

Identity and Patriarchy: Nadia Al-Kowkabani's *My Sana'a**

Khaled Alkodimi*

Department of English and Literature, Imam Mohammed Ibn Saud Islamic University, Saudi Arabia

Received on: 21-3-2020

Accepted on: 08-6-2020

Abstract

Nadia Al-kowkabani is a post-modern Yemeni novelist and short story writer whose powerful response to the longstanding patriarchy in Yemen informs her work. However, little is known about Al-Kowkabani and her literary oeuvre. This paper develops feminist perspectives to read Nadia Al-Kowkabani's novel *My Sana'a* (2015), in Arabic, 'صنعائي-*Sana'ai*'. It identifies a range of challenges that the novel presents to dominant discourses of identity and patriarchy, particularly in the context of Yemeni society. With this in mind, I argue that Al-Kowkabani's *My Sana'a* is a powerful literary response to the double suffering of Yemeni women: They are being alienated from their own homeland for reasons of exile, or immigration, on the one hand; and, on the other, they are usually the objects of a male-dominated society. The protagonist's dual identity in Al-Kowkabani's novel is compounded by patriarchal norms that continue to govern the institution of marriage in Yemen. In addition to allusions to contemporary Arab critics and thinkers, the paper offers a comparative reading between Al-Kowkabani's *My Sana'a* and Susan Abulhawa's novel *Mornings in Jenin*, demonstrating the ways in which the heroines in both novels – despite being caught up in quite similar situations – react differently. My paper, therefore, calls for rethinking the whole question of women, particularly in Yemen; because it aids in redressing grievances and reclaiming truth.

Keywords: Al-Kowkabani, Exile, Identity, Feminist, Nostalgia, Patriarchal Oppression.

Introduction

Nadia Al-kowkabani is a post-modern Yemeni novelist and short story writer. She is one of the contemporary powerful Yemeni voices who has been introduced as one of the “best Arab writers” in the “emerging Arab voices” by Peter Clarck (2010). Al-Kowkabani has written a number of short story collections and a few novels. Her novels include *It's Just love, Ladies, My Sana'a (Sana'ai)* and *Ali Mohsen Bazaar, in Arabic- Souk Ali Mohsen* (2016). Interestingly, most of her novels are concerned with the harsh life of Yemeni society, particularly for women. Therefore, I argue that Al-Kowkabani's *My Sana'a* is a staunch claim of women's rights, a feminist voice for the liberation of women from the shackles of patriarchy, particularly in the context of Yemen.

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* Doi.org/10.47012/jjml.13.1.6

* Corresponding author: kaq2002@yahoo.com

Al-Kowkabani was born in Taiz, and studied architecture at Sana'a University. She completed her PhD in architecture at Cairo University in 2008, before returning to take up an academic position at Sana'a University. Her first published literary work was a short story in the journal *Al-Thawra*. Since then, she has published a number of short story collections, starting with *Zaferat Al-Yasmeen* (Jasmine's Sighs) in 2001. Her first novel is titled *Hubb laysa illà (It's Just Love)* which was published in 2006. It was followed in 2009 by *Aqeelat (Ladies)*, a story about the lives of 19 Yemeni women. Also in 2009, she formed a literary group called Meeting Yesterday with fellow Yemeni authors, Ali Al-Muqri, Samir Abdul-Fatah and Wajdi Al-Ahdal. Abdul Aziz Al Maqaleh, a prominent Yemeni man of letters, expresses his admiration for Al-Kowkabani, describing her as a woman "gifted with great talents and an ability to disconnect between what is scientific and what is literary, between engineering and creativity" (2011).

Al-Kowkabani has received a number of literary awards both in Yemen and abroad. Among these are the Saud al-Sabah Prize in 2000 (Second prize), the Yemeni President's Award for Young Writers (2001) and the Arab Fund for Arts and Culture Grant (2010). In 2009, she was invited to participate in the first writers' workshop (Nadwa) organized by IPAF (International Prize for Arabic Fiction), and her work was included in the resulting anthology entitled *Emerging Arab Voices*, referred to above. Her work has appeared in translation in two issues of Banipal magazine, in 2005 and in 2009. She has also been translated into French and German. Al-Kowkabani is also a member of many groups, in particular a committee campaigning for an end to violence against women (Nadia Al-kowkabani, and Banipal).

Al-Kowkabani's first novel, *It's Just Love*, for example, deals with marriage traditions in the male-dominated society of Yemen. The novel depicts the story of an educated girl with great ambition in life to pursue her education abroad and become a prominent professor. However, due to the marriage traditions in Yemen, her father forces her to get married to someone she has never known before and who tortured her on the first night of their marriage. Such marriage, according to the author, destroys the lives of many innocent girls like Farah who experiences the hardships of marriage life as early as her wedding night:

No one heard my screams. No one came to help me. No one healed my pain. My body was violently ripped open by him, and I was proved innocent of what I had been accused. My virginity was torn into pieces that would be difficult to mend or indeed to fix. Body parts were penetrated and had the poison of desire thrust inside them and then thrown away like dirty towel. (It's Just Love 2006, 76)

Thus, through Farah, Al-Kowkabani was able to criticize the Yemeni patriarchal culture wherein male domination over women has long been the norm. In this system, "a man is considered as the head of the family and has a considerable control over the lives of the members" (A research Guide 2019). Like Ramzia Al-Eryany, a famous Yemeni short story writer, Al-Kowkabani is a "leading feminist and a political activist who dedicates her life to give a voice for the voice-less women in her society" (al-Wadhaf, 10).

