

Omani Feminine Writing: The Novel of Breaking Silence

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Abstract:

The article is an attempt to highlight the specific traits of Omani feminine fiction in the context of Arab literature. The genre appeared as an ideologically mature endeavor that reflects the Omani society in its transition towards modernity and the entailing effects of such change on Omani people. The paper analyses two novels: *Alashyae Laysat Fi Amakiniha* (Things are not in their Places) by Huda Hamad and *Sayidat Al-qamar* (Celestial Bodies) by Jokha Al-Harhi in reference to key concepts introduced in the field of sociology of literature particularly genetic structuralism. The reflection of Omani society is guided by a transformation through the two writers' feminine subjectivity that provides world views in fiction which aims at breaking silence.

Key words: Arab literature, breaking silence, Omani feminine fiction, sociology of literature.

Introduction:

Omani fiction as a genre appeared in the 1980's which signals a late emergence if we take Arabic Literature as a reference. The first Arabic novel is *Al-huyam Fi Jinan Asham* that was published by Salim Albustani in 1870. After almost a whole century, fiction appeared in Omani literature; however, it came as a mature genre that guaranteed its high status in Gulf Literature. In Oman, women only began publishing in the 1980s, although 'A'isha Bint 'Isa ibn Salih al-Harithiya is known to have written poetry at a relatively early date, perhaps from as early as the 1950s. Yusuf al-Sharuni cites the names of several women who contributed to the early development of the short story and poetry in Oman, and none of their works were published before the 1980s (Su'ad Al-Mana, p. 255).

In fact, feminine fiction is a young genre in Oman compared to poetry which dominated the literary scene for a long time but the media including press and magazines contributed to its spread and popularity. "Omani women writers have published four collections of poetry and only one collection of short stories. Much of women's literature in Oman finds its way to the reading public through newspapers and magazines" (Su'ad Al-Mana, p. 263). In general, the cultural environment welcomed the birth of feminine fiction in Oman and supported its development to a certain extent especially if we take into consideration that most of the short stories and novels appeared to discuss the female conditions under patriarchal rule and attack some long-standing social norms. Many scholars discussed the issue of Arab women's writing's visibility and positive reception in works including Joseph Zeidan's *Arab Women Novelists: The Formative Years and Beyond* and Lisa Suhair Majaj et al.'s *Introduction to Intersections: Gender, Nation and Community in Arab Women's Novels*.

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Writers such as ‘A’isha Bint ‘Ali ibn Sa‘id al-Ni‘mi, Tiba Bint ‘Abd Allah al-Kindi, , Zakiya Bint Salim al-‘Ilwi, Safiya Bint Muhammad Sa‘id al-Harithi contributed to the development of the short story in Oman. Their voices paved the way to the appearance of a more complex and culturally engaged form which is the novel. In 1999, Badria Al-Shihhi published her novel *Crossing Embers* in Arabic, translated into English in 2021, to signal the beginning of women’s writing that put into question phallocentrism in society and literature as well.

For years, many Omani writers including Ghalya Al Saiid, Jokha Alharithi, Huda Hamad, Fatima Ashidi and Zouina Alkalbaniya published novels that marked a rapid rise and flourishing of Omani feminine novel. Taking into consideration the unspoken, the unnarrated, the silenced experiences of women in society for a long time, our paper attempts to claim that the novel these women writers have produced is a novel of “breaking silence”. Their fiction came as a reflection of Omani society and representation of marginalised women who have been relegated to the margin for a long time. However, our paper highlights how the reflection is transformed through feminine subjectiveness representing the specificities of Omani society and their effects on female characters.

Our analysis makes use of genetic structuralism’s concepts to highlight how feminine fiction is regarded as authors’ world views that aim at breaking silence through different processes that we deduced from a close analysis of two novels: Alashyae Laysat Fi Amakiniha (*Things are not in their Places*) by Hamad and Sayyidat al-Qamar (*Celestial Bodies*) by Al-Harhi. *Celestial Bodies* is the first Arabic novel to win the International Booker Prize in 2019 after being translated into English.

