



Modern Arab Women and Traditional Morality

Gamil Mohammed Alamrani

Department of English Language, College of Arts and Humanities, Jazan University, Jazan, Saudi Arabia

المراة العربية المعاصرة والنظام الأخلاقي التقليدي

جميل محمد العمراني

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية، جامعة جازان، المملكة العربية السعودية



LINK الرابطة	RECEIVED الاستقبال	ACCEPTED القبول	PUBLISHED ONLINE النشر الإلكتروني	ASSIGNED TO AN ISSUE الإحالة لعدد
https://doi.org/10.37575/h/art/0091	02/12/2020	27/01/2021	27/01/2021	01/09/2021
NO. OF WORDS عدد الكلمات	NO. OF PAGES عدد الصفحات	YEAR سنة العدد	VOLUME رقم المجلد	ISSUE رقم العدد
7688	7	2021	22	2

ABSTRACT

This study uses a descriptive-analytical methodology, based on a postmodern deconstructive feminist approach, to analyze the struggle of modern Arab women fighting against patriarchal biases, violence, and the hypocritical morality system that dominate most tribal Arab societies. Applications for the study are taken from major Arab contemporary novels that continue to create strong independent female characters to expose the misogynistic nature of selected traditional tribal Arab societies. Many of these characters challenge the existing tribal moral codes that incite physical and psychological violence against women who are suspected of violating accepted social and cultural codes of family honor. The study highlights that the existing morality system is biased and unjust, resulting in the continuous subordination and manipulation of women. The analysis also reveals that modern Arab women challenge the hegemony of the long-standing and traditional patriarchal system, fight for an equal distribution of social rights and responsibilities, and reject any form of psychological and physical violence inflicted on women under a misguided masculine system of honor.

المخلص

استخدمت هذه الدراسة المنهجية الوصفية التحليلية المبينة على مدارس ما بعد الحداثة، حيث جمعت ما بين النظريتين النسائية و التفكيكية في تحليل صور نضال المراة العربية المعاصرة ضد مظاهر العنصرية والعنف والنظام الأخلاقي الذكوري التي طغت على معظم المجتمعات العربية القبلية التقليدية. وقد بُني النقاش في هذه الدراسة على نماذج أدبية وصور مقبسة من روايات عربية حديثة تناقش قضايا المراة ومظاهر العنف المتكررة، وأهمها أشكال العنف الجسدي الذي يُهدد المراة إن خالفت الأعراف والعادات القبلية. كما وضحت الصور والنماذج في هذه الدراسة الأدوار الاجتماعية والثقافية للمراة العربية المعاصرة التي استطاعت بناء شخصيتها المستقلة ومقاومة التحديات الاجتماعية والثقافية التي تواجهها في المجتمعات التقليدية. وأظهرت نتائج الدراسة قدرة المراة العربية المعاصرة على تصحيح بعض جوانب النظام الأخلاقي التقليدي الذي ثبت تحيزه الذكوري غير المنطقي، ولا سيما في قضايا الشرف والعفة. كما أثبتت الدراسة قدرة المراة العربية المعاصرة على تخطي معظم الحواجز القبلية التي منعتها من التقدم والازدهار، وعلى رفض العنف الأسري بجميع أشكاله النفسية والجسدية، وعلى مقاومة العنصرية الذكورية السائدة، وعلى السعي إلى تحقيق المساواة الحقيقية بين الجنسين في الحقوق والواجبات الاجتماعية والثقافية.

KEYWORDS

الكلمات المفاتيحية

Arab contemporary literature, feminism, masculine biases, women's rights, double standards

النظرية النسائية، الأدب العربي الحديث، ظلم المراة، التحيز الذكوري، المجتمع التقليدي، حقوق المراة

CITATION

الإحالة

Alamrani, G.M. (2021). Almar'at alearabiat almueasirat walnizam al'akhlaqiu altaqlidiu 'Modern Arab women and traditional morality'. *The Scientific Journal of King Faisal University: Humanities and Management Sciences*, 22(2), 252-8. DOI: 10.37575/h/art/0091

العمراني، جميل محمد. (2021). المراة العربية المعاصرة والنظام الأخلاقي التقليدي. *المجلة العلمية لجامعة الملك فيصل: العلوم الإنسانية والإدارية*, 22(2)، 252-258.

1. Introduction

Readers of modern Arab literature often encounter a broad spectrum of characters searching for hope and the end to a long and painful nightmare, a new life after a lost home. Numerous Arab novelists project an optimistic vision of life in a modern society that rejects the inherited social and cultural ailments that have crippled the development and progress of several Arab societies, resulting in the current prevalence of staggering violence, division, and backwardness. One of these social and cultural illnesses that have been scrutinized is the social and cultural construction of gender politics in traditional tribal Arab societies. In most of these societies, social and cultural codes of gender are dominated by a patriarchal system that is biased and unjust, resulting in the continuous subordination and manipulation of women. Women's actions and behaviors are intricately linked to a masculine system of honor, resulting in total social alienation and imprisonment. This traditional system of morality is extremely masculine and assigns male members of the family power and control over subordinate members, i.e., women and children, who have to respect these norms and adjust their behavior to maintain these codes. Any violation is severely punished. Among these punishments, the most extreme type is the so-called 'honor killing' (Husseini, 2009; Mansur, 2009).

