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Social Realism and Commitment in Husah Al-Tuwayjir' *Wa Ṭāla Sh'arī Min Jadīdin*

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Abstract

This paper examines the short story written by Husah al-Tuwayjir entitled '*Wa ṭāla Sh'arī min jadīdin*' (And My Hair Grew Long Again). The work belongs to that rare category of Saudi Arabian female fiction writers which offers female perspectives to the general corpus of modern Arabic literary repertoire. The paper explores the expansive articulation of female identity that is contested as a negative model in the story and also points to the social and feminist commitment in Arab-Muslim societies, especially in Saudi Arabia. The short fiction written by al-Tuwayjir, the paper argues, accounts for female experiences that reduce male-female relationships in the given social context to a fundamentally antagonistic one. Al-Tuwayjir's story is unabashedly a case study of a more convinced but also matter of fact and multifaceted perspective on female experience in the Arabian Peninsula.

Introduction

Current literary criticism of women's fiction in Saudi Arabia in many ways reflects the social status of Saudi women. Many male critics seem to consider the study of fictions written by women writers in the Kingdom as optional in their endeavours to assess the Arabic fiction in general. Others consider women's fictions to be merely factual accounts of women's lives. In short, fictions written by Saudi women are not yet considered part of mainstream in Arabic literature.

Husah Al-Tuwayjir, the author of *Wa ṭāla Sh'arī min jadīdin* (And My Hair Grew Long Again) was born in Riyadh 1958. She had her primary and secondary educations in the same city. The author of this selected story obtained her Bachelor degree of Arts from King Saudi University before she proceeded to obtain Masters Degree in social services from the University of St Louis in the United States in 1985. She presently works as Director General of the Care and Guidance Department at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, she has a prominent social presence, being a founding member of the women's Wafa' charitable society in Riyadh. She takes a substantial part in literary activities.

Al-Tuwayjir is a writer whose work dwells on the story of a typical married couple the husband being the only active member of the two-man group. As it is evident in a patriarchal society, the wife is always silent and is in the shadows, bowing to the whims and caprices of her husband. However, she decides to break the chain of silence and subservience by cutting her hair. This is an act of rebellion, a way to show her husband that the period of silence and subjugation is over. Added to this, she makes her husband realise the fact that she has decided to re-build herself. To re-integrate herself into the society by empowering herself, she refuses to follow the mundane route within the household and keeps different hours from that of her husband. Eventually, she returns to school and also finds herself a job. Although her husband is desperate for the situation at home, to return to the way it was before, his wife has invariably closed the doors on her days of servitude and subservience to her husband.

The story of the author examined in this paper represents more recent trends in the writing of Arab women. In contrast to her male counterparts' works, Al-Tuwayjir's work reflects a greater awareness of and commitment to the social and sexual issues facing Arab women today.

Within this unity of concern, however, the writer exhibits a multifaceted approach to the problem, and great stylistic innovations. Husah Al-Tuwayjir uses her experiences as a woman and health practitioner to express the internal and external encounters brought about in women's lives through subjugation. Her style is direct and realistic, and her reflective thoughts often seem like theoretical works rather than fiction. She portrays women striving for self-realisation through aesthetic plots in her works, moving to romantic revolt against puritanical attitudes toward love, social hypocrisy and showing women revolting against being treated as sexual objects or slaves by despotic and authoritarian husbands. Her style exhibits the wide range of her thoughts, poetic and suggestive at times, surrealistic and irrational at others, and highly symbolic throughout. Husah Al-Tuwayjir approaches women's problems through an extreme sensitivity to her inner self and her sensual sensations that help her grasp more acutely and fully the magnitude of women's oppression from within. Her style is poetic, sensual, and highly suggestive. The writer portrays, with frankness and acute perception, the evils that Arab society in general and Arab women in particular are facing today. Her style is usually realistic and thought-provoking.