Similarly, her subsequent novel, *Aqeelat*, in English-*Ladies*, focuses on the difficulties of women in general and girls, in particular, in the patriarchal society of Yemen. The title itself is ironic in the sense that while the word *Aqeelat* is supposed to refer to respected women, in Arabic culture, the story shows

women as being oppressed and ill-treated. Abdulaziz Al-Maqaleh, referred to above, notes that the title of Al-Kowkabani's *Aqeelat* has two dimensional connotations, "married or imprisoned". According to him, the story suggests that "there is no difference in both, the symbolic and the real, particularly in the third world where the woman is imprisoned inside her households". As Al-Maqaleh explains:

Aqeelat is a novel or a collection of novels in one story combined by a solid thread of the manifestations of women's suffering, or of her peerless torment, and of her long-haired future yearning to a new life in which she enjoys and exercises her existence as a human who has the same rights like the rest of women in the world, and with certain duties to fulfill. (2011)

Significantly, Al-Maqaleh finds vast difference between Al-Kowkabani's first novel, *It's Just Love*, and her latest novel *Sana'ai (My Sana'a)*. He points out that the difference lies not only in the approach and artistic vision, but also in the form of artistic construction and breaking the familiar monotonous features in the traditional novel and fostering new creative horizons based on "breaking all the norms" and follow the so-called new narrative writing "fragmentation and disruption of space-time structure, and exit from time to time, and from one place to another, in an experimental structure that combines reality and imagination". According to Al-Maqaleh, through this artistic disturbance, Al-Kowkabani draws a series of facts and events, and models of *Aqeelat* or ladies who are "similar but contradictory in their life performance and in their conscious or unconscious expression of life within a frame of surprisingly paradoxical differences that provokes astonishment and pain" (2011). Al-Maqaleh further notes that Nadia Al-Kowkabani's works are "based on a great deal of imagination and aesthetic expression" which she utilizes to address certain controversial issues in an "artistic manner" (2011).

Based on the discussion above, this paper claims that Al-Kowkabani is arguably a feminist author par excellence. As feminist theory concerns itself with the "images of women in literary works" (Robbins 1999, 51), this essay attempts to read *Sana'ai (My Sana'a)* from feminist perspectives in order to fully explicate the author's view of women in her society. Feminist theory is very much concerned with the different "structures of [women] oppression" such as "social deprivations", ... physiological oppression or the oppression of the body by the virtue of its femaleness ..." (Robbins 50). Robbins notes that "patriarchy" is the name given to all those structures of oppression including cultural oppression or psychological oppression and violence against women (50). Peck and Coyle also points out that "feminist criticism is concerned both with the representation of women in literature and with changing women's position in society by freeing them from oppressive restraints" (1993, 170). They have further stated that "feminist criticism" is mainly concerned with "the oppression of woman", and therefore, it concentrates on the "figure of the suppressed female", claiming a full "female identity" (171). However, as Virginia Woolf argues, women must "reject this social construct and establish their own identity. Women must challenge the prevailing, false cultural notions about their gender identity and develop a female discourse ... portray their relationship to the world of reality and not to the world of men" (Bressler 2003, 146). Al-Kowkabani's *Sana'ai (My Sana'a)* is very much concerned with the patriarchal social system in Yemen. In this novel she rejects in Beauvoir and Millett's words the assertion that "males considered the

female the 'Other'" (Bressler 147) or "have made women the 'nonsignificant' other" (144). This theme is discussed in details in this paper, however, for the flow of the discussion, I shall begin by highlighting the heroine's identity crisis as an integral part of Subhyyah's experience of the masculine society.

Identity Crisis and Home Nostalgia

Indeed, Al-Kowkabani's *My Sana'a* is one of her greatest works, where reality and fiction have been carefully interwoven to depict the landscape of Old Sana'a, one of the most ancient cities in the world. The novel is a story of love, a story of politics and a story of history, carefully interwoven to reflect the complexity of modern Yemeni society. Significantly, it is the fascinating history of Old Sana'a that enchanted Subhyyah and made her nostalgic about the city. The story begins with the arrival of Subhyyah, her mother and the corpus of her father that is to be buried in Sana'a. Subhyyah starts her enquiries about her adored city as soon as she arrives in Sana'a (180). She is too excited to be ultimately on the lap of her dream city. Meanwhile, she starts her own painting exhibition where she draws and paints pictures, and also receives different people on a daily basis. This place gives her an opportunity to see and encounter different people including Hameed with whom she soon falls in love, as well as with an unknown woman who has been introduced by Subhyyah as the woman of "sitarah" (Sana'ani hijab), and who later on, increases Subhyyah's prejudice against Hameed (101).

Subhyyah, born in Yemen, was brought up in Cairo as her father was on self-exile to Egypt due to his role in the Yemeni Revolution in 1962. She was only six months when her family left Yemen, seeking refuge in Egypt (*Sana'ai* 2015, 86). Her father was an important figure among those who had played a significant role in that revolution. However, he neither told her the reasons of his exile, nor revealed to her his past life. In other words, she remains ignorant of her father's past life until he passed away. Unaware of her origins, Subhyyah grows up believing that she is originally Egyptian. Surprisingly, however, she accidentally learns from her teacher at school that she is originally from Yemen. This incident shocks her and leads her to start searching for her origins, her real identity. Indeed, it marks a turning point in her life as she starts to suffer from having a dual identity, and home nostalgia, as well.

But the sixth year was already a late age to be informed by my mother and father that the country in which I live is not my homeland, but I have a different one! I don't know why I don't live in! And why I don't visit it, and why nobody informed me about it before ...and I have two names: 'Sabah' at school and 'Subhyyah' at home! (89)

As Fareed Al-Homaid notes, "political crisis, history and questions of identity feature prominently in much of the work being produced today" (*Yemen Times* 2015). Interestingly, Subhyyah's alienation from her history is used by the author to highlight the close relationship between history and identity. In other words, Subhyyah's lack of identity is a result of her ignorance of the history and the traditions of her nation. "I search but only for someone who loves me, who gives me a homeland I never lived in, and an identity I did not belong to", she said (166).