This study presents a feminist analytical perspective of the status

of Arab women in modern Arabic literature. It adopts an intellectual postmodern deconstructive worldview that questions old traditional social and cultural values. The study explains how modern Arab feminists deconstruct the current politics of gender, thereby redefining women's social rules and rights in a bid to achieve equality and prosperity. These modern women reject the illogicality of the codes concerning women's social rules and cultural stereotypes and emphasize that the bulk of these codes (which govern Arab traditional societies) can be questioned, amended, and restructured. The study applies primarily two novels, *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1997) and *The Ship* (1985) by Jabra Ibrahim Jabra; other major Arab novels that include strong independent female characters to expose the misogynistic nature of tribal Arab societies and redefine the codes of morality and honor are also consulted. The paper first introduces the reader to Jabra Ibrahim Jabra and the two main novels applied in this study. Following on, it underlines the theoretical and methodological framework of the study, before presenting the analysis and discussion of the major themes and events that underpin this study.

1.1. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra:

Jabra is a prominent intellectual, artist, poet, novelist, and cultural critic of Palestinian origin. Born in Bethlehem, Jabra lost his home in 1948 and was forced to live in exile in Iraq. He completed his

education at Cambridge University and returned to teach English literature and literary criticism at the College of Arts at the University of Baghdad. Jabra's works highlight his many talents and fine sensibility. His works have been acknowledged worldwide and have earned him many awards and accolades. These include the Targa Europa Award for Culture (Italy, 1983), the Literature and Arts Award (Kuwait, 1987), the Literature Award for the Novel (Iraq, 1988), the Sultan Oweis Cultural Award for Literary Criticism (the United Arab Emirates, 1989), the Jerusalem Medal for Culture, Arts and Literature (Palestine, 1990), the First Class Recognition Medal (Tunisia, 1991), and the Thornton Wilder Award for Translation (Columbia University, USA, 1991) (Bethlehem University, 2020).

1.2. The Novels: *Hunters in a Narrow Street* and *The Ship*

The analysis of this study is based on two major works by Jabra, i.e., *Hunters in a Narrow Street*, and *The Ship*. *Hunters* relates the story of multiple conflicts between Arabs and Jews, tradition and modernity, and control and rebellion. The primary narrative concerns the protagonist, Jameel Farran, a Christian Arab, who is forced to leave his country (Jerusalem) to live in Iraq. He falls in love with a beautiful Muslim girl, Sulafa; however, the surrounding social and cultural traditions create insurmountable obstacles in their relationship. The narrative background reflects several social and cultural artifacts that depict the contemporary way of life at the time when the novel was written, including descriptions of brothels, streets, honor killings, and many other profoundly disturbing events.

The Ship relates a micro-portrait of the post-1948 Arab world and its frustrations, depression, hopelessness, and struggle for survival. The story is narrated by two characters. The first of these is Isam Salman, an architect from Baghdad studying in London as a means to escape traumatic memories. The second, Wadi Assaf, is a Palestinian businessman who lives in exile in Kuwait. Both characters are on a cruise ship from Beirut to Europe. The narrative background presents several Arab and European characters who are all linked to Isam's decision to leave Iraq. Isam is accompanied by the woman he is in love with, Luma. He had been unable to marry her because of a family feud, which resulted after his father had killed her uncle because of a land dispute.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Background

The current study employs a descriptive–analytical methodology, based on a postmodern deconstructive feminist understanding of the politics of gender. This approach is used to analyze ideas and beliefs about modern Arab intellectuals regarding social rules as it relates to women and their right to equality and prosperity. Feminist theory developed from a universal ideological critical movement that strives for equal social, political, and economic standings for women. It combines many political, economic, and social theories directed at the equality of both genders. The premise of this movement is to question the patriarchal biases and social and cultural inequalities and stereotypes that have hindered the development of women in many societies (Walters, 2005). The movement began in the West and developed in many waves, creating gradual development in the acknowledgment of women's rights and social standings in the West, as well as worldwide. Virginia Woolf (1929: 25) paved the way for the voices of women to be heard when she stated, "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind." Accordingly, Woolf and other pioneer feminists argue that feminism as a movement strives not to strengthen women but to make the world recognize their already built-in strength and creativity. As such, feminism fights for women to have the power

to be heard and represented. As Anderson (2000: 3) noted, "feminism isn't about making women stronger. Women are already strong; it's about changing the way the world perceives that strength." As feminism developed, it incorporated many diverse cultural and social trends and ideologies. King (2003) positions the diversity of the feminist movement within a global context and explains how each culture defines its own socio-cultural systems of thought. According to King, feminism began as a universal movement but feminists should not try to generalize women's experiences or aspirations across all cultures. As such, there needs to be an emphasis on the diversity of the feminist movement to reject the misconception that Western feminism represents the issues and aspirations of all women. The goals and aspirations of women in different societies are not always the same. Western feminism had been triggered by the suffering and needs of Western women, who had their own values, thoughts, and ideologies that did not necessarily resemble the experiences of other women in different parts of the world. Spivak (2003) explains how the Western intellect left cannot and should not try to speak for subalterns, who are always silenced and dominated by the hegemony of other powerful social groups. Spivak gave a powerful example of the practice of *sati*, where a Hindu widow has to be buried alive along with her dead husband. Spivak's argument about the practice of *sati* deconstructed the idea of the homogeneity of the colonized.