In general, we can say that the various approaches taken by the author and other women writers, especially in the Arab world recently are

courageous and daring. She reflects a desire and concern not only to describe Arab women's problems and dilemmas, but also to find new ways for them to escape their trapped situations. This boldness is reflected in the lifestyle of the writer herself, trying to break away from the tradition-bound circles around her. She has asserted herself as a feminist writer despite the prejudices voiced against women fiction writers in Saudi Arabia, a path not easy to follow within the restrictions of Saudi Arabian society. The selected work in this essay was published in Riyadh; the country has continued to publish important works, thus demonstrating the leading cultural roles even in the midst of its social turmoil.

Protest and Rebellion in Husā's *wa ṭāla Sha'ī min jadīdi*

Feminist writers' view of men as mates stands in stark contrast to the dominant antagonistic character about women. The men's dominance of women reflects a tendency to assert woman's deficiency, and to shoulder her with the responsibility for social problems. The factors that contribute to this antagonism are related to culture, religious, and popular discourses. The shift from a tribal society to a modern state has undermined the traditional individual male function of protector as a member of a tribe, not only vis-à-vis other male members, but more important by women.

Scholars like Nawal Al- Sa'adawi, Altorki Sorayah, Mariam Cooke, Latifat Al-Zayyat, and a host of others, researching the Arabian Peninsula and Muslim women have contended that patriarchy is a salient feature of Arab societies, and they have treated as a concrete social fact. This questionable characterisation of the Arab social structure as patrilineal and patriarchal center on the premise that men determine the organisation of society. As a result, women were and are depicted as isolated from men, as passive actors in the so-called public domain, as confined to their kin groups, and so on.

Among the theoreticians of patriarchy, however, Gayle Rubin (1978) has come closest to identifying the ideological function of patriarchy as distinctive from its use as an all-embracing explanatory social fact. She points out that patriarchy should be treated as a specific form of male dominance, and its use should be confined to the Old Testament type of pastoral nomads from which the term originated. Rubin contends that the power of males is not founded on their roles as fathers or patriarchs but rather on their collective adult maleness. In the context of the contemporary society of Arabia, like elsewhere in the world, while patriarchal practices, in which individual males assert their power over individual females, do exist, it is that collective adult maleness that constitutes a driving discursive force, reflecting the collective need to

control society in and through women. Patriarchy, whether practiced on the collective or individual level is mediated by the fact that it is men who control other men, but through women. The patriarchal discourse acquires its ideological force because it satisfies the need for power of individual men and society at large. The patriarchal ideology may be sustained either because it serves some men's psychological need for power or because of the social incentives of the high status rewarded to those who acquire the skill of controlling women. For example, men's zeal to dominate women is usually justified as protection for women, but it can also be seen as a means by which a man protects his honor and through which he maintains his social prestige vis-à-vis other males. In the patriarchal discourse, patriarchy need not be maintained in real interpersonal relations between men and women in order for it to be effective on the discursive level.

Husāli Muhammad al-Tuwayjirī's short story has an intertextual link with Nawal Al-Sa'adāwi's *Women at Point Zero*, most especially in the deployment of radical feminism in chronicling women's plight in their society. She has also chosen to address the particular problems faced by Saudi women. Al-Sa'adāwi presents some very daring issues about Arab society. For instance, she asserts that anything required of women should also be enforced for men, because the moral values of a society should be applied to all of its members, regardless of sex, color, or social class. She illustrates that at present, the codes of honor imposed on women are like codes imposed by rulers on their workers and servants, rather than moral imperatives for the whole society.

Al-Sa'adāwi in the *Fall of Imam* portrays that one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman. She believes that the differences between men and women are not inherent in their nature but are learnt within society, because sex is biological and gender is all about psychological. The social institutions and laws regulating Arab women's lives in marriage and divorce must be changed if the Arab world is to move toward an improved society. The cultural and media organisations, as well as all means of mass communication; television, radio, magazines, newspapers, the publishing industry, must take equal responsibility for bringing about the necessary social changes. They must, among other things, represent women in respectable roles other than the stereotypical roles like cooks, dishwashers, beauty aids, and fashion models.

