

Juxtaposing Religion, Tradition and Stereotype with Women Self; Mapping ‘Women Quandaries’ In Middle East Countries with the Reference of Arab Women Fictions

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Abstract

Contemporary Middle East novels written in English, trending new heights of theoretical aspects in today’s literature. One of the significant perspectives in these novels pursues socio-cultural approaches especially from the perspective of women. This paper contemplates the projection of women self from selected Arab women novelists along with their selected works. By and large, Arab women writers unanimously portray the problem faced by women in the midst of religious fundamentalism and conservatism. In this attempt, I target three major Arab women writers and their novels; The bastard of Istanbul written by ElifSafak(Turkey) Girls of Riyadh written by RajaaAlsanea (Saudi Arabia) and West of Jordan written by Laila Halaby (Palastine). All these three writers have been consistently challenged by public protest in connection with their writings. In fact, the strong characterization and concrete themes patterned by these writers furthermore conceded the inferior state of women merely as a submissive creature. Moreover, gender stereotype often determines women identity and the current existing social structure in the Middle East.

KEYWORDS: Arab Women Writers, Gender stereotype, Religious fundamentalism, Tradition.

Middle East novels written in English, trending new heights of theoretical concepts and literary discussions in contemporary literature. One of the significant conceptions in these novels pursues socio-cultural approaches especially from the perspective of women. In order to frame societal structure and women status in Middle East countries, three highlighting novels have been selected here for microscopic analysis. The Girls of Riyadh, West of Jordan and Bastard of Istanbul written by Rajaa Alsanea, Laila Halaby, and EliffSafak respectively. In its accurate analysis, religion brings aninevitablestring in the Middle East countries. Majority of inhabitants emulate norms and regulations in their personal and public life as well. Both faith and belief undoubtedly are choice based individual freedom. However, social laws and customs are absolutely privileged to each individual irrespective of their religious and gender status. It is inborn perquisite, equally privileged to whole human being. As far Saudi community is concerned, conservatism and patriarchal supremacy often juxtapose women identity in their public life. A significant number of provisions, both in societal and religious, segregate women from the main stream of public life.

Eliff Shafak, is a Turkish-British novelist and women’s right activist. She portrays the city as a city. She was a frontier of women’s equality and freedom. Her writing primarily

focuses on minorities and particularly the role of women in society. Turkish women have a quite different nature from their sisters in the neighboring countries. Turkey is less traditional due to the western influence in their culture and the great reformation lead by Ataturk in 1969. But contrary the status of women still limited in many aspects. Instead of fighting straightly for their humanitarian needs, they have been received these needs in a silver tray from Ataturk. Elif Safak *Bastard of Istanbul* intensifies a hybrid space where Islamists defends their right to practice religion, and the other hand Kamalists advocated secularist democracy. The *Bastard of Istanbul* challenges traditional conventions of westernization and Characters portrayed by Safak are collectively unanimous. All main characters are women and cracking their identity in different way.

Shafak confers Turkish societal life in depth. And also pursues the status of women in Turkey, even after the great reformation lead by Mustafa Kamal Ataturk. In her view She says, Turkey is a country belongs to men. She said that, Turkey politics at local, regional and national level is overwhelmingly male. "It is very masculinity, it is very divisive and it is very aggressive" (Guardian 2009). She also states that term sister hood is highly applauded rather than feminism in Middle East. *Bastard of Istanbul* is a strong, powerful narration that has stabilized a huge literary space for Safak. Women characters in this novel are under the threat of their identity. They are unable to project themselves mainly because of the religious influence conservative social upbringing. Women in this novel create many rules for themselves, and those rules were antithetical to the present circumstances of society.

Elif Safak introduces Kazanci family, a family of women. Kazanci family has been destined by the early death of male members for many years. There was no male patron in the family except Mustafa Kazanci. He was considered as a precious gem in the family. The royal treatment being a son privileged to Mustafa in many ways especially in his dealings with public life. At the same time female members should be more alert to get away from the hands of evils. Treating a male child was not same as treating a female child in that society. They become chastity conscious that ultimately transformed a safety measurement to reckon the woman worth. This inconsistency limits their social commitment and confined within the walls of conventions. This has been reflectively narrated in *The Bastard of Istanbul*. Consequently women become hyphenated self in a reformed society.