The current study focuses mainly on Arab Islamic feminist trends. Many Arab feminists (e.g., Wadud, 1999; Ali, 2006; Mernissi, 2001) argue that Arab feminist ideology has its own characteristics and that these differ from Western feminist theories. The most important difference among these is the use of Islamic tradition to support their feminist beliefs pertaining to equality and freedom, which appear to be misunderstood by many Western scholars. These feminists believe that Islam has never been a barrier or a counterforce to their progress or advancement. Rather, they expose the politics of current social injustices towards women, pointing out that these misogynistic practices are purely tribal, social, and illogical interpretations of the Islamic faith. As Mernissi (2001: 5) explains, "the Muslim ideal of the silent, passive, obedient woman has nothing to do with the authentic message of Islam." Ali (2006) argues that many feminist Islamic principles challenge current cultural interpretations of the subject. According to Ali, the unequal distribution of rights and responsibilities between men and women regarding ethics and sexual conduct has no place in Islamic teachings, and that Islamic traditions emphasize equality and justice for both genders. Wadud (1999) further explains this misunderstanding of women's social rules and Islamic religious teachings and states that Muslim women have been excluded when current interpretations of Islamic rules are made. The bulk of these interpretations have been done entirely by religious male scholars, leaving women as a subject without agency.

The discussion in the current study also includes the analytical strategies of a postmodern deconstructive approach, which provides a fresh perspective of literary analyses by stimulating unusual ways of thinking about the subject at hand. It creates an endless chain of meanings that exposes the instability of current cultural meanings and assumptions (Silverman, 1989). It is a critical methodology first adopted by Derrida; more recently, however, it has been developed to incorporate several major literary theories such as feminism, post-colonialism, and Marxism. Feminist theory develops with Foucault's "The Subject and Power" (1982), which provides a profound analysis of feminism and power relations. Foucault disperses traditional views of power relations and explains that power and authority form a series of interrelated, complicated, and ever-changing practices rather than a fixed system as it is typically disseminated.

One of the main philosophies of this deconstructive approach is the challenge of the traditional hierarchy of power relations, in which a

given society is divided into upper and lower levels and certain social groups are given more authority and power to dominate others based on their gender, income, race, or ethnicity. According to Foucault (1982: 8), "Power is not a singular relationship between two entities in which one possesses control over the other, but an interconnected web of power relationships in which every body exercises some level of power". In most of these social situations, the subject is silenced and stripped of their free will and remains controlled, directed, and threatened. These traditional societies have, through a complicated political system of dominance, normalized most of the social and cultural codes of ethics and behaviors, thereby giving absolute power to certain political agents against others (in a feminist context, to men over women). This notion of normalization is also questioned in postmodern deconstructive critical thought. Foucault (1982), for example, argues that the process of normalization is a political endeavor. Then, he refers to it as a disciplinary power that exerts the maximum social control using the minimum expenditure of force. In the present study, some of these deconstructive analytical tools are used to present the imposed traditional political and cultural attitudes on women, as well as the normalization processes that maintained these social and cultural codes, creating enormous pressure on women to conform to socially accepted representations of masculinity.

A post-modern deconstructive approach can also be applied in the present study, alongside a Marxist materialistic perspective to better understand the nature of the Arab traditional society, which considers a woman as an economic and social property of her family. In this context, any behavioral transgression on the woman's part can damage the family's honor and reputation. That is, the value of a woman's chastity, and, accordingly, family honor, becomes family socio-cultural capital that can be invested through marriage to gain advancement within the social hierarchy, or, at least, to maintain a family's current social standing. Paulsson (2013: 1) explains this notion of honor as family insurance as follows: "[I]n [a] poor socioeconomic setting, honor is the [family's] insurance for well-being." This ideology increasingly enhances the power and legitimacy of male members in the family as the guardians of family prosperity, which can be protected by supervising, securitizing, and punishing women.

This materialistic significance of the chastity of women is multiplied within the collective interdependent culture of tribal societies, where the actions of an individual affect the other members of the tribe. These collective societies conceive of the individual as "an inseparable part of the group, with a responsibility and loyalty towards the group, the tribe and the family" (Chinthio and Ericsson, 2006: 8). Patricia Greenfield (1994) addresses the values that characterize and separate European societies from African, Asian, and Native American cultures, and states that the former is more individualistic, private, and independent, whereas non-European groups tend to be collective, social, and interdependent. Greenfield further explains that "cultures that tend to stress interdependence usually emphasize such values as family responsibility, respect for elders, and cherishing of the extending family" (Nieto, 2010: 2). This interdependent collective nature of a tribal society contributes to the scrutiny of women because it increases the pressure and supervision of their male guardians (as examples will later show in this study).

