

EXPLORING FEMININITY: UNVEILING THE SILHOUETTE IN FADI

ZAGHMOUT'S *THE BRIDE OF AMMAN*

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ABSTRACT

A close reading and analysis of the writings in Arabic literature give a wider insight to us about the Arab world. It also throws light on the attitudes, cultures, and beliefs of the people belong to it. Though basically rooted in Islamic rules and principles, different Arab nations follow their own cultural beliefs and systems. Thus, an analysis of the literary works by writers from different nations demands a careful reading of their cultural characteristics. The paper explores the craft of character portrayal in Fadi Zaghmout's *The Bride of Amman* from the perspective of feminism. The sufferings and agonies of the female characters are portrayed vividly in it.

KEYWORDS: Feminism, Patriarchy, Dominance, Language & Culture

INTRODUCTION

The principles and beliefs of feminism have undergone drastic changes over time. The term feminism is used to depict a political, cultural or economic movement intended at establishing equal rights and legal protection for women. Feminism as a movement achieved its status in the twentieth century. It witnessed the result of two centuries great effort for cultural and socio-political rights. Such a hard effort had its first expression in Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and shortly in John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women* (1869) and the American Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). This school of criticism came into prominence in the late 1960s. They strive continuously for ensuring equality on social, economic and political grounds.

Femininity and its application are key situations for defining culture. The normalization of feminine characters functions as an over-determined depiction of "Arabness" within Arab communities. Fadi Zaghmout's *The Bride of Amman* is set in Jordan. Fadi Zaghmout is a rising Jordanian novelist and an active blogger. His first novel *Aroos Amman* (*The Bride of Amman*) was published in the Arabic language in Jordan in January 2012. It addresses issues of gender and sexuality in the lives of people who belong to the city of Amman. It is translated into English by Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp in 2015. It reflects the lives of Arab society in Jordan with vivid details including women, children, and misogynistic Arab men.

CONTENT

The Bride of Amman throws light on the lives of Jordanian people guarded by conservatism and inequity. Through Salma, her younger sister Leila and her friends Rana and Hayat, the novel exposes the narrow views of the social order that credit marriage as central to female existence. It actually gives a big blow to their personal freedom. It portrays the inner turmoil of the female personas who feel suffocated and strive hard to switch with the rigid norms of the society. The novel is primarily told from female perspectives accompanied by a single male voice. It deals with various

themes such as marriage, female subjugation, the dominance of patriarchy, homosexuality, and suicide. The novel's essence is entwined into the fabric of Arab society. It discusses issues normally swept under the shade of disguise in the name of honor. It portrays various problems such as rape, suicide, misogyny, unplanned pregnancy, exploitation, suppression and so on.

We are introduced to a number of female characters in *The Bride of Amman*, including Leila, a young, academically motivated student; her friend Hayat, who comes to grips with her history of abuse; their friend Rana, who secretly loves a young man from a different religion and must face the consequences; and Salma, Leila's older sister who face the pressure of being a spinster in her thirties. The mastery in portraying the female characters who suffer a lot of emotional turmoil due to the pressure of society is depicted well in the novel.

Leila is introduced as a highly academic student who has passed her degree with a distinction. Her attaining the highest scores can be read as her effort to put a slap on the very face of sexual discrimination prevailed even among the educated strata. As she says in the first part of *The Bride of Amman*:

I partly have Loai to thank for my success, the know-it-all in my class whose marks I have always kept an eye on, making sure I did better. He's been a great source of motivation, and his being male made me even more determined to beat him. It was him who made me realize the sheer scale of the sexual discrimination I faced when he told me his father's reaction once after I got a higher score than him in class. (Zaghmout 2)

Leila's attitude to sexual discrimination and her feeling as a woman is depicted well in this context. She says, "Yes, I'm a woman and yes, I have passed my degree with a distinction. That's what I want to be recognized for" (Zaghmout 3). Even though she was confident about the superiority of her success, getting engaged is a much more significant achievement than getting a degree in every one's eye. As a member of a conservative family, she was sent to a single-sex school on the ground that no one is allowed to have any kind of romance before marriage. It is this bond of social constraints that forced her to get apart from the first man in her life, Omar.