Subhyyah starts to feel nostalgic about her original homeland. She feels lost and diasporic. She admires the life of Cairo, but at the same time she is nostalgic about her native land. Unfortunately, her dual identity makes her unable to settle down in either of them. Her longing for Sana'a, for example, makes her unable to permanently settle down in Cairo. However, when she arrives back in Yemen, she finds that she is different, an odd one. Indeed, she finds herself caught up between two identities, being a typical Sana'ani girl, and at the same time, being unable to fully part with the life of Cairo where she was raised and grew up. This dualism is clearly expressed through Subhyyah who suddenly discovers, early in her life that she belongs to "two cities, two dialects and two homelands" (88). Subhyyah expresses her own worshiping for the two cities when she declares that "Sana'ai was in the box [a shape of it], but Cairo was my free city that was pumping blood in my arteries. I discovered that I have two cities and two dialects and two homelands early in my life" (88). This realization stuck in her memory and with which she begins to suffer the dual identity until the end of the story. She asserts that it is an "incident that has been dug in the wall of the memory and with which [she] begins the dual identity and homesickness". She carries on, "until the age of six, I speak outside the house in one dialect and inside the house in another dialect" (88).

Subhyyah's state of nostalgia for Sana'a is further sharpened by her grandmother who suddenly arrives in Cairo and starts telling her fascinating stories about Old Sana. Subhyyah admits: "before sleep, I circle myself beside her, to tell and tell and tell ... every day I hear new tale" (91). Those tales further arouse Subhyyah's interest in Sana'a as she says: "and since then, like all girls, I wished I got a prince and I wished a palace like 'Ghamdan Palace' with multiple floors, luxurious, its well-being arrived far and wide ..." (93). Her longing for the city is emphasized by keeping whatever items related to Sana'a as a priceless gift which she keeps among the valuable things at home. "I kept the issue as a precious gift, but a treasure arrived from Sana'a, with whatever information it contains about the old city which has been established in the memory about that city which will be mine no matter how long I am away from it ..." (100). In his analysis of the crisis that results from one's separation from his ideal homeland, Zwingmann concludes that nostalgia is actuated by a number of factors where he points out that isolation from an ideal past is a major factor that intensifies nostalgia. For him, "Intense nostalgic behavior and nostalgic fixation are due to change which is abrupt, forced and irreversible which contrasts strongly with the pre-change situation (1973, 37).

Subhyyah ultimately arrives in her adored city after the death of her father and she immediately starts investigating the city of her dream. She appears very enthusiastic to relive and enjoy the past she has missed. "There was hope that did not part from me, to live all that I have delayed at the exile, in a homeland that I dreamed of more than anything" (121). In her quest, Subhyyah encounters and introduces readers to the different aspects of the city, its beauty, habits, and traditions and more importantly its people and their romantic adventures. Amar Al-Asbahi who describes Nadia Al-Kowkabani as a novelist at the size of the novel notes that *Sana'ai* provides an opportunity for the reader to

travel not only through the old alleys of Old Sana'a, but even inside its houses, and the inhalation of its fragrant smells and privacy recognized by each one who passed

through its ancient Gate of Yemen, and transported between the walls of those old houses and gazed at its paved roads, and its neighborhoods that witnessed a lot who passed on it, and dug in the minds its history that still until the moment writes its details...in spite of the succession of regimes and events. (2019)

To her disappointment, however, Subhyyah's dream turns into a heap of ashes as she finds herself totally different, unable to adapt to the Yemeni society where the "hegemonic structure of patriarch or masculine domination" is the dominant (Butler 2004, 193). "I waited for many things till I arrive in my country, but I didn't find them ... nothing around me except the mirage that intensifies my passion for a life I didn't live! ..." (165). Her ridiculous situation reaches the peak when she feels she does not belong to the city: "Oh father! I don't know if I should blame you and reproach you for eradicating me from the roots of my homeland and attempting to implant me in another country ..." (165). The ironical state of Subhyyah is intensified when she begins to feel she would like to go back to Cairo. The absurdity of the situation is that she is unable to adapt to her original home city. She could not change and follow the traditional life-style of the Yemeni society. Indeed, staying in Cairo for several years, Al-Kowkabani, like many Yemeni intellectuals who represent "the conscience of the nation" (qtd in White 2013, 15) is "torn between their reality, based on traditions and customs, and their perceptions of being 'civic', based on the media, books, magazines and social media, that are neither adopted nor encouraged by the state" (Al-Bakry 2019). Such writers, according to Al-Bakry, cannot bring about any changes to their society. For Al-Bakry, all they can do is to point out their social concern through their writing, however, they "find themselves [totally neglected] and marginalized" (2019).

The tragic condition of women in general pales in comparison with the complexity of their situation in Yemen. One key preoccupation of my paper is to foster a comparative awareness of the different articulations and interpretations that Arab novelists make of the woman's cause to accommodate diversity and account for historical dynamics of social and cultural change (Al-Musawi 2003). Like Amal, in the *Mornings in Jenin* by Susan Abulhawa (2010), Subhyyah misses the sense of belonging to the homeland. Amal, for example, is considered lucky when she escapes the hell in Palestine as she gets a scholarship to America to pursue her education in the United States. However, she finds difficulties adapting to the new environment there. She tries hard to mix with people by dating, nuding herself and lying on the beach but all in vain (Alkodimi 2019, 135). "She feels exiled both from her land and from her culture, and she finds herself striving to adopt in this exotic culture" (Bellour, 11). Her crisis of identity and her nostalgia for the homeland ultimately leads her to return home.