3. Analysis of Female Characters

Jabra created two groups of female characters. The first of these is a caricature of many fragile female characters who suffer the tyranny of a masculine patriarchal society and accept the immobility and confinement of socio-cultural limitations. Many of these characters

have no choice and are generally uneducated and underestimated. They grow up with a certain degree of fear about losing their social standing and are scared of any movement or act that may endanger their reputation. In opposition to these fragile women, Jabra created well-educated and empowered female characters who are passionately vocal about their right to enjoy their life and pursue their dreams. These women redefine codes of honor and reputation through their strong system of values and empowered personalities. They follow values that they are deeply committed to, not because they are watched and supervised by male family members but because they are aware of how these values strengthen their ambitions and can fulfill their dreams. These women change the traditional social and cultural roles assigned to them and pose significant resistance to traditional tribal politics that have crippled women's movements and activities. Their conversations and actions expose the patriarchal biases of an old traditional value system, question the discriminating distribution of social rights and responsibilities, and reject the psychological and physical violence inflicted on them under a biased masculine system of honor.

3.1. Representations of "Fallen Women":

In *Hunters in a Narrow Street*, Jabra ridicules the violent traditional patriarchal system through the representation of "fallen" women. These women have violated the traditional social codes of female conduct and are forced to live as delinquents outside accepted social and cultural norms. They become a "liability" to their male relatives, as their existence poses a threat to familial prosperity. Their rebellion against patriarchal norms must be punished, and the only acceptable form of punishment is their murder or exile enforced by male relatives, the "hunters" who can restore their families' honor by killing these women in the streets of Baghdad. These women are represented in their society as "damaged commodities" that cannot be profitably invested for further familial empowerment and advancement.

Jabra deliberately ignores the reasons or motives assigned to these women's sexual transgressions (love, rape, or poverty). Instead, the author focuses on the violence inflicted on them. In his description of Baghdad brothels, the threat of honor killing is a dominant aspect. There is a reference to "a policeman who frisked everyone from chest to knee" (Jabra, 1997: 23), emphasizing the miserable future awaiting these women outside the brothel. Descriptions of women's bodies include types of mutilation and deformity, e.g., "a girl with one leg" and another "with one eye," (Jabra, 1997: 3), implicating previous acts of violence against these women. Inside the brothel, a sense that someone has been or will soon be killed is conveyed. Jameel Farran's conversation with Husein captures this dreadful atmosphere:

There are two or three of them [policemen], and they're always armed. Nevertheless, an outraged brother or cousin might still manage to smuggle a knife in. (Jabra, 1997: 24)

The expected futures for these women are inevitably morbid because the society in which they live never forgives their sexual behavior. They remain a threat to their families as long as they are alive. The above conversation continues as follows:

[A] few girls have been murdered in that colorful alley. Do you see this spot here?... last week Samiha's roommate, having left the closed brothel area to buy some clothes, was surprised by her brother and stabbed to death (Jabra, 1997: 40).

These women have come to believe that they have lost the value of their existence. They are convinced by social and cultural rhetoric that they lack self-dignity and respect. Jameel Farran, who represents the voice of the author, ridicules these prostitutes in a Baghdad brothel as dehumanizing themselves through their contemptible behavior:

I had no time to think before I found a woman, heavily painted in red and white, pulling my arm. Another, her blouse revealing a stray

breast, got hold of the lower end of my jacket at tugged at it (Jabra, 1997: 23).

Jabra's mockery of a prostitute highlights the feminist philosophy of modern Arab female writers, who reject the manipulation and exploitation of women's bodies, as well as the degrading act of prostitution itself. According to these feminists, prostitution dehumanizes women and indirectly asserts the misguided patriarchal ideology, in which women lose their self-value and self-dignity to be free agents in a sex trade designed to serve men's sexual fantasies. Ghada Alsaman, a radical Arab feminist, describes an ideal path for Arab women's sexual conduct. She entirely rejects any practice of woman's sexuality, except one in which both men and women are deeply involved in a (legal) relationship that is based on love and respect and acknowledged by all members of society. Alsaman refers to such a relationship as a real "marriage" (cited in Abu-Lughod, 2011: 4). Other sexual practices in which the woman is engaged as a free agent, and "where the male partner only gets some inches in the female body to penetrate for few minutes" are completely rejected as being a part of what Alsaman refers to as "bohemian sexuality" (cited in Abu-Lughod, 2011: 4).

Jabra then exposes the social discrimination and hypocrisy of a tribal society that punishes these "fallen women" for subverting sexual codes, but the same society still believes in the necessity of their existence. This reflects a dialectical hegemonic philosophy, which Foucault asserts in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) happens when the system creates its own delinquents to maintain its power and to ensure its continuity:

It is said that the prison fabricated delinquents...in the sense that it has introduced into the operation of the law and the offence, the judge and the offender, the condemned man and the executioner (Foucault, 1997, 254–5).

Jabra illustrates the significance of the existence of the "fallen woman" as a necessary symbol for a patriarchal society to further enhance its social system of codes. These codes become clear and easy when people can observe both sides of the comparison. In *Hunters*, Husein summarizes this philosophy in his statement to Jameel Farran: "to preserve the honor of our wives and sisters we must create a whole class of honorless women" (Jabra, 1997: 23). Accordingly, the validity of these social codes and the possible consequences of their violation are enhanced.

