*, *Pillars of Salt* and *My Name is Salma* - the novels under study - are a witness of the harrowing and outrageous situations faced by women in the Arab world. Acclaimed authors Leila Aboulela, Hanan al-Shaykh and Fadia Faqir have carved out stories that are not only a reflection of the Arab society, but they also gain significance because, at times, they are inspired by true events. The authors, all women, have either experienced the incidents themselves or have gone through the similar mental or emotional conflict as those of the protagonists. The towering resistance that they offer, despite being in a hopeless and appalling situation are a testimony to the insights offered by the authors about the socio-cultural situation in the Arab world. The protagonists share a common background in terms of how their men treat them and a culture that that subjugates them in the name of Islam and family honour. The stories mostly unfold in the Levant and the authors epitomize grit and gumption of Arab women through the characters who are willing to embrace death in their struggle for freedom and survival.

## Women and Society

To fathom society, it is pertinent to decipher the role of women in it. Of the many definitions that define it, the following definition sums it up entirely - "The roles of women within the society are dedicated towards advocating human development, social justice and are influencing the policy-induced change." (Kapur, 2019). If that description is applied to the multiple Arab female characters in the novels, the perspectives of the authors regarding the socio-cultural situation of those females are in total contrast. The characters of Leila Aboulela, Hanan al-Shaykh and Fadia Faqir are oppressed individuals because of their gender. In a society that is just, culture evolves around women as their involvement also inspires the children to partake in activities related to the community, which in turn, creates an environment of interconnectedness among the people. Sadly, that situation does not exist in the novels. The cause of the reality portrayed by the authors is due to "some of the greatest barriers to women's equality in the Arab region are discriminatory laws, gender-based violence, lack of alternative childcare options, unfair wages, unequal division of domestic labor, and the shrinking of civil society space." (AbiRafteh, 2022).

Moreover, the inclination of the Arab men to treat women according to the Islamic law, also called as Sharia, rather than accepting modern laws that seek equality among the genders, is the biggest obstacle that denies women to have a voice of their own. The authors underline the deliberate efforts of Arab men to mix religion in every aspect of a women's life to trample them to a point where they cannot question the

legality of the treatment that they are subjected to. If they do, then that is considered as blasphemy or sacrilege, the punishments for which are worse. The maltreated lives of Zahra, Salma, Sammar, Maha and the others in the novels are threaded together by a common denominator – sexism that is powered by religion. And in the matters of religion in the Arab countries, women don't have any say, let alone any representation. If the women want to make a change in their situation, they need adequate representation in all the strata of society that wields power. The Levant offers very little, at best symbolic, positions to women that cannot bring about any change in their lives. The comprehensiveness with which the authors have touched upon the lives of women that spans continents, cities and villages reveal a sorry state – that their past as victims follows them wherever go.

Through the viewpoints of the authors, “clearly, the state's role in promoting, allowing, or forbidding social change is crucial. Without movement toward equivalent legal rights, access to public space, and political influence, women have little hope of further expansion of their rights, or of sex roles.” (Zuhur, 2003). The authors have explicitly stated through the developments in the stories, a systematic and concerted colluding between the religious leaders and the government to keep women subjugated. The reasons to do that are many. Women empowerment is a scary thought for the Arab men. That is so because more than a millennia of dominion and domination of women has made them sexist. The seared belief in their consciousness that male superiority cannot be challenged is another reason. Also, women are considered to be stupid or of a lower intellect than men. Lastly, gender equality is considered to be a western concept that is not compatible with the Arab way of life. Therefore, even when Sammar and Salma live in Europe, they face restrictions, that are, among other reasons, in their own mind. The conditioning of the Arab females has reached levels where even subconsciously, they feel they are going to be called out for living the life of their choice even on foreign land.