The attitude of the society towards marriage and education is also portrayed well in the novel. Leila's eagerness to tell about her success in academics is contrary to the reaction of the family. Her family including her mother and grandmother value it as nothing more than another step on the path of marriage. Marriage as an unaltered social institution carves her enthusiasm towards studies. Leila's mother's main concern was about her securing the best chances of bagging a husband. The noble status that men enjoy in a society that follows the rigid norms of patriarchy is contrasted with the real position of men in search of brides. In Leila's observation:

Most men looking to get married these days are unable to support a family on their income alone, so they hope to find a wife who can help share the financial burden of raising children. This has ironic implications for women in our society; our hard-won right to go out to work has turned into a duty, another chore that doesn't reduce the long list of other chores waiting for us at home. (Zaghmout 34)

A Jordanian man accepts his wife's help economically but won't share her burdens. The disparities that exist in the society between men and women are well expressed by Leila as:

A man is considered a good catch if he has a job with a good salary. Meanwhile, to qualify as a potential bride, a woman has to be beautiful, the right age, morally impeccable, a talented cook and cleaner, and

have a degree and a job. Maximizing the chances of finding a fiancé is a very difficult and complex game, so a job has become a precondition. (Zaghmout 35)

She recognizes the irony bound up with the double pressure of finding a husband and a good job after graduation. Leila was extremely happy to get a position in a bank as the job meets society's requirements for a woman to work and be a housewife at the same time. Even in the workplace she had to withstand the gaze of her employer. It throws a ray of light on the fact that exploitation against women irrespective of their academic and professional status has a universal appeal. The biased attitude of the society on such matters can be read from her thoughts as, "after all, he is a man and, no matter what happens, as a man he won't be judged as harshly as I am. Even though I am the victim, I'm the one being violated" (Zaghmout 38). To get rid of it, she tried her level best to down play her appearance. It is a serious note on the insecurity of women even in the workplace. Here, she refuses to rebel against the system although she can see its appalling defect. Leila has her own views on marriage and so she cannot accept anyone whom her family place in front of her. In her opinion, one can't accept someone whom one's heart rejects. She is totally against the notion that love comes after marriage. Her education and exposure to the public might have drawn her with a straight perception on such serious matters in her life. As accustomed to the cultural norms of the society on marriage, she accepts the proposal of Ali whom she loves from her heart. Leila's extent of female conditioning is such that she admires the Arabic word for a bride, *Aroos* and the very name vibrates in her ears like a holy hymn.

Leila expresses her delight in being immersed within the norms of the tradition by finding out a loving husband after securing a good job in her appropriate age. She also tries to uphold the age-old practice of leading a family life with husband and children. It is her submission to such patriarchal rules that departs her from bidding goodbye to her husband Ali after revealing the heart-beaten truth that he is a gay who enjoys his homosexual relations even after marriage, even after being a father. Leila tries to put her and family within the perfect frame even after getting exposed to the naked reality. Like a typical mother, she revolves around her son who stands as the compass in her life. She believes that her life is linked to the happiness of her son, to his life and his future. She also seeks solace and relief in prayers.

Although she is presented as an embodiment of patience, she stands apart from other women in many ways. She observes each and every minute detail and comes out with her own findings. In other words, she has a wider perspective to get out of the riddles of her life. While placed in front of the biggest catastrophe of life, betrayal by her husband, she weighed up the options that she had without dwelling into a sudden decision. Leila decided to go on with her image as an exemplary wife and mother for her son and his future. She is an exceptional person as she is not ready to be submissive to the play of fate in her life. Her mind is filled with varied ideas to get back her independence and self-confidence. She thought of a refreshing plan of entering into the realm of learning to evade her bitter thoughts on life. It helps the readers to grab the idea that education is an effective tool that a person make use of to get out of the obstacles in life. Leila is a role model in this aspect as she started to do a course in gender studies with the full support of her husband.

