



Masculinity In Transition: A Study Of Select Short Stories By Arab Women Writers

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Abstract: The works of Middle Eastern women writers focus much on the issues of the female body, sexuality, motherhood, and the veil. Primarily these women are portrayed as being on the receiving end of the society. However, some women writers have also attempted to write about how certain men are victimized in a society that aims at confining only women. With the help of Gender and Sexuality Studies, Race Studies, Masculinity Studies, and Middle Eastern Studies, the paper will try to analyze the threat of the traditional ideas of manhood in short stories written by Arab Women Writers. These writers attempt to show the impact of changing socio-cultural scenarios on not only the female but also the male mindset, hence being an emerging issue in English Literature.

Key Words: Arab Women Writing, Masculinity, Manhood

Introduction

Anastasia Valassopoulos in her introduction to Contemporary Arab Women Writers draws attention to the fact that while the Arab Women are praised for bringing their experiences to the paper, their works are not subjected to constructive criticism but are rather seen as documentaries. The contemporary women writers in the Arab world feel a need to voice what Inhorn calls “emergent masculinities” as opposed to the concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ Such fiction highlights the vulnerability of the male psyche in a society that is orthodox, conservative and expects men to be unemotional and tough. Such portrayals emphasize that just as the whole world is changing, so is the Middle East. The paper draws attention to an area of Arab Women's Writing that depicts the portrayal of changing definitions of manhood in Arab society. This exploration will try to move beyond the idea that it is only oppression that Arab women writers bring to the fore. For this endeavour, Dalya Cohen-Mor’s Arab Women Writers: An Anthology has been taken as the primary source of study. The anthology as suggested by Cohen-Mor herself

introduces [s] the English reader to Arab women’s ways of life, currents of thought, and creative expression. The volume offers a rich cultural encounter in which the complex world of Arab women, as seen by these women themselves is unveiled. (Cohen-Mor 1)

As per Cohen-Mor, short story writing among Arab women writers has flowered after the Second World War and received great attention owing to its brief structure and effective techniques.

It cannot be denied that women writers have expressed women as victims of oppression in their works while receiving the same treatment themselves, as seen in various stories in this anthology. However, an emerging idea among such expressions of female oppression is the representation of men whose set ideas of manhood are confronted in the changing Arab world. The paper seeks to unravel such writing and exposes the struggle that men also have to undergo in a conservative society that is fast changing. Also, the study is an attempt to throw light on the idea that as Reeser avers

Even as questions of power are central to the study of gender and should never be forgotten, the study of masculinity should not assume that all men have power or hegemony at all times. (Reeser 8)

In such a case how various layers of masculinity function and human society and civilization in any part of the world does not exist without concrete notions about gender roles for both males and females. Gender roles seem to structure one's constructions of identity, sexuality, and psychology. Kimmel defines manhood or rather hegemonic manhood as "a man in power, man with power, and man of power" (Kimmel 30). This manhood, however, "does not bubble up to consciousness from our biological makeup it is created in culture" (Kimmel 182 quoted in Aghacy 3). Psychologists Robert Brannon and Deborah David summarize that a man must not display any signs of femininity, must be powerful, be always in control without any display of emotions, and lastly be daring and aggressive. The model of 'hegemonic masculinity' proposed by Raewyn Connell

"often concentrates attributes such as wealth, professional success, the power to dominate and control others, physical strength, virility, and paternity, and is often contrasted to subordinated or marginalized masculine forms (quoted in Inhorn 3)

For the West, this idea is more prominent in societies like the Middle East because the zone is much more prone to violence and men are more prone to be tyrannical, and oppressive. Thus it can be said that "[a]ll manhood acts, as we define them, are aimed at claiming privilege, eliciting deference, and resisting exploitation" (Schrock and Schwalbe 281). The female body is seen as one on the receiving end with the male being the doer.