I.On Society and the Novel: Social Criticism in Brief:

The relationship between society and literature has always been a complicated multifaceted one that resists limited definitions and analyses as it remains inclusive of different processes of interaction, representation, influence, reflection and transformation. In this context, Sidney Finkelstein (2017) argues: “To understand literature, we must know not only individual works but also the cultural life of which they are part because a literary work of any writer is conditioned and shaped by that cultural life”(9). The dialectical relationship between the two raised many questions about the mimetic status of literature and its aesthetic dimension in representing society or reality in general. Realistic fiction dominated long periods of literary production because it was regarded as a representative of reality and gained ground as its faithful mirror. However, the literary work particularly the novel is the product of a collective consciousness of a particular social group that created it rather than a mere reflection of reality. Lucien Goldmann, one of the founders of social criticism, states in *The Sociology of Literature* (1970) that

The essential relationship between art and social life doesn’t reside in the content of a work of art offering a description of the events and characteristics of that life. Rather, the relationship rests in the categories which organize both the day to day consciousness of a social group and the imaginary universe created by the writers. (151)

Thus, any literary work is based on a mental structure which is a social phenomenon that encompasses social factors and collective consciousness. Genetic structuralism, led by Goldmann regards literature as a total of multi-layered meanings that are homogenous.

To analyse a literary work, Goldman suggests, in his works notably *The Sociology of Literature: Status and Problems of Methods* and *Toward a Sociology of the Novel*, a number of key concepts including:

1- Human Fact:

It is a structure which includes reciprocal relationships of conflicting and complementary interactions between humans and the environment. The structure is meaningful because humans adapt to their environment and influence it.

2-Collective Subject:

It is a group of individuals that create a social class that has a view of life and contribute to the development of human history. Thus, a literary work is a product of an author who belongs to the collective subject having a collective consciousness.

3-World View:

In representing his class, the author offers a world view in his work that represents a structure of feelings, thoughts, ideas and aspirations derived from collective consciousness of the class the author belongs to. Consequently, the literary work is the product of social and historical background which contributes to the choice of its structure and content.

Analysing a literary work requires determining its social referent which is regarded by John Hall an important strategy that situates the literary analysis in a social context of the work's production (Hall: 32). He believes that a literary work is shaped by the dominant cultural and ideological values of the context of its production and understanding the social referent contributes to understanding literature.

II.A Novel of Breaking Silence:

Omani feminine novel can be regarded as "a novel of breaking silence" for different reasons. As a literary work, it is created by a feminine voice that has been silenced for centuries as women were assigned specific gender roles determined by male dominated society. Silence was part of the education of girls in Arab countries and being silent is a characteristic of descent behaviour and respect of the social norms of conduct. The literary and social merits of their writings stem from their creative telling of the self as they marked a shift in perspective and stood as self-narratives by previously silenced women. In this context, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley (2007) maintains that:

Although Syrian, Lebanese, and Egyptian women have been known as writers for centuries, today women writers from every Arab country are making their mark. Naturally, these writers have produced texts in all literary genres (poetry, drama, and fiction). In addition, these writers have also developed new and different forms and modes of writings, with self-writing being one of the modes in which Arab women have produced a substantial number of creative texts. (p. xxvi)

Second, the feminine novel tackled recurrent themes such as women experiences and their rebellious reactions that resisted the norms of the tribe, the male rule and supremacy and the silenced on taboos. In fact they stand as outstanding voices in a movement of women's empowerment in the public sphere. According to Mona. N. Mikhail (2004),

Today Arab Women are entering new fields, and functioning with a new sense of identity. There are more women working in the Arab world than ever before, more engaged in politics, in every scientific domain, and certainly more enrolled in institutions of higher learning. Increasingly, legal, economic, political, social, sexual and reproductive rights and freedoms are sought more as obvious entitlements rather than feminist demands. Significant numbers of women have moved into positions of political power. Many are making their voices heard in the media and throughout the cultural and academic life of their societies, even if they still mostly retain exclusive responsibility for domestic work. (Mikhail, p. x)

In addition, most of the novels presented silenced individuals either as oppressed women or men ruled by predetermined social racial and historical conventions.

By means of exemplifying, we take two novels: *Alashyae Laysat Fi Amakiniha* (*Things are not in their Places*) by Hamad and *Sayidat Al-qamar* (*Celestial Bodies*) by Al-Harthi because they both offer a revision of the Omani society through a feminine perspective. Their works reflect the concerns of different social classes as they discuss the effects of patriarchy on women and the efforts of Omani people to cope with modernisation. Moreover, they expose the social injustice that victimises individuals in a society struggling to free itself from class, race and gender discrimination.