Concerning the taboos surrounding sexuality, Accad Evelyn (2001), a radical feminist critic notes that the circumcision of girls is practised as a means of ensuring their virginity by inhibiting their sexual impulses, thus making them frigid. With mutual sexual attraction more or less ruled out,

marriage is usually based on materialistic considerations; it is a kind of business transaction or legalised prostitution in which the husband becomes the sole owner of his wife, with unilateral rights of divorce.

Al-Zayyat reveals: "I am of the opinion that any local problem that is candidly addressed, however, will most likely have universal application, as human beings experience many things in common wherever they find themselves". Al-Zayyat is trying to make a case or appealing to the entire world that if male dominance could be checked in the entire Arab world, where it is predominant. This will make a change and have positive effects globally and not only on Arab women.

In Al-Tuwayjir's *wa qāla Sha'ī min jadīdi* (And My Hair Grew Long Again), it is revealed that relations between the sexes are only partly a product of patriarchal rules. Women writers' tendency to locate forces of oppression outside the dynamic relations between men and women is a reflection of their social approach to societal problems. Patriarchy, in author's view, is only one of the techniques used by tradition to control women in the society. Her story suggests an important distinction that has to be made between patriarchy as a social fact and patriarchy as ideology used for the purpose of control.

In a similar vein with other female writers in Arab world especially Nawal Sa'adawi, Husah Muhammad al-Tuwayjir in *wa qāla Sha'ī min jadīdi* puts forth the protest against patriarchal established norms by women who are tired of the status quo. In this story, there is a clear rebellion from the heroine. The couples involved in the story are from the privileged class. However, gender oppression and subjugation knows no class boundary. It is a phenomenon which has eaten deep into the fabric of the Saudi society. So long as there is a man in existence, irrespective of his status within the society, there will be the accompanying oppression and marginalisation of the women folk. The heroine of this story has found her to be stagnant and redundant, a vicious circle of living in her husband's shadow, adhering to his wishes and catering to his every whims and caprices. The story opens with the narrator presenting the readers with an argument between the couple. The reader is privy to the fact that the wife refuses to observe her daily routine of preparing her husband's tea and serving him, while he reads the dailies. The fact that she refuses to serve her husband his tea is clearly a break away from routine. In her words, the heroine reveals:

وتذكرت أنني لم أصنع له الشاي هذا الصباح.. وأني
لم أقدمه إليه .. وتذكرت أكثر .. أن هذه هي المرة

الأولى التي يحصل فيها هذا .. منذ كونا معا حياة مشتركة، لقد شعرت بالرغبة الأكيدة في .. الخروج على روتين حياتي اليومي .. لقد كنت أعاني مرارة التحجر في المشاعر .. ولا بد أنه كان يدرك ما أعانيه .. أو أنه يشاركني المعاناة.. ويشعر كما أشعر إن كان شيء قارب على النهاية. ونحضت لأغادر الصالة -أنا أشعر بإقناع تام بضرورة الوصول إلى حل .. الحياة معه أصبحت مملة .. راكدة .. لم يعد بما جديد .. دائما نحن على خلاف حول أشياء كثيرة...

I remembered I had not made him tea this morning. I remembered quite a lot that it was the first time such a thing had happened since we started our life together I had felt an urgent desire to get out of the daily routine. I was suffering from the way my feelings had become frozen, and he must have felt that. Or maybe he had joined me in the feeling that everything was coming to an end.