While earlier there seemed to be no dialogues on the gender constructions of males, there has been increasing attention in this realm, especially in the West. As Hearn and Pringle observe, "There has been the gradually growing realization that men and masculinities are just as gendered as are women and femininities" (Hearn and Pringle 1). These changes as Hearn and Pringle suggest stem from the changing nature of employment, nationalism, family, education, and sexuality. Questions related to power in everyday life and changes that both men and women have to bring about in themselves are also directly related to the problematization of the idea of manhood and masculinity.

Nafila Dhahab's 'The Smile' is a story of transformation. In the words of Cohen-Mor, "The intriguing perspective of this story is that it depicts the man as the primary victim of the prevailing social order and value system" (Cohen-Mor 10). The story tells of a young girl's silent infatuation with a young man. This man wears a smile on his face every day

Morning after morning I received his smile, until one day I didn't see him. I missed him. Thinking that some misfortune had befallen him, I imagined that I would meet him again in a few days. His face would be pale, and perhaps his smile would be pale as well. (Cohen-Mor 79)

However, once the man disappears, the girl does not find him anywhere and instead chooses to "adopt his smile". She did not look for him now as she found him in her own or "their" own smile. She now smiled to make other people happy just like he did. She smiled at people in misery and people saying false things till years passed by and "[t]he smile had become a permanent feature, my daily bread, and the mask with which I faced the people around me" (Cohen-Mor 80). Years later when she finally finds the man on a beach, she is shocked to see him smiling in the same way but now as a madman, saying things she could not comprehend, looking disheveled and "dressed in a uniform with metal buttons and waving a cap". The reader along with the girl is aghast to see a man who inspired a life to live the life of a lunatic. The story voices the effects of war on men. Hala Maksoud observes that the sheer number of wars that Arab men have faced makes them a vulnerable subject

In the last century, the lives of Arabs have been punctuated by wars. They have lived through different forms of wars and have experienced their traumatic aftermath, the dislocations, the pain, the killings, and the losses. (quoted in Aghacy 2)

Men are traditionally seen as the tougher sex but the story tells the degenerating effects war has on men who might be more sensitive and tender-hearted and may be thrown off in warfare. The story can be seen as a loud denial of the idea of hegemonic masculinity with the society unequipped to cure the after-effects of war on a tender-hearted soldier. Stories such as this attempt to "treat masculinity not as a normative referent against which standards are assessed but as a problematic gender construct" (Kimmel 10). The text reveals that it is not only femininity but also masculinity that suffers the onslaught of wars. The idea of masculine hegemony is thus subverted following such experiences. It reveals that the idea of hegemonic masculinity is absolutist and essentialist. Such experiences uncover the other side of patriarchal masculinity which can be "both commanding and impotent, heroic and cowardly, central and marginal combining power and powerlessness, privilege and pain" (Aghacy 3).

If it is the war that wounds the male psyche in 'The Smile', it is the patriarchal notion of sexuality that is brought to the fore in Alifa Rifaat's 'My Wedding Night'. The story starts with the feminine point of view – a bride witnessing her wedding celebrations. The reader starts to feel the feminist outlook with the bride thinking about agreeing to the marriage only to clear the way for her younger sisters. The opening shows her disgust at the dancing girl's vulgar moves and apathy at her wedding which borders on terror

But this throne over which I presided seemed to me nothing but a bier packed with frozen roses. Suddenly it would tumble with me into a bottomless grave, dark, like the obscure future that I faced. I was suffocating . . . suffocating. I wanted to jump to my feet amid the large crowd gathered around me. I wanted to run away. (Cohen-Mor 120)

The narrative seems to be an account of an oppressed girl in an orthodox setting in a patriarchal set-up. The bridegroom, an engineer from a middle-class family, had an ascetic past. He traveled to various holy places and lived a life of abstinence till he realized that

true faith meant struggling and being ready to grapple with the temptations of the devil; it didn't mean deprivation, introversion, and confinement. So he went back to his family and looked for a wife. (Cohen-Mor 122)