The novels reveal that the Arab patriarchal society as a whole, has deliberately avoided female empowerment and due to that their dependency on males for monetary reasons has caused them to wallow in poverty. The novels under purview are not just stories, the female authors have depicted the compulsions under which women live and struggle to live an ordinary life, free from dependence. The comparison of societies has been made in an interesting manner in *The Translator* (Al-Asmakh, 2009), “Sammar struggles between being a part of a community as in Sudan and an Individual as in Aberdeen. Sudan, Sammar's native country is a collectivist society in comparison to Scotland, the country that Sammar migrated to which is an Individualistic society.” (Al-Asmakh, 2009). That observation is a telling conclusion for the towering efforts that Arab women have to make to integrate into a society which is unlike theirs. The need for integration arises for the Arab women because their own societal norms restrict and prohibit them

to adopt or accept the ethos of other cultures. Even if they want to blend into the social norms of other societies, their own diaspora may either ostracize them or consider them to be an outcast. The troubles and plights of Arab woman, if analysed wholly through the novels, reveal that the patriarchal Arab society treats them in a manner that can be called ethnocentric.

Ultimately, the take of the authors on social perspectives of Arab women in their novels are not limited to any single aspect of their lives. It involves an overall analysis, where the three authors endeavour to highlight the struggles of women in every walk of life. That struggle is external as well as internal. The women not only have to fight the patriarchal society but also their conditioned thinking which forbids them to have any freedom of choice, even if it's related to their own private lives. Additionally, the social, political and economic barriers that women have to face makes them compelled to live a life that offers little hope of change. Of the women who migrated to the western world, their difficulties in getting used to a new environment can be only attributed to their fear of the standards of that country. Overall, the perspectives of the authors can be divided into two parts in some cases where the protagonists migrate to a foreign land and the other women in the Levant who have to live their life according to the Arab patriarchal laws. That difference doesn't make too much of a difference on the outlook of the female authors as they know that though the protagonists may have achieved freedom, their consciousness is still shackled in the land of their origin through memories.

### Women and Culture

The status of the Arab women in the Levant is in terms of their cultural identity is another aspect that is explored in the novels by the authors. A culture cannot be complete without the participation of women in it. Any vibrant, thriving country needs the contributions of women to make herself a strong nation. That is so because the characteristics and richness of a country are based on them. Culture has been defined by many in multiple ways. However, the following definition encompasses its essence – “Culture can be defined as all the ways of life including arts, beliefs and institutions of a population that are passed down from generation to generation. Culture has been called “the way of life for an entire society.” As such, it includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, rituals, art. Norms of behavior, such as law and morality, and systems of belief.” (LaMorte, 2016). Needless to say, that above definition includes the contributions and participation of women. In contrast to that, a UN report (“Convention on the”) makes scathing remarks on the situation of Muslim women by observing that “[...] women's freedom and their rights as citizens remain[d] vulnerable, and must be continually reinforced.” If the authors perspectives are taken into account, the Arabic culture has yet to accept women as a part of their ethos. The authors don't deny women's presence in the Arabic culture, but what they do emphasize is that it is miniscule and is confined to certain professions that are relegated to the background. The examples of women being successful and in

the limelight are rare, and therefore, according to the authors, an exception cannot become a rule. The portrayal of women in the novels from either the rural or the urban background highlight their position as a gender that has to be compliant and not be in the limelight.

The novels under study have Arab women protagonists and characters from teenage to the elderly. If the lives of the characters are chronicled, in their country and in those where they have taken refuge or immigrated, notwithstanding their individual identity, it is observed that their role is limited in the cultural aspect. And that role is to live life the way men want them to. With no freedom or recourse to justice or a platform to express their views, skill or talent, their contributions amount to almost nothing. And whatever value they add to the Arabic culture, is only by the prior consent and authorization by the patriarchy. Cultural enrichment of a society is only possible if generations after generations of women are allowed to carry forward ghetto legacy of their cultural contributions. Aboulela, Al-Shaykh and Faqir have raised a valid question – If the characters of the novels are subjugated and facing persecution and sexism, how is it possible for women to enrich their culture? Moreover, if the definition of culture for men is to beat, rape, push women into prostitution and kill them at will, how are women supposed to fight that radical thinking? For, unless that perverted ideology is not crushed, how can women even think of contributing to their culture?