I got up to leave our living room, utterly convinced a resolution must be reached life with him was growing tedious and stagnant. There was nothing new about this. We were constantly disagreeing over so many things. (Translation is mine)

The total lack of change makes the heroine edgy. She is determined to find a way to solve this problem. The most annoying aspect of their married life is the inability to communicate. Whenever there is a rift between them, the husband will leave the house hurriedly to avoid any argument which may arise. In a bid to change this, the heroine cuts her hair. On various levels, the exiting of her hair is symbolic. It represents a departure from the old norm and a rebirth. From another perspective, it is a revolt, an act of defiance, a challenge to already established norms. From yet another point of view, it is a way by which the heroine draws the attention of her husband. Recounting this incident, the narrator writes.

وبالفعل رفع رأسه وبصوت هامس حزين قال كأنه يحدث نفسه: ليتك لم تفعل ذلك.. ليتك لم تقصى شعرك الطويل .. إنك لا تدركين كم كان رائعا !! وابتعدت إلى الطرف الآخر من المقعد .. وبتحد لأول

مرة قلت : سأفعل ما أريد .. لقد مللت سيطرتك ..
 إنك تعاملني كدميه .. تريدها فقط لخدمتك ولكنك
 كنت غبيا .. إذ لم تدرك انه من الممكن أن يكون لي
 شعور واحساس و ارادة .. أتدري؟ لقد كرهت نفسي
 إذ أنقذ أوامرك دون أن يكون لي رأى .. من اليوم
 كل شئ سيتغير. شعري وقصصته .. ومن حقي أن
 أفعل ذلك .. وهناك امر آخر .. سألج باب الحياة
 العملية .. وسأواصل دراستي .. وسيكون لي في هذا
 المنزل رأي .. ليومين فقط .. وبعد سأغادرها لأنني
 فقط أريد أن أشعر بأنني قد مارست حقوقى كاملة ..

Lifting his head, he begins to whisper sadly, as if he is talking to himself.

Why did you do that? Why did you cut your long hair?

You didn't know how beautiful it was!

I moved to the other side of the chair and, for the first time, spoke in a challenging voice:

"I will do whatever I like. I am tired of your control over me. You treat me as if I were a doll, just there for your convenience. But you were the stupid one. You never thought I might have a will and feelings. I have come to hate myself, because all I do is follow your orders, without having any views of my own. From today everything is going to change. I've cut my hair. And it was my right to do it. And another thing, I am starting work and I am going on with my studies. I will have my own opinion in this house, even if it is just for two days. Later, I can leave it. I want to feel that I can use my rights". (Translation is mine)

Self-Identity and Self-Realisation in *Wa qāla Sha' rī min jaḍḍi*

The importance of self-realisation is central to Al-Tuwayjiri's *wa qāla Sha' rī min jaḍḍi*. The reader will see the ambivalent feelings of a woman toward the restrictions of her culture. The heroine self-realisation and self-identity meets her husband unexpectedly, but he simply cannot change the woman's stand. As with other occasions of discord, her

husband is of the impression that by simply ignoring the matter, it will be resolved. The author depicts a determined woman who is conscious of the fact that she needs to make a change in her home and in life. She realises the fact that there is the need for her to find her niche in life and work on it. The heroine, in her words, depicts:

فالحياة أقصر من أن .. تقضيها في شقاء .. والعمر لا
يتكرر لتسقى مضاعفا والسعادة من صنع أيدينا ..
ولست حبة تطرق بابا لتكتسح مرارة اليأس من
خلقنا .. ان لم تعمل على ذلك وحاول جاهدا أن
يعيدني حياة الإهانة من جديد .. ولكنني رفضت
ونفذت ما أريد .. أتممت دراستي .. وولجت باب
الحياة العملية .. وشعري طال من جديد .. لم أعد
أفكر في قصة ثانية.