Amal's meeting with her brother, after three decades of separateness, has fostered her nostalgia and ignited her burning desire to return to the homeland. So, she left her land of alienation and exile that constitutes an "unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home" (Said 2002, 173). Amal returns to Jenin with David and her daughter Sara, who wanted to know about her homeland, the history of her people and their plight. The title "*mornings in Jenin*" carries the intense feeling of nostalgia to the childhood years when Hasan used to read poetry for Amal each

morning (Bellour 2016, 13). It was only Amal trying to assimilate into the American society and deny her Palestinian identity, but she eventually failed to do so.

Similarly, Subhyyah suffers from both the crisis of identity and the nostalgia for the homeland. She keeps dreaming of her native land until she returns back. Ironically however, Subhyyah, in contrast to Amal, finds herself unable to adapt to the social atmosphere of her native land. Hence, the absurdity of her situation lies in the fact that she wants to run away from her home to the world of her childhood, Cairo, as a result of an extreme sense of not belonging. In this regard, one may contend that, whereas Abulhawa has used her heroine to depict the significance of the land for Palestinians, al-Kowkabani wanted to criticize the backwardness of her own society which is totally different from the image that Subhyyah has created in her mind. As Bressler notes, the goal of feminist criticism is "to change society, not simply critique it" (151). From a feminist perspective, Al-Kowkabani's main goal is to "change this unfair social status of women" and the society at large (Bressler, 151).

Mockingly, Subhyyah's *Sana'ai* (*My Sana'a*) is changed into "their Sana'a" as she ultimately calls it (165). This ironic tone has been skillfully functioned to criticize women social oppression in Yemen as they have no chance to enjoy life like their counterparts in other parts of the world. Unfortunately, Subhyyah realizes that her ideal image of the city and its people which she draws in her paintings is totally different from the reality. "I went on weaving a world belonging to me in my work when I draw and hit with my brush and colour on the fabrics and papers" (112). Her idealism, however, makes her unable to accept the reality of the city and its people. The world that she draws and imagines falls into pieces as she has been shocked by the reality and hardships of life in Yemeni society, particularly for women. She finally admits that she is different and that she cannot combat with it as "difference needs confrontation, challenging, strength and patience. I didn't have power for all this. I put on the black veil to appear to belong to the community, not different of it" (105). Hence, Like Amal in Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin*, Subhyyah also tries hard to adapt to the new environment in order to experience the sense of belonging, but all goes in vain. Like Amal, she feels she is totally different, an odd one. However, in contrast to Amal, Subhyyah finds herself in a society where women oppression is the norm. This society, according to the author, lacks openness and freedom, particularly for women, therefore, Subhyyah appears to be a strange or the odd one. Obviously, this is why she ultimately bow down and puts on the 'black veil'.

The author seems to be angry as one of the most ancient cities in the world suffers from backwardness and lacks the basic needs of life in spite of being a beautiful landmark. The author, in other words, seems to criticize the traditional life of her society that is not yet ready for the change. In particular, it is an indirect criticism of the "cultural oppression", in Robbins words, of women that shocked Subhyyah and leads her to think of Cairo again (50), as she eventually, insists on her mother to go back to Cairo, but her mother rejects the proposal completely (83). Subhyyah's lost identity is aesthetically deployed as an allegory of being alienated from the history of her own homeland. That is why she admits that "the enquiries about the homeland takes [her] away from the search of its history" (180). In this sense, the author seems to suggest that the whole nation is lost in the sense that the

September 1962 revolution was not successful, and the hopes for social changes turned into a mere dream. Subhyyah's search for the nation and its history is from within. She is at home but she feels she is being estranged. While this shows the difficulties of those who live in exile to adapt to such traditional society, it also highlights the failure of the current regime to improve life-style in Yemen.

Ironically, Subhyyah ends up searching for Cairo (78-79), the city of her exile. She could neither identify with people nor with the city of her dream. She finds Sana'a incomparable to Cairo.

I compare the most important basics of entertainment and cultural activities available in life that I lived in Cairo like gardens, parks, book exhibition, arts, cinema galleries, theater ... then I feel pity towards them [girls] from the disgust that they face from the community. (82)

Hence, she is longing for the life of Cairo as she is more rigid and reluctant to embrace the traditional social order of Sana'a. In other words, Subhyyah is a victim of a cultural shock as she finds her ideal city-Sana'a is much less than she could imagine. This is perhaps why she succinctly describes Cairo as a "city of life", or "full of life in each hand-length in it" (83). Thus, it is too absurd that Subhyyah, after all, prefers to go back to the country of her exile rather than to stay in the country of her origin. Indeed, being raised in Cairo, Subhyyah seems to have a different view of life. Culturally, she is under the influence of Cairo city where women enjoy a space of freedom, and the gender relationship is different, as well. Such cultural background creates difficulties and prevents her from accepting the 'cultural oppression of women' in her original city. In other words, she is culturally shocked as she finds that the social atmosphere of Sana'a is totally different from that of Cairo with which she is familiar. In contrast, Sana'a suffers from a patriarchal system that denies girls and women in general to have such space of freedom that their counterparts enjoy in Cairo. In contrast to Cairo, Yemeni women find solace only in gathering inside houses to chew qat and spend their time, a habit that has been totally rejected by Subhyyah who "used to express [her] huge astonishment when [her] mother talks about the extra concern of women with these gathering habits and its costly rituals" (82).