In the novels, the term 'culture' for women in the Arabic world is confined to be at the beck and call of men and to do as they are told. The majority of the multiple characters in the novels are clearly and definitively slaves to the will of men. Can that behaviour of subjugation be called a culture in the strictest sense of the definition above? The answer has to be, and must be, an emphatic 'no'. The betrayal and murder of Zahra, the honour killing of Salma, and the torture and abuse of Um Saad and Maha, among the other afflictions that the other characters go through, point towards a very shocking belief – that the role of women in Arabic culture is defined by patriarchy. And that culture is abuse, torture and death. On the other hand, Arab women in the novels who migrate to a foreign land, do much better in terms of enhancing and enriching culture in any which way they can. That is a testimony to the fact that if Arabic women are given the environment of freedom and equality, their contributions could not only make the existing Arab culture rich, but also make the world take notice of their offerings in terms of skills and talents, and provide them a global platform to showcase them. However, the novels depict a bleak picture.

Moreover, it is extremely pertinent to mention that female Arabic authors have been accused of depicting Arab women as helpless and compelled. They are also blamed of presenting a narrative which demonize Arab men – “Other Arab writers in diaspora represent Arabs in a negative way which led to enhancing the stereotypical images that were, and are still known, about Arabs like Faqir in her novel *My Name Is Salma*. This may be regarded as a strategy for attracting Western readers and gaining popularity.” (Alhaloli, 2022). Though that statement maybe true to a certain extent due to the fact that readers have it ingrained in them that Arab women are nothing more than sex slaves for the Arab men. Those preconceived notions also contribute to the readers idea of women being oppressed and going through excesses that are too difficult to put into words. In a nutshell, that is the impression of the Arabic culture on the outside world. However, the winds of change in the world of culture in the Levant have been experienced and a change has been witnessed. Although, much needs to be done. On the authors predilection to portray women as nothing more than an object in the Arab world cannot be completely denied. Firstly, the novels under study are written by women, who have an intricate knowledge about the functioning of the Arab society with respect to their women and culture.

Additionally, the women in the novels who go abroad are victims of biculturalism but do experience a freedom that allows them to make considerable progress economically and does their confidence a world of good. That is so because the Arab diaspora in a foreign land becomes a bit lax in their ultra conservative attitude towards women. But, their mental and emotional ties are still, to a degree, bound with their homeland. That is itself is an attachment to their culture in the sense of belonging. In *Beirut Blues*, Asmahan faces the predicament of her life, whether to stay put in Lebanon or emigrate to America. “One of the most poignant portrayals in *Beirut Blues* is Asmahan wavering between her longing to be with her lover Jawad in Paris and yet her inability to renounce her attachment to Beirut. Even though she often expresses a sense of being imprisoned within the city, she still regards the option of leaving the country and the war behind as an act of deception.” (Mambrol, n.d.). Again, this is an emotional conflict that is rooted in culture. Despite knowing that the future of her motherland is bleak and gloomy, her love for Lebanon gains precedence. It is very clear that the women in the novels take their countries with them in their heart wherever they go. Their connections with their roots explains that they can, with their discrimination, differentiate between their country’s true identity, her essence and the biased patriarchal values. If culture is passed on from one generation to the next, and if one traces the culture of a country and the manner in which women were treated historically before the advent of an ideology that stifles the liberty of women and oppresses them.

## Conclusion

Without an iota of doubt, it is explicitly clear that abuse and oppression of women in the Arab world is a reality. Through the characters, the female authors have provided socio-cultural perspectives on women in the Arab world. Their outlook encompasses the state of women where their liberty is guarded and restricted, and which results in women becoming subjugated. So much so that a woman's perspective cannot be formed independent of men. The vice-like grip on women in a society that is sexist, chauvinistic, biased and uses religion and laws to commit excesses on women hinders the contributions of women in the socio-cultural aspect. But when the very same women migrate to countries where gender equality is valued, they make themselves useful in many ways. At times, by narrating first-hand accounts through the protagonists, the authors have depicted the absence of a conducive environment where women are valued. Furthermore, women have to face a situation where their choices in matters of love can become a matter of life and death. An individual's social and cultural life are intertwined and the absence of one cannot complete the other. The psychological effects of immigration on women, and their failure to completely integrate even though when they live among their diaspora, lays emphasis on the state of belonging. Ultimately, the women in the Arab world have a long road of struggle ahead – that of gaining an identity of their own and that of being valued.

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