A lady who forms part of a social structure deviates from the path of submission to self-realization. It cannot be read only as her reaction to the betrayal of her husband, it has other social stimulations too. Social system has imprisoned her within a fictitious marriage and it is the same system that pushed her sister Salma to commit suicide out of fear of a dark future full of restrictions and taboos. It's a self-realization phase in her life and she felt the urge to stand up and defend women's rights more broadly. After finishing her master's degree, she started a support group to enable women to

help each other to fight against various forms of injustice. It also enabled her to think of a national association that campaigns for an end to the social constraints that prevent full equality between the sexes. Though she involves actively in such matters, she is not totally free of the system as she enacts her role as a wife to ensure her perfect family status. Leila submits herself too much forgiving and compromise in the interest of peaceful co-existence, to live for her children, and to maintain the graph of a perfect family in the society. Her life and incidents have a great connection with her sister Salma.

Salma is another person who fell into the hands of social constraints due to her being not married even in her thirties. Salma is described by her grandmother as ‘an unplucked fruit left to rot’ because of her unmarried status. The words have the strength to unveil her mask of self-confidence. It has torn her apart. As identity is a social construct, by following the rigid norms of the society, people automatically get interwoven with the norms. As a highly motivational novel, it opens up some heartbreaking moments when unmarried Salma is pushed to the emotional and psychological edge. It awakes her to a state of uncertainty. Salma lives in a society where patriarchal rules dominate the lives of people.

Another problem is the attitude of the society and men to those women who are placed higher in terms of career and salary. Men won't marry women with a higher salary or with a more important job than his. Women, here, are forced to admit the ultimate goal in their lives to find a husband, not to progress in their career. Salma got a promotion and was shocked to see people's strange reaction to it. She lives in a society where man is still a superior being and woman is worthy of praise only when her good fortune and success are shared with her husband.

She writes an anonymous, popular and highly didactic blog entitled, *The Jordanian Spinster*. She finds it as a weapon to expose the obsession Jordanian women has with marriage. She gives expressions to her fears, dreams, and expectations placed on her shoulders as a Jordanian woman in a society that is full of pressures and obligations. It is through her inspiring writing, she stands as firm as a northern star in her fight against the power structure of the patriarchal system. Society forces her to lead a whole life revolving around a man who is notable only by his absence. She faces the pressure of ageing as a single woman, much to her family's charging. Salma describes Jordanian women's obsession with marriage as ‘maniacal’.

Salma deems as an eternal spinster by her family, and therefore as a source of shame. She also feels shackled by the other women in her own community including the friends whose mantra is, ‘it's your turn next’, and an obsessive, matchmaking mother. She consoles herself on the thought that fate plays in the lives of all people. Salma falls to an unexpected emotional turmoil when she listens to the news that her younger sister Leila is getting married soon. Her mind is filled with darkness to see that, “my future looks pitch black to me. I'm destined to end up all alone in my father's house, a prisoner to social constraints for the rest of my life” (Zaghmout 87). It throws light on the narrow thoughts of the society that looks at the value of a girl proportional to her age. She loses worth with each passing year. *The Bride of Amman* is filled with a sense of foreboding, of imminent disaster and it does eventually come in a dramatic and deeply affecting way through Salma's suicide. She sacrifices her life in her revolution against the norms of society on marriage. She exposes her protest to the rigid norms of the society by showing how the society has transformed her as a scapegoat in the institution of marriage.

Salma is an exceptional character who doesn't submit herself to society. On the contrary, she fights against such evils by escaping herself from the world. She expresses herself ironically as “Everyone wants to see me as a bride at any cost. And I want to be a bride, too- but not at any cost” (Zaghmout 90). She is firm in her decisions as she put it, “On

Leila's wedding day, there won't be just one celebration, there'll be two. Two weddings, two brides, two celebrations: Salma and Leila- both brides on one night. How happy you'll be, Mum! I'll finally make all your dreams come true, all one day!" (Zaghmout 90). Salma's expression to the saleswoman in the shop while asking for a black bridal dress alarms her firm decision in life. She imagines herself as a transparent bride, the invisible *Aroos*. Her thoughts are unique and her advice to the society to be always careful on what one wishes for. She believes that all wishes might come true one day, but not at all in the way one imagined. It becomes true in her case where her family long for her marriage and she decides to put a halt on all their worries. Her words have a strong power to put a chain on the ankles of social norms.