3.2. Women and Violence:

In *Hunters*, Jabra uses the murder of Azima to emphatically reject all forms of violence inflicted on women by their traditional tribal society, which reacts mercilessly against any woman who violates social norms related to sexual conduct. The presentation of and commentary about Azima's murder scene exposes the inhumanity of such acts. In the narrative, Azima recognizes her brother's intention to kill her but fails to escape this fate. She screams for Shabo's help, but her brother's knife is faster:

A girl in a black aba flew in terror to my door and screamed, "Shabo!" Shabo rushed out to her. But Yousef was there before him. He pulled the girl back and plunged a log knife in her belly (Jabra, 1997: 44).

The conversation between Adnan and Brian following the murder extends Jabra's mockery of violence disguised as a concept of honor. Adnan, the rebellious son of a tribal family, explains the dynamics of tribal society and the system of family honor. He tells Yousef that Azima's brother represents the father's authority in a collective patriarchal society, in which authority can easily be transferred to any male member in the family:

This was the only thing for him to do. If he had not done it he would have been the laughing stock of his family and friends (Jabra, 1997:

46).

Adnan's explanation of the violent reaction of any male member in Azima's family is illustrated in a study conducted by Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2015), who examined six different cases of honor killings. She notes that one of the victims is murdered by her fiancée's brother and another (Salwa) by her older sister. In Salwa's case, her older sister acts on behalf of her absent father.

Adnan's explanation seems irrational to his British friend, Brian, however, who is wholly unfamiliar with tribal ideology. Brian cannot understand the hierarchal power transfer in a traditional tribal society. He explains to Adnan that the murder makes more sense if Yousef had been Azima's husband. According to Brian, the concept of honor killing makes sense only in the context of a husband defending his honor by killing a wife involved in a crime of passion.

Jabra's intense criticism of violent honor killings reaches a climax when the Bedouin Sheikh approaches the corpse of the murdered girl and asks Yousef if it had been a matter of "honor".

Bedouin sheikh: Well done, man! It's good to see we haven't lost our sense of honor yet. Well Done, man! (Jabra, 1997: 46)

Honor becomes a legitimate cover for violent crimes against women who have engaged in any type of sexual misconduct because their sexual transgression threatens their family's honor and reputation. Where men are concerned, these codes of honor do not apply in similar social contexts. Men can entertain their sexual fantasies as long as they keep them hidden from the rest of society.

The use of the word "sheikh" in the above quote has significant importance because, traditionally, it signifies an old man or a religious scholar; however, I believe that, in this particular context, it signifies an old man who represents an outdated traditional system.

Adnan: There is honor for you,' whispered Adnan. 'Of course the honorable sheikh is going on a visit to a prostitute right now, but no matter (Jabra, 1997: 46).

There is an overlap between the social codes of Arab tribal societies and Islamic legislation. Though honor killing takes place in many traditional Arab societies, it is unequivocally forbidden within Islamic tradition. Murder is against the basic rules of Islamic teachings, which emphasizes the importance and sacred nature of human life:

Whoso slayeth a believer of set purpose, his reward is hell forever. Allah is wroth against him and prepared for him an awful doom (Holy Quran 4:93).

Islam holds every soul, regardless of gender, class, or ethnicity, in high esteem; furthermore, gender is not a factor when it comes to committing any type of sin. Each individual is similarly accountable for their actions:

Whoever chooses to follow the right path follows it but for his own good; and whoever goes astray, goes but astray to his own hurt; and no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another's burden" (Holy Quran 17: 15).

Accordingly, each individual is responsible for their own mistakes, and men and women are equal in terms of reward and punishment. Regarding sexual conduct, the Quran and prophetic tradition assert an equal responsibility among men and women to abstain from sexual transgression, as well as equal punishment by law for violations in this regard. Men and women are to "cast down their gazes" and "protect their chastity" (Holy Quran 24: 30). When these religious guidelines are undermined, the State, through a systematic process, will verify and measure the gravity of the act involved and ensure equal legislation and punishment for the offender, whether man or woman.

In the case of Azima's murder in *Hunters*, there appears to be no verification or evidence of any sexual transgression on her part. Jabra ridicules the social injustice and the irrationality of the dreadful act of murder. Azima's brother only suspects her involvement in a sexual relationship as her belly becomes "that big" (Jabra, 1997: 47).

Elsaadawi (2007), a modern Arab feminist writer and gynecologist, denotes many cases in which innocent women are killed simply because of suspicion and are subsequently proven innocent. For example, she narrates the true story of a girl accused of having had a premarital sexual affair, because she, like Azima, had fullness in her belly. The girl was brought to a clinic by her husband to be examined; Elsaadawi continues:

When I examined the girl, I could not find any signs of pregnancy. The girl [had] been born with a thick, elastic and non-perforated hymen. The swelling of her belly was due to the menstrual flow that had accumulated in her vagina, since the age of puberty (Elsaadawi, 2007: 25).