In sum, Al-Kowkabani exposes a range of social ills that permeate the social fabric of Yemeni society, in particular qat-chewing sessions. Her critique, as the analysis shows above, unfolds the series of disappointments that her main character undergoes. In what follows, I demonstrate the ways in which Al-Kowkabani's critique of women's position in Yemen is not restricted to the social level, but is also inclusive of the individual level.

Hameed's Masculinity and Subhyyah's Ambivalence

As Fredric Jameson (1986) puts it, the third-world author in one way or another is "a political intellectual" (74). Indeed, 'political conscience' informs Al-Kowkabani's works, including *Sana'ai*. In this novel, Al-Kowkabani makes use of the historical part of the story in order to send a political message to the current regime that fails to appreciate the precious heritage of the old city of Sana'a. This is perhaps why Subhyyah reacts angrily and "named [her] painting the cry, for a bird with a child's face flying with its wings on the city whose parts of the wall were littered out" (120). It is a call to preserve the historic

sites in the city as the author feels that "its people do not know the value of the treasure in their hands to protect it for themselves and for the world" (113). The ancient fascinating historical palace of Ghamdan that Subhyyah has been dreaming of, for instance, has been converted into the 'palace of weapon' under the existing state. This shows that the existing regime is not concerned with the well-being of the state but rather interested in creating unstable society so that it could ensure its own continuity. In this sense, the author seems to sharply ridicule the current regime that has defamed the beauty of the city. She uses her heroine as a vehicle to express her anger as the city that she adores is losing its status as an important landmark in the world heritage list. Subhyyah, the author's mouthpiece expresses her anger when she wonders, "What do those people do with the city?! How they could defame its beauty and its history in this way?!" (94).

Interestingly, the story takes us back to different significant events pertaining to the Yemeni revolution and the subsequent events that lead to its failure. Both *Subhyyah's* and *Hameed's* fathers play important roles in that revolution which is the main reason for her father's exile. Hameed's father, for instance, "defended the new republican system of Sana'a ... when the tribes surrounded and attacked the city ..., particularly in November 1967, a siege that continued for seventy days" (56). As Al-Asbahi notes, Al-Kowkabani's *Sana'ai*, "gifted us a historical document for the generations where she informs them of facts... about Yemen history which many attempted hard to cover, in order to achieve their goals and motives" (Peace Horizons 2019).

Such flashbacks have been carefully functioned to highlight the Yemeni revolution and the revolutionists who sacrificed themselves for the sake of the nation, but were ultimately executed one after the other by those who take an advantage of the current situation and who were also against the changes taking place in the country toward freedom and democracy at the time. Those events are introduced by Hameed, the second voice in the story and who once wonders: "who believes that four hundred thousand republic soldiers face eight thousand trained soldiers and fifty thousand tribal men around Sana'a and hundreds of mercenaries?!" (74). Hameed adds, "In 1948 revolution, after the reign that last for 44 years ...he [Imam] punished the revolutionists and slaughtered the necks of many of them ...", Hameed said (54). Perhaps, this is why Riyadh Hammadi considers *Sana'ai* as the truest historical novel about the political history of Sana'a where the novel blends the history of humans and stone into interesting love stories" (*Alquds Alarabi* 2019). According to Hammadi, the central question of this part of the story is whether that historical part "was written as it happened or not". However, he ended up with the impression of Hameed himself - a second key figure - that the writings of this period are characterized by "ambiguity and abound in the gossip and writings of personal impressionism and conflicting notes that no one knows its truth" (Hammad 2019). Similarly, al-Nabi stresses the significance of *Sana'ai* as a novel that presents "Sana'a's multiple faces, the face of the city, the face of love and the face of war and conflict" (2015).

Al-Kowkabani introduces those different faces in her story. For instance, the brutality of war against Sana'a and its inhabitants is skillfully set in contrast to the beauty of the city, as well as the innocence and the romantic adventures of its inhabitants. Hameed, for example, exposes his father's secrets, "My father

used to love women, ... fond of them-like others of the legendary Sana'a inhabitants ... stories known to everyone about love, romance... and the suffering from temptation ..." (60-61). Hameed's comments, however, clearly reflects the author's critical stance of the masculine society that treat women as "sexual being", if I borrow de Beauvoir's words (2004, 52).

However, the romantic story of Subhyyah and Hameed occupies the central part of the story, through which the author ridicules the patriarchal social system in Yemen. Their romantic story is carefully integrated with the historical background of Yemeni society in order to produce a live picture of such male dominated society where woman is looked at as an "imperfect man" (Beauvoir 51). Hameed is introduced for the first time when he abruptly visits Subhyyah at her exhibition hall. He attracts her attention from the first time he visits her place. That admiration developed into a wonderful love story between the two. "It is love, this what I feel towards 'Hameed'. I won't stop it. I won't resist what my heart leads me to.... I love, then I am female" (121). Subhyyah starts enjoying the city in Hameed's company, "but I lived with him the city that he loves and which I search for" (107). Interestingly, what attracts Subhyyah is not only Hameed's physical appearance, but she sees in him the other side of the coin, his deep love for the city of her dream-Sana'a, a common characteristic in both. However, while Subhyyah is a mere searcher of the town, Hameed, on the other hand, grew up in the city and knows every single part and family in there. Their wandering in the city gives Subhyyah a chance to know and experience more about the city.

More importantly, Subhyyah identifies Hameed with Sana'a, her adored city. She finds in him the desired characteristics of the Sana'ani man whom she is looking for. In other words, she recognizes him as a unique Sana'ani gentleman, an image that she has created in her paintings and dreamed of since she was at the exile land, Cairo. "Hameed is my love and there is no love like him" (167). She goes further and associates him with Sana'a, "I was between Sana'a arms at that moment. His hands which went on penetrating ..." (124). Hence, she admits that Hameed equals Sana'a in her view as she declares "... but Sana'a and Hameed are the same thing, in my mind and in my painting" (113). Thus, like the image of Sana'a city, she draws an ideal image of Hameed too.

