



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 4. Issue.3: 2017 (July-Sept.)



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

ENSLAVED CHILDHOOD: STUDYING CULTURAL OPPRESSION IN WRITINGS OF ARAB
WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

Arab women have faced oppression, cruelty and injustice for centuries. It seems, however, that oppression and enslavement begins early in their lives. Childhood, which should be filled with joy and rosy dreams, is inexplicably mired in anxiety and fear. Whatever semblance of freedom these women had during their respective childhoods is snatched away the moment they attain puberty. The present paper attempts to focus on an integral and defining aspect in these women's lives. It strives to chart the childhood and the journey from childhood to youth of Arab women based on the reading of short stories by Arab women writers. The analysis endeavours to problematize the cultural set-up that denies freedom and liberty to female children in the Arab world.

As Jawad opines in *Muslim Women in United Kingdom and Beyond: Experiences and Images*, "Traditional Islamic cultures have defined clearly, although obviously with cultural variations, what women should be and do, as they move from childhood through puberty, marriage, and old age." (Jawad 50). We see an instance of this in "That Summer Holiday" by Samiya At'ut. In the story, the free – spirited Dalal is denied the right to play in the streets and wear shorts like her brothers as her father and other men living on the street believe that she is now a grown-up. Ironically enough, her mother is the bearer of this heart-wrenching news for Dalal, she herself being the victim, the sufferer and at the same time the conduit of the oppressive patriarchal mores and customs. She says, "Dalal, from now on, you are absolutely not to go out into the street. That's what your father said. Also, from now on, you are forbidden to wear shorts." (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 31). Dalal's innocent and bewildered mind retaliates but all her attempts at protest are silenced at once:

"The discussion is over. I don't want to hear another word." And she left the room.

Dalal stood for a moment as if rooted to the spot. She dragged herself to the bathroom and locked the door. She sat on the floor and seemed unable to think. Suddenly she got up, lifted her shirt, and looked at herself in the mirror. Running her hands over her chest, her fingers felt two small round buds sprouting, almost escaping, from her body... Unable to control her feelings, she covered herself with her shirt and burst into hot tears. (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 31)

Sexual awakening in a girl is met with utmost harshness on the part of a female child's parents in the Arab world. Nawal Saadawi in *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* (a revolutionary book written by one of the most iconoclast Arab women writers) asserts that,

The education that a female child receives in Arab society is a series of continuous warnings about things that are supposed to be harmful, forbidden, shameful or outlawed by religion, the child therefore is trained to suppress her own desires, to empty herself of authentic, original wants and wishes linked to her own self. Education of the female child is therefore transformed into a slow process of annihilation, a gradual throttling of her personality and mind, leaving intact only the outside shell, the body, a lifeless mould of muscle, bone and blood that moves like a wound up rubber doll. (Saadawi 13)

"The Parting Gift" by Umayma al-Khamis portrays a similar situation - a beautiful Al-Jazi dealing with her budding sexuality. Completely smitten and tempted by a handsome pick-up truck driver, she allows him to slip inside her house through the back door:

She opened the door slightly, and he slipped in quickly. She became confused, and her heart beat wildly. What should she say? Should she talk to him or embrace him passionately? Frightened, bewildered, and ashamed, she suddenly asked him to leave. She thought that would be the most appropriate thing to do.... He embraced her and kissed her on her lips and neck. She fell silent, dazed, and offered little resistance. (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 34)

An overbearing sense of fear grapples her when a 500 riyal note gifted to her by her lover becomes the culprit as it threatens to expose the sinful truth to the school counsellor and more dreadfully to her mother and she wished "If only the gas pipe would explode in the staff room so that everything would come to an end. . . . If only the water reservoir on the school roof would burst and the water would gush out in a flood...". (*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 36) Completely regardless and insensitive to the new-found physical, sexual and emotional urges of her daughter:

..., she rushed at her furiously, her long cloak ballooning behind her. The counselor intervened between them with an elegant and nimble gesture... The mother kept staring at her daughter with swollen eyes. At that moment, it didn't seem that she remembered her daughter as a red lump of flesh that she had nursed, or as a little girl whose fine hair made only a small braid. (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 36)

Demeaned, humiliated and completely deprived of her dignity, she walks behind her mother towards their house with her eyes facing down.