Salma sacrifices herself by submitting herself as the 'bride' of Amman. Her last speech before bidding farewell to the world, especially to the city is really piercing. She says, "I've played by your rules and your customs. I've been obedient, chaste...I have never been with a man...I have excelled in my studies and in my work...I work hard to help my father pay the bills...I work hard to help my mother with the housework. But I have never been good enough" (Zaghmout 144). Her words have a strong sense of authority to ruin the city that is filled with a rigid society. It is the absence of political, social and economic justice that led women to the decisive choice of death. It implies that suppression and oppression has a universal appeal. Her suicide is depicted as an act of resistance, rather than surrender. It also depicts as a move of solidarity with other women, and thus as an intrinsically feminist act. Salma kills herself for every woman and mother in order to exemplify the immense amount of pressure addressed towards women and daughters.

Rana is a Christian female figure in the novel who falls for a Muslim. Rana's first interaction with her lover Janty is depicted perfectly well to posit the readers within the picture and mindset of a twenty-year-old, full of romantic ideas. Rana is portrayed as a girl who has never been sticking to the rules. She is rebellious by nature and stubborn. She doesn't heed her attention to anyone except the voice in her head. Although she is portrayed as an exceptional child, she is really aware of the society that restricts women's freedom regardless of the religion. Society acts as a moral guide to lead the lives of the people forward in every situation by imposing strict guidelines. Through Rana, the novelist portrays the life of a young woman trying to feed a craving for gender equality and personal freedom.

Society has implemented certain rigid rules to ensure dominance over the lives of the people. It can be read in line with the power structure. Rana reflects on it once when her male cousin interrogates her about Janty in the university as, "It is just a game, a kind of machismo contest where they all vie to dominate the females of the herd" (Zaghmout 69). Through the character of Rana's cousin, it is shown that male characters try to overpower the female characters by defining the social boundary for female. He employed his right and power to make emotional decisions on her behalf. Rana's feminine instinct couldn't resist a man standing to defend her. It is, for this reason, she warns Janty and his ally who fought with a student who behaved badly to her. It shows her stern thoughts as a free individual who is capable to lead herself forward.

Rana and Janty escape from their native land to save their lives from the evil eyes of the society that treat such relations as unjustifiable. However, in the interest of reconciliation with their families, they return back to the native land. It took time to melt the snow in between the family members. As a girl who belongs to the conservative Christian family, it is a difficult task for her to get her dream accomplished. It shows the pluralistic view of the Arab world in which patriarchal traditions rule irrespective of the religion. It is, for this reason; she had to flee with her lover when she realized that a new life is bloomed within her womb. A lady who has constructed strongly within her own face gets herself diminished so suddenly to the care of her lover and his family. It's a downward curve of transformation that is visible in Rana's life.

Fleeing out of one's homeland to a strange place in need of safety and shelter from the patriarchal society including her father and family members throw light on her losing her individuality and identity for mere survival. It fills the mind of a reader with the consequences of violating the norms of society. She asserts, "Society left me with no other choice. I was now in the hands of a wheel of fortune, an arrow spinning like a compass that would dictate the direction fate would take me. Fate had plucked me from the roots that could no longer sustain me; I was at its mercy as I set off with painful footsteps on the path ahead" (Zaghmout 146). Rana realized the power of her cultural heritage that exerts over the society. Arab patriarchal dominance over the women crosses all areas irrespective of any geographical or social boundaries. Rana made a fresh start with her verbal communion with her father after the birth of her angelic daughter, Sarah. It ultimately leads her to return back to her native land with a great understanding that love is the greatest sacrifice as well as the greatest source of suffering. Rana, as a social being has got entangled with the cultural characteristics that force her to be anxious about the future of her daughter. She thinks that her actions in the past might have an impact on her daughter's life. However, she takes modest courage to remind her that she is the master of her own destiny. It throws an optimistic note on freedom that women will enjoy in the future.