In the same book, Elsaadawi describes another example of a pregnant girl who had had a premarital sexual affair but succeeded in keeping it a secret. The girl was five months pregnant, but her hymen was intact:

She explained to me that the pregnancy had occurred after repeated [incidences of] superficial sexual intercourse and asked me to remove the child through an abdominal operation (Elsaadawi, 2007: 30).

The girl was eventually married to a successful engineer following the operation. Her parents organized a huge party as she bled the night of the wedding, a clear sign of losing her virginity. These incidents illustrate the superficiality of traditional societal judgments when it comes to women's sexuality. Many women are punished, even killed, without any examination or investigation, some for not bleeding on their wedding night, even though science proves that some women can be born without a hymen, or that it can be broken during physical exercises such as riding a horse or bicycle:

No girl can be more unfortunate than she whom nature has endowed with an elastic hymen, capable of widening and stretching at the moment when the man's finger or his sexual organ penetrates upwards in the vagina [because] such a hymen will not bleed (Elsaadawi, 2007: 25).

The fear of the public exposure of a woman's sexual transgression in a traditional tribal society is more dreadful than the transgression itself. As such, a woman's family may respond more violently if a transgression becomes public knowledge. In a study of women's sexuality, Abu-Odeh (2011), a professor of law at Georgetown University, comments on this over-stressing of a woman's virginity in many Arab societies as follows:

The virginity of a woman exceeds the physical biological body (the vagina) onto a wide social and behavioral set of codes: the hymen becomes displaced from its biological vessel, the vagina, onto the body as a whole (Abu-Odeh, 2011: 149).

In the case of Azima, the fullness of her belly gives is enough evidence for her brother to punish her, despite the lack of any actual sexual transgression on her part. This hypocritical masculine morality is further criticized in the narrative in the relationship between Jameel Farren and Salma. Salma is a married woman of a high social standing engaged in a sexual affair with Jameel Farren. However, her reputation and honor remain untouched because they are able to keep the affair private.

3.3. The Independent Woman:

Jabra's ideal modern women are represented by the characters of Lama in *The Ship* and Sulafa in *Hunters*. These women transition from traditional submissive figures into modern powerful and independent women who redefine the values of traditional morality and undergo substantial personal growth. They are initially under the control of their patriarchal families, their marriages to relatives already planned. However, as their characters develop, these women discover their own personalities, challenge the traditional patriarchal supremacy, and establish their own value systems.

3.3.1. Sulafa

Sulafa is a daughter in a wealthy family. Her father, Tawfeek, refuses to send her to college or let her socialize with men outside the family; "he will not allow his daughter to go to college. He is against the mixing of the sexes, no matter where" (*The Ship* 1985: 67). Nonetheless, he is socially pressured to hire a private tutor for Sulafa because private schooling advances his aristocratic fantasies. However, he demands monitoring of the tutoring sessions, assigning his trusted male servant, Abed, to always be present. Concurrently, Sulafa's marriage to one of her relatives is being planned. She is both her father's biggest treasure and burden and the sooner she is married, the faster her father can be at peace.

Sulafa displays the same level of education and intelligence as her peers at school. She has an extraordinary ability for understanding all of Shakespeare's plays, the poetry of Keats and Shelley, and generally mastering the English language. During the tutoring sessions, she begins to develop feelings for her private teacher, Jameel Farran, despite knowing the risks involved in such fantasies. She is aware that a future relationship between Jameel and herself is not remotely possible. Jameel is a Christian, a working-class novice, and a foreigner (a Palestinian immigrant to Iraq). These differences will never be accepted by the traditional society in which she lives, particularly the religious difference. However, Sulafa is a modern empowered woman who follows her dreams, trusts her own decisions, and believes that love can overcome these barriers.

In the developing relationship between Sulafa and Jameel Farran, the threat of honor killing is always present. Sulafa calculates her every move. She cannot confess her love to Jameel or act on her feelings. Her contemplation on the river Tigris with Jameel Farran reflects her unsettled soul. She is not "afraid of drowning", even though she cannot actually swim. This recurring theme of women's desire for a swim is present in the writing of many modern women and symbolizes their desire for freedom. In Chopin's *The Awakening* (1993), Edna, the female protagonist, realizes how the sea can inspire her thirst for freedom and life. In learning how to swim, she rediscovers herself, her sexuality, and her life. Once she learns how to swim, she discovers the meaning of her existence and becomes painfully aware of the social and cultural restrictions of her traditional life. Sulafa recognizes that "the river is life" (Jabra, 1985: 95) and realizes the necessity for action if she wishes to be free. She confesses her love to Jameel:

I would like to have our Humber filled with bricks, so that I could hurl bricks all day long at all repression, the lies, the cruelty (Jabra, 1985: 136).

Sulafa's first "hot agonized kiss" (Jabra, 1985: 136) with Jameel liberates her soul and she decides at that moment never to hide or compromise her love for Jameel. However, their relationship is exposed to Sulafa's servant, Abed, who wastes no time in manipulating the situation to his advantage. Abed knows how traditional society might react to Sulafa's "transgression". Abed blackmails her and tries to force her to have sex with him. To his surprise, Sulafa is not the traditional weak woman he anticipates. She fights for her honor, resists his sexual advances, and threatens to destroy him. She asks Jameel Farren to buy her a gun, believing she may need to use it to protect her honor. Later, the reader is informed that Abed has drowned in a river. Abed's role as Sulafa's "protector" and his sexual harassment of Sulafa represent Jabra's mockery of the traditional tribal value system that never trusts a woman. This ideology claims to protect women by trusting foreign male guardians, even the most untrustworthy among them. Abed is entrusted to protect Sulafa's honor from any potential contact with Jameel Farren yet Abed attempts to violate her himself.