In another story "Let's Play Doctor", Alya forays into a power zone of her own by playing her favourite game "doctor" where 'she never tired of issuing her daily orders. She never wearied of seeing the naked bodies of her girlfriend and little sister' (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 38) and secretly revolts against her tyrant father by mimicking his dialogues:

Alya took delight in mimicking her father's voice as he yelled angrily and made a great effort to terrorize the entire household, an effort matched only by that of his daughter when mimicking him. "Shut up girl, you and her, or else I'll make your life miserable!" The three of us laughed a lot at this expression, which we used to hear each night from Alya's father, and each morning from Alya herself. (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 38-39)

The game and the mimicking come to an end in the repressive aura of the household yet she again manages to find a space and voice of her own by singing Latifa's popular songs and later her own compositions every morning after her father leaves for work. Soon after, her father brands her as a shameful blot on the family as she had transgressed her boundaries and dared to fall in love with a boy at the university. Scandalized beyond words, he had "vowed to divorce her mother or kill Alya, if she set foot outside the apartment. He had also forbidden her to attend the university and complete her studies." (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 40) The violent and oppressive father beats her brutally like an animal. Her body is injured, beaten and shattered but her spirit still soars high:

Her face was badly bruised, her back was hunched, and her eyes were sunken. Her facial features were obscured by swelling and discoloration, and her right arm was wrapped in bandages. I wanted to hug her and shelter her in my room, which looked exactly the same as it did during my childhood. But I didn't know what to say to her. My tongue stuck in my mouth. Before Alya crossed the threshold, she said sadly and feebly, "Come on, let's play doctor. . . ." (*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 40)

If "Let's Play Doctor" is a story of an unbroken spirit, Sharifa al-Shamlan's "Fragments from a Life" depicts poignantly the tale of a spirit crushed in the face of the callousness, inhumaneness and hostility of everybody around her- whether it is the doctor who tries to assault her, the nurse who steals her medicine, the father who marries again, the stepmother who schemes to sell the garden full of her favourite date - palm trees and presumably plays an instrumental role in sending her to the mental institution:

... A huge tractor was digging up the garden. It was approaching my date-palm trees. I screamed . . . and screamed . . . and then ran and sat on the ground in front of the tractor. My stepmother dragged me away, saying, "We've sold the garden. They're going to turn it into a street." I pulled her hair and scratched her face. She said, "Shouldn't you ask where the bangles came from?" I threw the bangles under the huge tractor. After that, I was brought here. (*Arab Women Writers:An Anthology of Short Stories* 54)

The intentional narration of the story in fragments is sufficiently evocative of the fragmentation of her mind, spirit and personality. Broken and crushed, her soul still strives to perform good for others and is content in others' happiness:

The orderly came to me and said, "They wrote about you in the newspapers."

"Why?" I asked.

"The director sent candy to the children in your village."

"Were the children happy?"

"Yes," she said. "They sent a telegram thanking the director."

(*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 54)

Nawal Saadawi documents in her *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World* how being termed mad or insane for being honest can land up one in a mental asylum:

Among the cases that I examined during my research study on women and neurosis was that of a young female doctor who had just graduated. She had been engaged and then married to one of her colleagues. On the marriage night her husband discovered that she was not a virgin. She explained to him that she had lost her virginity while still a child and that her father was the culprit. But her husband was unable to take the shock in his stride and divorced her. The young woman returned to her parents' home. She was unable to tell her mother the truth out of fear for the father. The good woman accused her of being perverted and the father zealously joined in, heaping blame upon his daughter. The girl, at her wits' end, wept and finally confessed to her mother all that happened. In turn the poor woman, exposed to the terrible shock of finding out what her husband had done, almost collapsed. The father, however, accused his daughter of lying and beat her savagely. She was seized with a nervous breakdown which the father used to his advantage. He accused the girl of being insane and sent her off to a hospital for mental disease. The psychiatrist in charge of the case put his trust in the father's story and refused to believe the girl. The result was that she ended up by losing not only her integrity and honour, the man who was her husband, and her whole future, but also her reason, since for some people at least she was now considered mentally unbalanced. (Saadawi 22)

This documentation is by no means contrived or imagined. Saadawi's account is a real life substantiation of Shamlan's story.

In "The Moonlight" Radwa Ashour depicts the plight of a young girl Nadya working for an elderly couple. There is no hope, no colour, no enthusiasm in her life:

"Can I help you?" the little girl said.