Life is too short to be spent in misery. We only live once, so why should we keep suffering? We make our own happiness. Because happiness isn't a pill we swallow to rid ourselves of the bitterness of despair, but something we work for and earn. He tried hard to get me to return to an abject life, but I refused and did what I'd always wanted to do. I went on with my studies and started working. My hair grew long again and this time I never thought of cutting it!
(Translation is mine)

Oladosu (2008) who investigates into the dynamics and the inner dialects in the construction of Arab women's identities in Sudan is in line with Al-Tuwayjir's position on women's identities. Oladosu explores the paradoxes in women's identities as a medium for the appropriation of that all important spirit in women's genie and how this is manifested in narration. The cultural background of Sudan where women appear to have no identity of their own is critically examined. They perceive themselves in the same way the society perceived them. The women's identities in *Mawsim*, according to Oladosu, are wrapped by tradition, then unwrapped by modernity which shows the image of their lives within the Sudanese society.

Another myth that the author unveils is that of the traditional conception of respect in her society. She points out that the most accurate model for this type of respect is the respect that is believed to consecrate the relationship between husband and wife, father and daughter and master

and slave. Instead, Al-Tuwayjir proposes a concept of "true love" that is devoid of the idea of ownership or selfish interests, and that is not marked by romantic self-sacrifice. She illustrates that true love consists of respect and recognition of the other person's equality, freedom, and independence; it is characterized by mutual understanding and communication.

Al-Tuwayjir depicts that the condition of Arab women can only be improved by structural means, by bringing about changes in the existing socio political system of the Arab world and by reforming the laws and regulations that oppress women in these societies. The sources of this constructive radicalism are made abundantly clear in Al-Tuwayjir's fiction, much of which is based on her experience as a woman and writer.

The Saudi society strictly laid out boundaries for women in which any women who stepped outside of them will be labelled as rebellious. Husah Al-Tuwayjir, a Saudi Arabian female writer takes the opportunity of expressing her perception of the society in which she lives through this story. In the study of her text, it is discovered that Al-Tuwayjir resists patriarchy through her presentation of atypical woman. Her artistic creation of a heroine, who represents reality, shows her social concern and desire to speak for women.

Al-Tuwayjir's rebellious heroine is a subversion of the woman in a society. Moreover, this is a heroine who realistically represents the ideology of Al-Tuwayjir's time; therefore, she should be regarded as a realistic and not a mere fictional character. Also, it is established that the depiction of a rebellious heroine is not a reinforcement of Saudi Arabian patriarchy, rather, it is recognition of a woman who is yearning and fighting for gender equality in a society which marginalises women.

Conclusion

Different women across the world have engaged the male folk in the discourse of feminist issues protesting against male dominance. They try to foreground the experience of women in a bid to show what they pass through at the hands of men in the highly patriarchal society. As the other half of humanity, women need to be accorded the same respect given to men in order to afford them a beneficial life. The selected story discussed had showcases women's experiences in their homes. Their experience is that men seek ways to dominate them, and in doing this they lose their essence. Thus, it is pertinent for men to start questioning the established principles within the society, their relevance to individual and societal development and also seek ways to incorporate women into the society in order to foster harmony.

It is not necessarily the role of fiction to provide blueprints for concrete social action, much fiction had resulted from attempts to do so, but the recent fiction of Arab women, with its greater openness and integration of individual struggle into the larger social context, may well become a force for positive and creative social and political change in the Arab world. Even if this is not the case, the production of fiction by Arab women writers would be remarkable for its variety and its occasional aesthetic excellence, existing as it does in the face of a tradition that has succeeded no such ambition or achievement.

Al-Tuwayjir's reveals in her work *wa ʿāla Shaʿn min jadīdi* to the three-fold pattern of existentialist experience; the project, the leap, and the fall. The heroine of this story has her project; the desire to break away from the traditional model and assert herself as an individual. To do so, it is necessary to make a leap, from her present condition of restricted consciousness, over the obstacles of tradition, hopefully to land in some brave new world of individual freedom. The leap, however, is in most cases too great to be completed, and, instead the heroine falls, however, the heroine of Al-Tuwayjir rises.

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