The institution 'marriage' especially traditional settings of marriage has been widely criticized on the other phase of the novel. Marriage is confronting the way of subjugation under male dominancy. Husband bossy figure over wife make her objectivity more complexes. The voice of a woman after marriage becomes more complicated. Rose, a woman character projected by Shafak, was married by Barsam, an Armenian American and delivered a baby girl. Her post marital life was desperately offensive. Post marital chronic resentment not only made you quite irrational and unreason, but sometimes it perfectly turns into reasonable. Rose transformed into a stubborn active woman who defended the internal conflicts existed in her husband's family.

Meanwhile the middle and upper class variations bothered leading women characters in this novel. Safak portrays the necessity of being self sufficient especially women. Zeliha's tattoo parlor is a suitable example for this. Even though tattooing is prohibited in

Islam, her approach was liberated and highly advanced. In contrast, it was difficult to manage a tattoo parlor in an Islamic country especially run by women.

Asya was sandwiched with middle and upper class conflicts. Having a middle class background her mother consistently compelled her to be independent. Asya was a regular visitor to café Kundera. Within few years this café will be turned into one of the most liberal zones in Istanbul. Because modernist wants Turks to forward, at the same time traditionalist want them to pull backward. If they put two steps forward then one step will be backward. This enforcing pressure make them sandwiched. Asya strongly protested against these conventions existed in society. Sometimes they feel themselves itched within these system of society. This half modern and half traditional make Asya distressed completely, and that point often overlooked as one of the reasons of her suffocation in family. She finds solace only at the café Kundera. Where she smiled candidly and talked unreservedly.

Hence the symbolical broadness of café Kundera occupies an influential role shaping AsyaKazanci character. On the other way it is a gateway of liberation especially woman like Asya. Tolstoy and his wife were regular visitors in this café. His wife often raises her voice for women rights. She was completely antithetic on male domination. In her opinion, it is a lifelong phenomenon. 'All talented women repressed by talented man'. She is also experienced in same way. Recognition! That's what I want the whole world to admit that if given opportunity. Just because she was a women. Because she was very talented women oppressed by a very talented man (Bastard of Istanbul, 86).

Tolstoy's wife was a regular visitor in café Kundera. In fact, she is moreover like an enthusiastic in her own desires and waiting for freedom from the restriction for a long period. All of these visitors in the cafe unanimously talk about the male domination on the one hand and supremacy of conventions and rituals in other hand. In café Kundera people were treated equally. All of their repressed feelings openly debated with the current social circumstances of Turkey. Safak consciously marked café Kundera a space to cultivate various discourses of depressed characters.

Rajaa Al-sanea, highly influential contemporary novelist, from Saudi Arabia wrote her well received novel *The Girls of Riyadh* in which she explicitly draws attention to changeable female characters in modern Saudi Arabia. When Saudi government introduced women education scholarship in 2005, majority of Saudis were against it, As part of women education scholarship Al-Sanea was one of the beneficiaries, and able to achieve higher education in abroad. Till then, getting basic education for women was a troublesome task. By profession she is a dentist and by passion she wanted to be a literary figure. She grew up in a family of physicians and quite often aghast of possibility for being a writer.

Alsanea narrates *Girls of Riyadh* written in epistolary form. There are cultural and societal conflicts faced by women in this novel, mainly how women are being treated in society. This novel portrays four girls from Riyadh and their pre- marital and post marital life along with bitter experience from patriarchal structure. Gamrah is the first girl introduced by the author. In connection with Rashid higher study both Gamrah and Rashid left Saudi immediately after their wedlock. It was rather a new world for Gamrah. She truly realized

the air of freedom. People can sing, dance, and chat freely. Wearing veil created an annoying atmosphere in their public life. As part of their culture, Gamrah used to wear hijab. But rather than making comfort and secure, wearing veil made some sort of disturbances in the public life of America. Gamrah aspired to learn driving. But Rashid never promoted for that. Driving for women was widely banned in Saudi Arabia, as early education denied. Al-Sanea annoyed by the strict rules that govern social life of women with patriarchal prejudices. In one of her interviews she has mentioned that Saudi government once introduced women education in the near past even though people were against it. Likewise driving ban soon takes away and same mass protest will be there from public.