I laughed and asked her whether she knew how to iron. She answered seriously that her mistress had said that she lacked nothing but cooking skills, which she still needed to learn. (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 42)

At an innocent age of seven, she is burdened with all the household chores one could think of, thus keeping her devoid of her childhood dreams. Buthayna al-Nasiri "At the Beach" shares the same thematic thread and is a heart touching rendition of Fatima's life, a ten year old domestic help. The portrayal is made all the more heart wrenching with the contrasts made between her dull, despondent life with the rich, exuberant life of the three children in the mistress's household- Layla, Mahmoud and Ahmed. During a holiday at the beach, her mistress orders her to

"Pull up a chair and sit here, and don't you dare take your eyes off them!" she said.

Fatima let her ten-year-old body sink into the chair opposite the sea. She smoothed down her flowing yellow dress and gazed unblinkingly at the three children playing in the water. (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 44)

Happy and content wearing Layla's discarded dress and head-band, she is lost in her reverie imagining that she would boast to her village friends about her visit to the seashore:

"Did you see the real sea, Fatima?" "What did you see at the seashore? Tell us." "I saw naked women . . . and little children building castles in the sand, and men playing in the sea. I saw big ships, white and carrying flags of different shapes and colors . . . They passed from a distance."

"Did you go into the water?"

"Every day . . ." (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 45)

She could not imagine telling the harsh truth to her friends "that she had to remain chained to the chair like a watchdog" (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 45). Eventually, the magnetism and the temptation of the sea beckoning to her allays her fears and inhibitions and she plunges into the sea. The sea is liberating and seems to provide respite and a rejuvenating break, however transient, from her dreary, mundane life:

... Her beautiful dress had been ruined by the water, which was dripping from the hem to the ground and collecting in puddles around her feet. Her wet hair clung to her temples and neck, the headband had slipped to her forehead, and grains of sand were stuck in her glass necklace. She looked like a soaking wet dog that had not yet shaken itself off.

But she was the only one in the photograph whose face was lit with a smile stretching from ear to ear. (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 47)

"The Slave" by Najiya Thamir brings forth the story of Amina, an adopted girl in a joint household. Deserted by her real mother, she is treated more like a servant, an odalisque by her adoptive mother. Unlike other stories under discussion, the main agent of oppression here is a female figure who is seizing the opportunity to give vent to her own frustration at being confined in this male - dominated Arab society. The contrast between the respective childhoods of the real daughters of the household and the adopted girl is stark:

Since the time that I became aware of the facts of life, I've realized that I am a stranger in this house, and that no bloodline connects me to it. When I was little, I felt sad whenever I saw my aunt's daughters go to school and heard them talk about their teachers and lessons and classmates and books and notebooks, while I washed the dishes, mopped the floor, and cleaned the stove and soot-covered pans. (*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 55)

Her mother refuses to send her to school or even to the evening centre as it would be too risky to roam alone. After much persistence and facing much embarrassment, she is allowed to take lessons from her cousins during the holidays thereby giving her a chance to escape the darkness of ignorance and illiteracy yet all the effort seems to be an attempt in futility as she stumbles upon the harsh reality that "... a little learning and beauty are in themselves not enough to liberate anyone, and that escaping from slavery is difficult for a person who has become accustomed to humiliation, subordination, and oppression." (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 58) Her adoptive mother makes Amina's tall and good looks, her good manners and her dexterity at household work a pretext for refusing all the suitors who come to ask for her hand in marriage.

She realizes quite painfully "... that she refuses the men who ask for my hand only because she wants me to continue to serve her and the others. I'm nothing but a servant, with no pay, no less and no more."(*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 58) What is more tormenting is the fact that she has accepted her miserable and hollow life as her destiny and refuses to make any attempts to break the shackles of the oppressive patriarchal structure. Her slavery, lack of power to revolt and sense of not being loved seem to be choking her metaphorically. Her vacuumed, unloved existence is so burdensome that death seems to be the only way out:

I have to suffer forever, like any obedient slave girl whose tongue has been silenced and whose feelings have been branded with a stamp of burning charcoal to keep her at her master's beck and call, with no thought of escape, until the day she dies and is laid to rest.

And then? . . . What's the difference between these bars that surround me and a grave? Wouldn't a grave be more merciful and gentle?(*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 58)

Thus, the childhood of Arab women is much under threat and various narratives such as mentioned above, problematize social challenges of the adolescent Arab girls. Threatened by their own body, the society and distortions of religion, the female child is yet to see what fate awaits her womanhood.

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