Hayat, Leila's friend, is depicted as a victim of incest. She carries a painful secret and is prey of abuse. A feeling of injustice and exploitation pervades throughout her life. Life teaches her a lot of lessons. She is a curious girl with an intense desire to learn. She wants to live, to soar and to wipe out the memory of the past. Her father always imposes his power on her. Her ambition in her life is that she "needed a man who could restore hope to her life, a knight in shining armor who would deliver her from her father's house and crown her as his queen" (Zaghmout 24). Her relationship with Qais is developed unconsciously out of this lifelong desire. But, his view of relation as something that he should feel throws light on the patriarchal urge to suppress women through physical union. Although she doesn't yield to his wish, she lives in the hope of a better life with him as her real life is too hard without daydreams. She is always optimistic as she asserts "every cloud has a silver lining" (Zaghmout 55). She was a victim of her father's abuse in her childhood and for her utter tragedy, the same torment she has experienced from her father for her understanding that the torments are not over yet. She also believes in fate and feels that "fate has conspired to play along with him that night" (Zaghmout 59). He exploited her affection towards her mother as a weapon to get her submissive to his will. The mental anguish that she has suffered throws light on the pathetic life of those who get abused in domestic places. Though rules on this ground are rigid, people conceal such bitter realities to guard their honor in the society.

Hayat's life has taken an unexpected turn in this context as she felt an urge to protest against her father's action by submitting herself to the wills of Qais. She gets a double blow in her life understanding that Qais also left her alone after enjoying her body. Later, she gets indulged in multiple sexual relations only to connect with people whom she hopes will help her to get progress in her life. Her wish comes true through Amr, a man in his forties who was a pilot with Royal Jordanian Airlines. He helped her to get the job as an air hostess. Amr's assistance in securing her a job with him can be read in line with his securing her presence for him, a thread of indirect dominance.

Hayat's view of life is entirely different from other female characters as she puts it:

As far as I am concerned, human beings have proven themselves generally to be weak and contemptible. We tend to be weak until we find someone weaker than ourselves, and then we become stronger at their expense. I no longer want to be one of the victims. If I have to trample on weaker people on the way, that's what I am going to have to do. (Zaghmout 116)

Hayat realized that she has never fit into the restrictive mold of what is considered a healthy relationship. She met a senior economic advisor, John, on his way to Amman on a USAID¹ project in Jordan. His thoughts on marriage and sexual relationships show his free attitude and caring mentality that attracted Hayat. Though she couldn't agree with him on sexual freedom, his way of thinking made an impression on her. For the first time in her life, she feels a sense of autonomy with a person who believes that "Love is more than sex" (Zaghmout 204). Hayat, the girl who described herself as a butterfly with clipped wings, becomes an airline stewardess and literally flies away to lead a happy life. The final man in her life becomes a source of her happiness, love, and safety. She became the perfect bride in the novel.

The female characters portrayed throughout the novel as the prey of victimization. It gives a vision of lifelong suppression and domination of patriarchy over the female strata. The writer tried to show that the victims will ultimately surrender to the cause and submit themselves to the play of fate by leading a life ahead as in the case of Leila. She puts a veil over her life by diverting her mind and acts as an advocate for women's, LGBTQIA and sex workers' rights. Salma is exclusion to such a group and she prefers to kill herself in a gallant act of reaffirmation. She is the real epitome of chastity who surrenders herself to the city as 'the Bride of Amman'.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, the representation of femininity and the material reality of women's lives in the post-colonial Arab world under the often male-dominated culture are pictured vividly using the lives of women who belong to both lower and upper classes. It's worth to look at the status of women in this postmodern era. Although she plays a vital place in the development of the society, she is not getting the recognition she deserves. During the ancient times, while the Arab society was backward in education and cultural development, women's rights were totally denied. The public expected a change when the world stepped into the twenty-first century. But, the discrimination of the society against women increased day by day. Culture and tradition impose certain rules on women. In reality, cultural norms are the commodities of the society. Though all major characters were the victims of social norms, they tried to get out of the tackle in one way or the other. The novel underscores feminism as it unfolds the dreams, aspirations, problems and emotional conflicts of the female characters. It has established its connection with the lives, values, beliefs, and cultures of people who belong to Jordan. The characters, their agonies, and sufferings are entwined with the people who originally live in those places. It is their life, their concerns, and their aspirations that are portrayed effectively by the writer.

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¹It is designed to advance competitiveness in select knowledge and economy sectors. Its main aim is to generate employment, foreign direct investment and exports.

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