Unfortunately, however, Subhyyah gets disappointed as she eventually realizes that Hameed is interested in her merely for his own self-gratification. She feels frustrated as she "has been turned into a mere girlfriend for mere showing off! What is wrong with this 'Hameed' getting more mysterious, the more I approach him!" she said (134). She ultimately finds herself unable to identify with him as he obviously appears to have different motives, being interested in her as an object of his desire, but not as a real partner. To her total astonishment, she realizes that Hameed is that sort of Yemeni society who looks at women as "sex maniacs" (Bressler 2003, 147). Her excitement turns into disappointment and loss. "He causes my amazement at his constant astonishment of my spontaneity with him in speaking and in deeds", she said (167). Indeed, Subhyyah herself appears to be unable to understand the reality of the conservative society of Yemen as she came from a different social background. Her openness, in other words, might have led Hameed and many others to misunderstand her.

Indeed, Hameed embodies the masculine society of Yemen which views women as subordinate to men. In 'The Second Sex', Simone de Beauvoir points out that woman is "not regarded as an autonomous being. According to him, while man is the "Subject", the "Absolute", woman is the "other" (2004, 52). Hameed, for instance, has denied Subhyyah even the chance to express herself or to discuss her thoughts with him. He never shows his interest in her ideas or dreams. This is obvious as she expresses her surprise and complains, "... but he has never concerned with my dreams. ... He never let me complete a sentence or explain an idea to him ..." (167). As French feminists suggested, "masculine desire dominates speech and posits woman as an idealized fantasy-fulfillment for the incurable emotional lack caused by separation from the mother" (Murfin 462). Obviously, Subhyyah's views are not significant to Hameed as he embodies that society where woman's voice is not heard or else should not be there at all.

Another important sign of Hameed's negligence for her is his late arrival on the day of her bathing, even though he promises to meet her early at the dawn time. Old Sanaa steam baths are among the most prominent monuments in the city dated back to the first Ottoman era in Yemen. It becomes a common custom, practiced once a week by the inhabitants of Sana'a. It was the "last thing to expect [Hameed] to be late for 10 minutes", for her bath, Subhyyah said (130). Indeed, as far as the idea is concerned, Hameed's selfishness is a result of his cultural background where man has to dominate but not the woman. Subhyyah makes it even clearer when she describes old Sana'a as a Masculine society through the symbol of the 'coffee maker woman' who manages to work in such patriarchal society (116). She further feels pity for the continuous sexual harassment against girls walking on the road in spite of the black veil that covers all body (106). Hence, al-Kowkabani seems to be interested in exposing the reality of her society, particularly those issues pertaining to women oppression and marginalization. Al-Homaid notes that many contemporary Yemeni novelists address "people's relationship with society and the status of more marginalized groups like women". Most of their themes, as Al-Homaid remarks, may be "viewed through the prism of revolution and conflict, creating a social milieu that stimulates reflection and artistic creativity whatever part of the world it is happening in" (Yemen Times 2015).

Al-Kowkabani's critical stance against the patriarchal society reaches the peak when her heroine expresses her contempt and indignation against this phenomenon by raising questions that draw attention towards certain forms of socially objectionable behavior, "how can this body survive its fate? It is the body of temptation ...even if it is covered from the head to the feet ... how" (106). She carries on,

female 'coffee maker' receives the coffee price and distributes her female craving for free. She grants the hungry eyes a wider scope to dive into the tasteful flesh without requesting anything in return. She ... her customers with broken looks ... that ...on ruined ...left by patriarchal Tatar legions towards ending other ruins.
(111)

Thus, Subhyyah seems to be unable to tolerate the male dominated society of Yemen. She misses the Cairo good old days where women have more freedom to enjoy life. She gets fed up with the Yemeni society that looks at women as subordinate to men, therefore, have no rights to wear, talk and walk as they like. Her rebellious reaction towards Hameed sums up the situation as she ultimately outcries in his

face: “all this is yours, and all is for you! Where I am? What did you want to do for me? ... You live but only for yourself! You are selfish ... selfishness is embedded in you!” (295). As Al-Wadhaf notes, “patriarchy constitutes the main source of women's oppression in Yemen and many other neighboring countries” (2013, 12).

Al- Kowkabani appears like Sahar Khalifeh who “explicitly attacks Palestinian patriarchal views of women in society” and worked hard to “empower women and change attitudes about their place in the family and in the community” (White 18). She believes that “if woman seems to be the essential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change” (Beauvoir 53). In this respect, Nabil Suleiman who describes Nadia Al-Kowkabani as a writer who “tells in the name of the Yemeni women”, points out that Al-Kowkabani is aiming at “changing the social patriarchy of her society and giving both sexes more freedom to choose their partners” (2011). In other words, Al-Kowkabani’s “discourse emphasizes northern [Yemeni] women as voiceless, powerless, and subject to northern patriarchal structures such as tribalism” (Davis 2014, 82). Like all feminist critics and novelists, Al-Kowkabani tries to stress that women “are people on their own right; they are not incomplete or inferior men” (Bressler 2003, 154). She is completely against "silence" or becoming "the invisible and unheard sex" (qtd in Murfin 462). Subhyyah’s rebellious spirit against Hameed (295) is an important sign of the author’s perspectives.