Like Gamrah, her close friend Sadeem was also under the troubles of marriage. She was good in her studies. She made new records of shining grades in her academic achievements. Sadeem had a proud voice while talking about Waleed, her fiancée. They were officially engaged but wedding ceremony didn't take place. Sadeem was submissive to Waleed. Immediately after the blissful night camp Sadeem was eagerly waiting Waleed's phone call. She wondered, 'does religion defined a sort of boundary in the mind of young man from conservative Najd family' (Girls of Riyad,36). There was a utter silence long lasted almost three weeks. Finally Waleed answered all of Sadeem questions in the form divorce letter. Sadeem kept all her secret done with him in last night. Due to her engagement, half of university subjects were failed. Sadeem denied her choice of love at the beginning stage of their relationship.

Laila Halaby was another distinguished writer who was born in Beirut to a Jordanian father and American mother. She spent a major part of her life in Arizona. She is also a part of Arab ethnicity and heritage, but at the same time, the advanced education and fluency in both Italian and English received a well establishment in her literary career. She has recently published a memoir, my name on his tongue. West of Jordan is a well acclaimed novel and readers have been unanimously accepted its cohesive thematic structure.

Liala Halaby's West of the Jordan envisions versatile life situations of women in Palestine and their relation with America. This is revelatory novel by a women writer who speaks both Arab and American women voices. By narrating four women characters, Halaby prominently highlights inner conflict affected by women in Palestine. These four girls struggle with national, ethnic and sexual identities in their own country and America as well. Halaby explores characters from the base root of Arab society and culture. All four women characters in this novel are cousins. But they have different social background. Each one of them represents miscellaneous strata of society.

Hala is the first among these girls. She was born in Palestine and brought up in America. She has very rare chances to visit in her homeland. During a visit to her grandmother, Hala feels that she has a deep tie to that nation. Second girl named Mawal, who leads a life of traditional young women's life on the West Bank in the village Nawara. Third cousin in this group is Soraya. Who engages in rebellious activities as a fully Americanized Californian. And the fourth cousin Khadija, who still cannot escape from the cruel domination and vulgar abusiveness from her father.

According to Elsa Gaztambide in Booklist, Halaby's voice conveys a tapestry of images. Characters of Halaby come across with the issue of identity. In her view Dori Despain noted in school library journal, the author makes clear that growing up women character is messy and difficult whatever the ethnicity or religion. It also symbolizes hybrid identity, which evidently sharpen individuals in searching of their homeland. And those who settle in their homeland still struggle with conventions and traditions revolving around their circumstances.

Hala's father didn't give healthy support of reading books from outside of school texts. He used to take away her books when he sees them. Besides her mother, Jalal was only the one supporter to Hala for getting appreciation for her reading. Both Hala's mother and elder sister Latifa had still struggling phase in their life. In her work, *A Room of One's own*, Virginia Woolf argues that the male dominated ideas of the patriarchal society prevent women from realizing their creativity. Father dominated society is an ever existing trouble for women establishment. Halaby also rises the same tension in the case of Hala. "Jalal has gone and come back and will stay to take care of the land. Tihani is married and away. Latifa is already Old, if Hala stays here, she will not rot like me and like Latifa. Look at us. We have rotted. Let Hala grow and dream"(West of the Jordan, 9)

Halaby arguably highlights the same question of male domination in the case Hala. Even though, her father had a great deal of land in Ramallah, he believed in education and let his wife to go America for college. On the other hand, he has very traditional as well as conservative thinking. Due to this reason, all other three girls immediately ceased their college education and end up with marriage. This is a stereotype in Middle Eastern countries. They believe in marriage at early age for girls rather than upbringing them in to the frontline of the society.

In fact all the three novels basically raise the issues of women in Middle Eastern countries. As far Saudi Arabia is concerned, religious fundamentalism converse in their social law and dissolve with individual identity. Especially women in this segment were denied their social rights and privilege. Turkey is still in confusion even after the great reformation by Ataturk. Women characters in *Bastard of Istanbul* struggle with conventions and traditions. Liala Halaby arguably highlights women characters who consistently under the threat of male hypocrisy and identity crisis in host land. Basically all the three women writers in Middle East unanimously framing Arab women internal and external conflict.

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