Hamad and Al-Harthi represent life in Oman and people's interactions with the contradictions imposed by the new demands of modernity and the power of tradition in addition to a reflection of the specificities of Omani culture in their novels through a process of transformation. The social referent is significant in understanding the forms of writing. The analysis of the social referent reveals that the Omani society that is moving towards modernity is characterised by conservatism and patriarchal rule which limits self-expression and governs the behaviours of classes in society depending on race, class or gender. Consequently, as writers women are limited in their reflection of the Omani society by what culture permits and sensors. We suggest that they present society through their feminine sensitivity and in doing so, they both alternate in the two novels between two processes: selection and transformation, declaration and silence.

1-Selection and Transformation:

Concerning the first process which is selection and transformation, the two novels might be considered in reference to Lucian Goldmann's concept of world view as female visions of the cultural clashes between modernity and traditional inheritance. However, the artists Hamad and Al-Harthi do not represent all the ideological aspects of a given era in Omani history; on the contrary, they select different phenomena and present them in different ways, which makes the uniqueness of their works as literary creations rather than historical chronicles. This process of selection is guided by the author's ideologies and subjective orientations that stem from a collective consciousness of the class they belong to which is controlled by their gender as women, social identity as middle class educated intellectuals and belong as Arab Omani writers. As a result, their novels function as mirrors of Omani society but the reflection in the mirror is transformed through the author's own view of what she presents. Macherey (1978) suggests that the mirror is a broken one when he writes in his critical work *A Theory of Literary Production* that "Literature can be called a mirror: in displacing objects it retains their reflection. It projects its thin surface on to the world and history. It passes through them and breaks them. In its train arise the images"(p.135).

In reading *Celestial Bodies*, we find that history is revised through feminine consciousness. The novel refers to a long period that spans from the twenty to the twenty first century following the changes of society that is moving from tribal to modern one but its individuals are still ruled by old social conventions. There are references to slave trade and some characters are slaves such as Zarifa who is owned by Sulayman, the rich slave merchant. Although, slave trade has disappeared, its social and economic consequences are still controlling the lives of many characters that are victimised by their ethnic origins and discrimination becomes clear especially in matters of marriage and family life which is the intersection between the public and private spheres. The novel discusses social classes in Oman as minority ethnic groups and poor individuals never get social respect and recognition despite their efforts to become rich and successful. For example, the character of Zaid, the son of the slave Manin, stands as an example of people who are socially alienated and excluded because of their origin which leads them to flee and choose self-exile looking for a free and decent life. The novel is rich with mythology references and folklore that draw a picture of the Omani culture and explains its social codes to Arab and Western readers.

Similarly, Hamad (2009) tackles some of the most sensitive issues in society including race discrimination and social taboos like open intimate relations, homosexuality and social hypocrisy. She presents the problems of a category of people who are called "bayasira" a term that refers to people who have a mixture of free and slave origin. Amal, a female character who is victimised and degraded due to her social condition as a "baysira" loses her chance of getting married to the man she loves due to her origin. She decides to become a prostitute to merit the social despise she suffered from since childhood and get revenge by revolting on society that alienated her since her childhood. There is also a reference to her aunt's marriage to a Zinjabaree man; another socially condemned relation that led her to be outcast from society as she becomes rejected by her family including her mother and sisters. Marriages in the novel expose the strength of the social codes that govern the Omani society and condemn all the individuals who do not abide by the strict social rules.

In addition, Hamad criticises the inadequacy and hypocrisy of such social conventions because they control the decisions of men and women and punish them for breaking the social rules. Ironically, Amel becomes the mistress of the man she loves after his marriage to Mouna her friend, who has a decent and respectful origin. The Zinjabaree man who is socially excluded offers the aunt Zouaina knowledge through reading which gave her self-realisation and compensation for being a social recluse. The writers highlight the interactions between the characters and their environment giving paramount importance to the human fact that is present in both novels either on implicit or explicit levels. The reciprocal relationship between the novels' characters and their environments is exposed through representing the issues of several economic, ethnic and social classes.

2-Declaration and Silence:

The second process is characterised by declaration and silence. Regarding declaration, the two writers transform specific traits of Omani society into literature in two different ways: the explicit and the implicit. On the one hand, Al-Harhi chooses to use the explicit in her novel, a technique that appears in different aspects of her writing: First, the setting in the novel is explicitly presented as the story happens in Oman in a village called Alawafi and the novel follows the development of three generations to span over a long period in Oman's history from the thirties until the present. Moreover, the characters are explicitly categorised and their reactions are easily understood for the reader is provided with their social, economic and psychological motives. Finally, some of the key themes in the novel such as class, race and gender discriminations are discussed openly and the effects of external factors on the characters are presented to the reader.