Hameed – though he admits his romantic view of Subhyyah – finds her quite different from all his romantic adventures. He remarks: “... as if I have never fallen in love, and as if my heart has beaten for the first time, learning the principles of love with a woman it has dreamed to go with ...” (47). He adds, “I love you Sabihati (my Subhyyah)! I am mad about you” (125). He visited her several times at her exhibition hall before they started dating each other. However, he ultimately confesses that he has different motives towards her. He takes advantage of Subhyyah’s admiration and carefully plans his temptations by standing “in front of her to draw [his] face that expresses the features of the Sana’ani man” (43). While she thinks that he is the right match for her, the ‘Sana’ani man’, whom she has always dreamed of, is merely looking for his own satisfaction as he admits: “all this was to stir her emotion or to play with her emotions” (43). Indeed, Hameed appears to be very selfish as he is not only seducing her, but he thinks she is less significant or inferior to him *as* he never gives her a chance to express her thoughts. Obviously, Al-Kowkabani seems to criticize the mentality of the people of her society who view women as inferior to men who have to listen or to follow the instructions rather than being real partners. This view is further sharpened by Hameed who admits that he gets rid of his own daughters by getting them married early in their life against their well.

I did like my father and got three children: two daughters and a son. Deep in my heart I wished they were all male. Girls are a big burden, therefore, I got rid of them and I gave them in marriage to the first men who proposed to them. I pay no attention to the request of the youngest who wanted to finish her high school first (73-4).

Such male domination makes up the essence of the feminist theories that “draw on the very real fact that women have repeatedly been marginalized and disregarded under historical hegemonic power structures in which men hold the bulk of authority” (White 10).

Eventually, Hameed admits that he does not understand Subhyyah and her motives when he says “being brought up and raised outside Yemen, her behavior shocked me and caused my bewilderment at the same time!” (159). He misunderstands her openness and makes a hasty judgement about her. He further admits that she is different from other women that he knew. “Subhyyah, alone, with whom I dare to walk with blatant face”, he adds (160). But more importantly, he regrets his misjudgment over her behavior: “I should have understood that she is different” (161). Hameed goes further and admits that she is bigger than his understanding, “you left even before I beg your pardon ... and you always prove that you are greater than I can fathom like life itself”, he said (158-9). He eventually confesses that he “let her down” as he “gave her a lover out of paper” (161). Interestingly, by equating Subhyyah with life, the author seems to suggest that she is an ideal person who dreams of an ideal world. Unfortunately, such ideal woman has no chance in Hameed's masculine society that views woman as “an imperfect man, an incidental being”, or simply “is not regarded as an autonomous being” (Beauvoir, 51-52).

Perhaps Hameed's behavior adds insult to injury as it increases Subhyyah's prejudice against the whole social system:

I suffered from the domination of that black colour over women at the beginning of my life in Sana'a. I put on my colour clothes like I used to in Cairo. I used to appear like a tourist or like an Arabian visitor or a stranger. I have never felt the respect of those around me when I wore it...But permanent stealth... (105).

While the above quotation sheds light on the cultural conflict that Subhyyah is made to go through, it also shows the author's concern with social oppression being exercised on women as they cannot freely express themselves since they are dominated by men. This idea is emphasized through the ‘insane of the dawn’, a woman of the city who, when passing Subhyyah and Hameed, comments, “women belong to men” (131). However, Subhyyah feels puzzled as nobody comments on her statement, as if it is socially acknowledged that women are so. The author, in other words, criticizes the male dominated society where women have been stripped of their basic rights to a dignified and equal life. This view is artistically captured in Subhyyah's remembrance of Rafat, a gentle classmate and friend of hers in Cairo. In spite of her rejection when he proposes to her, he shows a clear consideration of her situation, and stays by her side until she leaves Cairo (97).

Subhyyah's inability to identify with Hameed symbolizes her inability to identify with Sana'a, though it's the city of her dream. Like Sana'a, Hameed represents the ideal person that Subhyyah was longing to unite with. She has been dreaming of uniting with a Sana'ani man who embodies or bears the characteristics of a man from the city she has imagined. “I have always dreamt of marrying, but from a Sana'ani man, yes, pure, one hundred pure Sana'ani ...” (24). She further describes the ideal Sana'ani man, “... my admiration for that Sana'ani shape for a man with a tall stand ...” (31). Though Hameed

appears at first to fulfill Subhyyah's conception of her knight, her dream turns into a heap of ashes as their relationship falls apart.

The crumbling of the relationship between Subhyyah and Hameed adds to her agony and disappointment. Subhyyah finds herself a stranger in her own city of which she has long been dreaming. Perhaps, that is why she ultimately admits that the "city is full of secrets" which she could not understand (131). The secrecy of the city is symbolized through the women of 'sitara' whom Subhyyah paints an image of her, without knowing even her name, but she was generous enough to reveal a lot of Hameed's secret romantic adventures with other women including herself (268-9). Eventually, Subhyyah finds that the reality of her city does not match with the image that she has created in her mind and paintings. Simply, she finds herself torn between her lovable city which she could neither understand nor identify with, and the city of her exile, Cairo. Perhaps, Subhyyah's ambivalence is, indeed, due to her dual identity, referred to above. Thus, like many Yemeni writers, al-Kowkabani, in this novel, seems to address issues of identity, history and nationhood "a common approach to modern Arabic literature" (al-Rubaidi 2017).

However, unlike the traditional women, Al-Kowkabani's heroine "must not weep about [her] lot in life but take an active part in creating and determining [her] own life" and future (Bressler 2003, 143). Such women, according to Bressler, "must also reject the notion that marriage is a woman's ultimate goal, one that can assure her of financial security" (144). This feminist approach, according to Bressler, "wishes to debunk the false standards and beliefs about women, both in their lives and in their portrayal in literature ..." (143). Indeed, Subhyyah's portrayal seems to fit this type of creation as she is financially independent, having her own profession, painting hall, as well as being able to ultimately reject and abandon Hameed, though she was mad about him. More importantly, she is an ambitious woman with different view of life which Hameed could not understand.