The misguided honor system in traditional tribal societies is a recurring theme in the literature of many modern female authors. In Ghada Al Samman's Novel, *Beirut 75* (1995), the female protagonist, Yasmeena, is killed by her brother under the banner of an honor killing. However, the true motive for the murder is her brother's material greed. Accompanied by her brother, Yasmeena travels to Lebanon for work. She becomes involved in a sexual relationship with the son of a rich and powerful family. As her sexual exploration continues, she buys her brother's consent by sharing with him the money she earns until one day, when this all changes:

She was overjoyed when her brother came in. He, for his part, was surprised by her visit, and at the moment he saw her, his face filled with rage. She remembered that she had not paid him anything for weeks (Samman, 1995: 95).

Yasmeena's brother kills her, and the crime is reported to the local police as an honor crime. The investigating police officer receives Yasmeena's brother with "a look of admiration" (Samman, 1995: 96), and the clerk at the police station enthusiastically writes down his confession as if transcribing a heroic epic. In the written confession, the name of Yasmeena's lover, whose reputation is more important than Yasmeena's life, is deleted.

Sulafa defends her life and honor against any possible violent threat. She represents the triumph of the modern powerful woman over old traditional values because she maintains her dignity and honor against all odds. She preserves her chastity and honor not because she fears punishment or her incapability of wrong-acting but because she believes in her own self-worth and self-respect. Later in the narrative, Sulafa's empowerment is heightened as the old system surrounding her begins to collapse. Her father is murdered by Adnan, thereby ending Sulafa's patriarchal imprisonment, particularly after she rejects the power authority of her uncle. She is free to marry Jameel Farren and follow her own way of life.

3.3.2. Lama

Another strong female character is Lama in *The Ship*. Lama represents how a woman can be empowered when given the right environment, a good education, and a sense of self-respect. Lama is an intelligent and beautiful woman who has earned the respect and admiration of everyone around her.

She had a sort of aristocratic flair which I could not explain... At Oxford she was even more proud, but at the same time it was the kind of pride that might easily dissolve into shyness or disappear completely if her interest was aroused (Jabra, 1985: 20).

Lama has completed her degree at Oxford majoring in philosophy. Isam comments on the depth of her knowledge of philosophy and modern literature as follows:

Could this be the same Lama who every morning had been talking about Thomas Aquinas, Ibn Al-Arabi, and Eliot, and who had held forth an ironic tone on the frenzied, blinding hellish world of Dostoevsky's characters. (Jabra, 1985: 85).

The narrator describes Lama's magnificent beauty, which is partly ascribed to the pride she has in her body and her elegant way of dressing. Dancing on the ship, she amazes everyone with her beauty and self-confidence:

Lama danced on—her breasts quivering, her waist swaying, and her buttocks flexing above those long, slender thighs, that kept bending and straightening in time to the music (Jabra, 1985: 85).

The narrator compares Lama to a Sumerian queen in the Museum of Baghdad, an image that signifies beauty, authority, and power:

[S]he was buried amidst gems, golden cups, fine garments, and a mass suicide of soldiers, servants, musicians and grooms. The men and women in the tomb drank poison from a great copper pot and prepared themselves for death (Maier, 14).

Lama is the central figure and a target of respect among all the people on the ship; "she was the bond that brought us all together" (Jabra, 1985: 33). Fascinated by her beautiful lips, Yusuf, one of the people on the ship, recites a poem:

*Her lips are lonely laughter
That stirs delightful appetite
They tend a bed of pearls
And a promise a drunken kiss
And a barbaric, lustful bite* (Jabra, 1985: 33)

It is not only her physical beauty that makes Lama such a desirable woman but also her zest for life, her smile, her youth, and her confidence. She can easily engage in any intellectual conversation, exhibits her depth of knowledge and critical thinking, and shares smart jokes and laughter with people around her. Lama represents Jabra's philosophy of a modern woman who knows neither limitations nor fear. She knows how to maintain her social and cultural prestige, however, and outshines everyone around her in terms of beauty and intelligence.

4. Conclusion

This study presented how the patriarchal tribal society of many Arab countries dictates women's patterns of behavior and thinking, linking their actions and behaviors to a strict value system based on family honor, a masculine economic system that has no logic or religious grounds. Modern Arab feminists continue to project female fictional characters that deconstruct these traditional worldviews. They reject the illogical nature of outmoded traditional codes imposed on women and the social rules they are expected to adhere to, as well as cultural stereotypes, and emphasize that these codes that govern Arab traditional societies must be corrected. The study shows that these characters challenge the premise on which these old values are created and practiced, which have created a system of morality that is biased, hypocritical, and unjust, resulting in the continued subordination of women and violence perpetrated against them. Modern female fictional characters such as Luma and Sulafa refuse to accept an inherited belief in their inferiority and reject the traditional ideologies that judge women's flaws differently from those of men. They also ridicule the notion that women's wrongdoings are redeemable only through violence and reject all forms of physical and psychological violence perpetrated against them.