On the other hand, Hamad uses the implicit to tackle social issues in Oman and expose the impact of the environment on the psychology of her characters. Her use of this technique is seen on different levels: First, the place in the novel is not referred to as Oman, but it is up to the reader to decipher the environmental codes she presents to help him identify the setting. She uses words such as the country, the city and the village. The emphasis in the novel is not on the history and the social issues that victimise the characters and constraint their freedom. Instead, Hamad is concerned with their effects on the relationships of the characters with each other. Moreover, she represents their refusal to surrender to outdated conventions when society is moving towards modernisation. Some of the social problems are exposed through action or dialogue. For example, the constant absence of a father hints at an economic condition of unemployment and racism becomes clear when Hamoud as a child is identified by his mother's Indian origin.

Furthermore, Hamad has the courage to uncover some of the taboos concerning intimate relationships in society. But, we notice that her cultural consciousness as an intellectual and her awareness of the social sensitivities towards such issues make her hint at these taboos without explicit descriptions that might be found offensive by readers. For example, she hints at homosexuality in society when she describes the character of Mohssine by writing "He was not concerned with the idea of proving his virility either with boys or girls" (p. 83). Finally, some of the details are kept secret because the writer used the technique of suspense and some important elements are understood only near the end of the novel.

III. Silence Images in the Novels:

Silence in the novel is deconstructed as it is represented in three images. It is associated with oppression, the lack of communication and the issues related to the female body. First, it is associated with oppression and female characters in particular are silenced individuals who do not have the right to decide due to the power of the patriarchal society. In *Celestial Bodies*, Al-Harthi shows how Miya gets married to a man while she loves another one without expressing her affections to any person including her sisters. Both her character and love are described as silent. Nevertheless, Hamad presents silenced characters that are aware of their state and express their frustration. "You are in a country that denies you the right to hold me... I hate these tight places that restrict our freedom of expressing our feelings of alacrity and missing for the people we love and respect" (p. 90).

Second, silence is dominating the human relationships and the characters do not even try to communicate in certain situations because they are aware of the power of culture. Some of them choose to surrender while those who are educated or have been already socially excluded take their decisions to become rebels. In *Celestial Bodies*, the sisters of Miya did not discuss with her matters of her marriage except remembering a book that offers advice of a Saharian woman who educates her daughter to be submissive to her husband. Part of the sisters' advice is to be sad for the husband's sadness, but when Miya wondered who becomes sad for her sadness, they felt at unease and became silent. Moreover, in her prayers, Miya was wandering why she loved a man and will be married to another. She saw it as a punishment although in her view, she did not commit the sin of telling anybody of her feelings. When a society condemns for affection expression and regards it as a sin, silence becomes the norm. While the silent Miya accepted what she regarded as a destiny, the girls of the coming generations are described as stronger freer girls who decide for themselves; however, they all failed to reach their ultimate goals or satisfaction. Furthermore, most of the socially blessed marriages are characterised by silence, Miya's decision to call her daughter London was not rejected by her husband. Similarly, when Mohssine, a character in *Alashyae laysat Fi Amakiniha*, becomes sure that there is a lover in the life of his wife, he never attempts to communicate with her. He feels her coldness and change but remains silent.

Third, silence is related to the female body. As women writers, both Hamad and Al- Harthi shed light on the silencing of the female body. In *Celestial Bodies*, the mother of Miya describes to her daughter how women used to give birth to their children while standing and holding to a wooden panel, without screaming or shouting. It was regarded as shame to express the feelings of the body including pain in labour. She compared herself to a horse because she gave birth to her daughter while standing only to honour her father the sheikh. In *Alashyae laysat Fi Amakiniha*, Amel denounces society's restraints on expressing the sensations of the female body in some of its stages of growth and pain. But, the most outstanding twist in the novel is the reader's discovery that all the feelings of Mouna towards Hazim and all that is related to their relationship is part of her hallucinations.

Conclusion:

As feminine visions of Oman, *Celestial Bodies* and *Alashyae laysat Fi Amakiniha* enter world literature and stand as key texts in women writing due to the maturity of their writers. They are closely related to their cultural contexts offering world views of culturally conscious feminine intellectuals who unveil the social interactions in Omani society and transform such collective consciousness through their feminine subjectivity by employing a variety of techniques in two major processes that characterised the specificity of their fiction. the maturity of their writers lies in unfolding the cultural layers of Omani society and exposing its ways of adapting to modernisation, deconstructing silence in Omani literature in particular and Arabic one in general and empowering the silenced in society and fiction by voicing his/her concerns and breaking silence.

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