As is quite apparent, Al-Kowkabani's *Sana'ai* critiques the continued grievances that Yemeni society, in particular women, have long been subjected to. The portrayal of the heroine's conflicting feelings of estrangement, and the magic of the place and her disappointment, and the cultural shock she encounters bring together the question of identity crisis and patriarchy.

Conclusion

Al-Kowkabani is a powerful feminist voice who attempts to portray the harshness of the life of the voiceless women in her society. Her novel *Sana'ai (My Sana'a)* is a case in point, in which reality and fiction have been carefully interwoven to deliver her views. Reading the story from feminist perspectives illustrates, in depth, the author's feminist concern of the patriarchal traditional system that oppresses and marginalizes women where Hameed is used as a scapegoat to dismantle the image of the Sana'ani man, a stereotype of the social patriarchy. Subhyyah, on the other hand, is introduced as the voice of the suffering women, through whom the author further sharpens her critical view of the male-dominated society of Yemen. Ironically, her acculturation difficulties and the lack of any sense of belonging can be read as an allegory of the lost identity of the Yemeni women due to the strict masculine system. Perhaps,

this is why her diasporic feelings and the crisis of dual identity in Cairo turned into the feelings of strangeness and alienation in Sana'a. The romantic story of Subhyah and Hameed is carefully utilized in the novel so as to criticize such culture that views women as subordinate to men or fully dominated by them. Subhyah's ultimate rebellious outcry can be interpreted as a call for women to stand firmly against such an oppressive social system. It is an invitation to resist the status quo, and to fight for freedom and democracy. Importantly, while the story depicts the current society of Yemen, the author, however, seems to be skillful in using flashbacks that do not only show the effect of the past on the present but also show how Yemeni society is entrapped into its past. The double voice of the story is deployed as an important narrative technique which serves to add credibility to what each one says about the other, as well as of being eye witnesses on the social reality. Al-Kowkabani's novel, therefore, stands as an eloquent testimony not just to the relentless oppression of women by men, to the incalculable harm inflicted on individuals in diaspora, to the exploitative nature of the then existing regime in Yemen, but also to the relevance of literature to human existence on earth!

The paper identifies a range of ways in which Al-Kowkabani articulates and interprets the challenges that women in Yemeni society are made to experience, particularly in terms of identity crisis, dislocation, alienation and patriarchy. In addition, the paper reveals that Al-Kowkabani's portrayal of women's oppression in Yemen is a local representation of a global phenomenon. Women's oppression, marginalization, and exploitation is not a problem that is limited to the Yemeni context, but is a global phenomenon, and a key preoccupation of human rights organizations and agencies. The paper's comparison of Subhyah in Al-Kowkabani's novel and Amal in Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* illustrates the common cause of women across the world. The comparison, however, suggests the gravity of women's tragedy in Yemen on account of the specificity of experience therein.

الهوية والتسلط في رواية (صنعائي) للكاتبة نادية الكوكباني

خالد القديمي

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية، السعودية

الملخص

الهدف الاساسي من هذه الورقة هو تحديد أو التعرف على مجالات النقد التي تقدمها نادية الكوكباني للتقاليد الراسخة في العالم العربي من خلال منظور المجتمع اليمني. في هذه الورقة، أزعّم أن الكوكباني صوت نسوي، وتشكل مساهماتها المعاصرة (ولا سيما الرواية) استجابة قوية للتسلط الذكوري المتجذر في اليمن، وبالتالي، غالبية الدول العربية القومية. يتجلى وعيها القوي لوضع المرأة في معظم رواياتها التي تتناول قضايا المرأة مثل الظلم والتهميش والنظام التسلطي لكن ومع ذلك، لا يُعرف الكثير عن الكوكباني وأعمالها الأدبية. تحاول هذه الورقة التحليل النصي لرواية الكوكباني (صنعائي) كعمل مهم يعكس الاهتمام الأنثوي والاجتماعي للمؤلفة، إذ تظهر الدراسة أن صبحية الشخصية الرئيسية في الرواية التي تعيش في المنفى تعاني من الهوية المزدوجة. فجأة وجدت نفسها عالقة بين هويتين، صباح في المدرسة في القاهرة، وصبحية، هويتها الأصلية في المنزل. ومع ذلك، وعلى عكس العديد من المؤلفين، تواجه الكوكباني صعوبات التناقف (الاندماج) عندما تعود إلى وطنها الأصلي بعكس بلد المنفى، حيث تشعر صبحية بشعور رهيب بالخسارة لأنها تجد حقيقة مدينة أحلامها مختلفة تماماً عن الصورة التي خلقتها في ذهنها. تكمن عبثية الموقف في أنها تجد نفسها غير قادرة على التكيف مع المدينة التي تحمل جذورها الأصلية. في الواقع، يبدو أن وضع صبحية قد تم توظيفه بعناية من قبل المؤلف من أجل انتقاد النظام الحالي في اليمن الذي يهمل أهمية مدينة صنعاء القديمة والبلاذ بشكل عام. وتظهر النتائج كذلك أن الكاتبة تستخدم القصة الرومانسية لصبحية وحميد لانتقاد النظام الذكوري للمجتمع اليمني الذي يحرم المرأة اليمنية من الحصول على حقوقها ويجعل صوتها غير مسموع. وبالتالي، فإن هذا البحث هو دعوة لإعادة التفكير في وضع المرأة في اليمن، ومساهمة في المناقشات المعاصرة في الدراسات النسوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نادية الكوكباني، المنفى، الهوية، النسوية، الحنين، التسلط الذكوري.

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