Through the characters of Azima and Yasmeena, the study also highlights the political processes that normalize patriarchal codes of morality. The creation of traditional "weak women" is another strategy that gives men absolute power over women. This practice allows the dominant masculine system to exert maximum disciplinary power and social control over the subordinate classes. It is a system that deliberately weakens women and presents them as inferior and less trustworthy compared with their male counterparts. However, modern Arab women continue to expose the hypocrisy of this system and its inherent flaws. Sulafa, for example, triumphs over this flawed system using her strong personality and self-trust, characteristics that may otherwise have rendered her a victim of sexual harassment and blackmail. She maintains her family honor through her education, self-respect, and self-confidence.

Biography

Gamil Mohammed Alamrani

Department of English Language, College of Arts and Humanities, Jazan University, Jazan, Saudi Arabia, 00966508029700, jalomrani@jazanu.edu.sa

Assistant professor in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, University of Arkansas, USA. Counselor to Jazan University Vice President of Academic Affairs, and previous chairperson of the Department of English at the College of Arts and Humanities, Yemeni. Previously, assistant professor and lecturer at the University of Arkansas, USA. Fulbright scholar, active researcher, and writer in critical, cultural, and social studies. Published in many renowned academic journals and publication houses, including Cambridge Scholars, the Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States, and many other international journals.

References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (1986). *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. United States, California: University of California Press.
- Abu-Lughod, L. (2011). Seductions of the honor crime. *Differences*, 22(1), 17–63.
- Abu-Shamsieh, E.M. (1988). *Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's Fiction: A Study of Themes and Techniques*. Ph.D. Thesis, Indiana University, Indiana, United States.
- Allen, R., Kilpatrick, H. and Moor, D.E. (1995). *Love and Sexuality in Modern Arabic Literature*. London, United Kingdom: Saqi Books.
- Chopin, K. (1993). *The Awakening*. New York, NY: Dover Publications.
- Edwards, S.S. (1981). *Female Sexuality and the Law: A Study of Constructs of Female Sexuality as They Inform Statute and Legal Procedure*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Martin Robertson.
- Elsaadawi, N. (2007). *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*. London, United Kingdom: Zed Books.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. London, United Kingdom: Penguin Books.
- Foucault, M. (1982). The subject and power. In: H. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow (eds.) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. Chicago, United States: Chicago University Press.
- Greenfield, P.M. (1994). Independence and interdependence as developmental scripts: Implications for theory, research, and practice. *Journal of Cross-cultural Roots of Minority Child Development: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc*, 3(1), 1–37.
- Husseini, R. (2009). *Murder in the Name of Honor*. New York, NY: One World Publications.
- Jabra, J.I. Translation: Haydar, A. and Allen, R. (1997). *Hunters in a Narrow Street*. Colorado, United States: Three Continent Press.
- Jabra, J.I. Translation: Haydar, A. and Allen, R. (1997). *In Search of Walid Masoud*. Colorado, United States: Three Continent Press.
- Jabra, J.I. Translation: Haydar, A. and Allen, R. (1985). *The Ship*. Colorado, United States: Three Continent Press.
- Kogacioglu, D. (2004). The tradition effect: framing honor crimes in Turkey. *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 15(2), 119–51.
- Kozma, L. (2005). Negotiating virginity: narratives of defloration from late-nineteenth-century Egypt. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 24(1), 55–65.
- Malti-Douglas, F. (1991). *Woman's Body, Women's Word*. New Jersey, United States: Princeton University Press.
- Mernissi, F. (1991). *The Veil and The Male Elite*. New York, NY: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Mernissi, F. (2001). *Scheherazade Goes West: Different Cultures, Different Harems*. New York, NY: Washington Square Press.
- Paulsson, M. (2013). *Why Honor is More Important Than Life: A Literature Review About "so-Called" Honor Violence*. Ph.D. Thesis, Blekinge Institute of Technology, Blekinge, Sweden.
- Samman, G. (1995). *Beirut 75: A Novel (N Roberts. Trans.)*. Fayetteville, United States: The University of Arkansas Press.
- Selim, S. (2002). Fiction mimics reality. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 31(2), 89–90.
- Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2015). The politics of birth and the intimacies of violence against Palestinian women in occupied East Jerusalem. *British Journal of Criminology*, 55(6), 1187–206.
- Siddiq, M. (1992). "Jabrā Ibrāhīm Jabrā and the novel of subjective aesthetics". In: I. Boullata (ed.) *The Arabic Novel since 1950: Critical Essays, Interviews, and Bibliography (24-37)*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Dar Mahjar.
- Spivak, G.C. (2003). Can the subaltern speak? *Die Philosophin*, 14(27), 42–58.
- Wadud, A. (1999). *Quran and Women: Re-reading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Woolf, V. (1929). *A Room of One's Own*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Yamani, M. (1996). *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*. New York, NY: New York University Press.