The girl also has a past of unfulfilled childhood love. Her lover died and she did not know of any other form of love. Now that the wedding night was here, she had fears about her husband's behavior. However, the bridegroom was as confused as the bride herself. We witness a new character in women's writing where the man is just as much baffled by marriage as the bride herself. He is so overcome by the nearness of a female that he trembles as he asks the bride to eat something. Nevertheless, to fulfill the societal expectation of a groom he tries incessantly to consummate the marriage but is unable to do so. Rifaat paints a horrific picture of the despondent groom who the bride is shocked to see

What I did see was a man standing in the middle of the room, naked. His shapely body aroused me, but he was wailing and tearing at his hair.

“The sons of bitches did this to me.” (Cohen-Mor 125)

The girl realizes that the man was not schooled in consummation.

Then the truth dawned on me: my own life was the sacrificial ram, and I had to guide my naive, innocent man, and make him play his proper role. Like me, he was a virgin; no female body had ever been near him before, just as no man's hand had ever touched me before... He calmed down a little and buried his head in my chest. (Cohen-Mor 125)

He is so crumbled by the gender role of a virile man that though he is young he cannot fulfill what he sees as an urgent requirement of a marriage contract. The story ends with the hopeful bride and the calmed-down groom but impresses upon the notions of manhood that are circulated in society. As Aghacy puts forth,

The stability of male power becomes dependent on a man's ability to control his wife; sexual intercourse is transformed into a kind of conquest conflated with rape where the penis is a symbol of power, an instrument of appropriation, a weapon expressing simultaneously male misogyny and fear of female power. It underlines what bell hooks calls “the phallogocentric model” for masculinity in which “what the male does with his penis” represents the primary and the most “accessible way to assert masculine status”. (Aghacy 21)

Not only this, the story seems to foster the idea that a man might fail to fulfill the traditional role ascribed to him but with female friendship, he may be able to face this seemingly difficult situation. With the female intervention, the bed does not become an “arena of social conquest, aggression, and destructiveness” (Aghacy 21). They may be able to establish a bond based on mutual respect and friendship. The man seeks relief in the girl's affirmation that sometimes when they might be in love they may be able to consummate the marriage. This image is quite opposite to the traditional image of a male who is “severe, resolute, self-centered, emotionally impotent, tyrannical, unyielding and abusive to women” (Aghacy 20). The story depicts that the traditional power ascribed to the male is slowly mitigating and with this the traditional dynamics of male-female relationships as well.

Sahar al-Muji in her short story ‘The Dummy’ presents the father and the husband who is presented as “the ultimate victim of his position of power and privilege” (Abudi 39). The story emphasizes how the man occupies the periphery while the wife manages the center stage. The title itself shows how he is merely reduced to being a lifeless idol, one who is sufficiently taken care of but cannot do anything on his own. The story is full of the dutifulness of the wife who thinks of her service to him as “inevitable”, “necessary”, and “essential” so that he looks clean and active- something he is not. The reason for this disability is not explained by the author but despite the reverence that the wife shows towards him and insists that the children should show, highlights the contradiction quite glaringly. For her, he is the master of the house who must not look shabby, disheveled, or irrelevant to the house and its members. To assert his usefulness,

he is made to sit in the living room, with newspaper and glasses as “[i]t was essential that anyone entering the room should believe that the scene was real.” (Cohen-Mor 127). The story again impresses upon the fact that though it is the man who occupies the center stage, it is the woman who makes him able to do it. He is on the receiving end.

the women writers in the Arab world feel a need to voice what Inhorn calls “emergent masculinities”. Fiction such as this highlights the vulnerability of the male psyche in a society that is orthodox, and conservative and expects men to be unemotional and tough. Such portrayals emphasize that just as the whole world is changing, so is the Middle East.

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