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Arab female diasporic writing: towards an annihilation of debasement

L'écriture arabe féminine diasporique : vers un anéantissement de l'avilissement

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Abstract ;

Post colonial diasporic literature was tailored for reflecting on the host country/native country binary with its myriad by-products as displacement and identity crisis. At this juncture, Arab women emphasized rather gender reconsideration. Thus, many female writers as Hanan Al-Shaykh, Salwa al-Neimi, Joumanna Haddad, and Assia Djebar, employed literature to denunciate forms of oppression, basically patriarchal. Such rebelling themes were, undoubtedly, unleashed by diasporic leverages. Thus, the premise motivating this paper is to see the extent of influence exercised by Western settings in triggering this development. A descriptive-analytical method was used to scrutinize the corpus study selected (The Story of Zahra, Women of Sand and Myrr, The Proof of Honey,I KilledScheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman, and Femmes d'Alger dans leur Appartements,). The findings demarcate the high socio-cultural and political engagement of female writers in the diaspora born out by the impress of Western thought.

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1.*Introduction*

The diaspora casts deeply its multi-faceted shadow on refugees, immigrants, and temporary travelers. For writers, the host country reshapes their narratives by reflecting an array of themes ranging from displacement, identity crisis, dislocation, and political malaise. Authors in this respect act as spokesmen to denounce, refresh, idolize, and reshape values and norms destined for a deconstruction/construction process. More specifically, Arab female writers, in contemporary times, geared their efforts to acclaim the themes of gender reconsideration, female rights, and female empowerment. Notable among these authors are Hanan al-Sheikh, Salwa al-Neimi, Joumanna Haddad , and Assia Djebar**,** who denounced in their narratives forms of oppression, basically patriarchal, seeking a re-affirmation of the female voice. The purpose of this article is to highlight this aspect in a number of novels such as *The Story of Zahra, Women of Sand and Myrrh, The Proof of Honey, I KilledScheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman,* and *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement,*. This presupposes, then, the raising of the following questions:

-How does the Diaspora influence the authors' thought?
-How are the themes of gender reconsideration, female rights, and female empowerment expressed in those novels?
-How were such narratives received both in the host and home spaces

2.*Impress of the Diaspora's norms*

It is a plain truth that people living abroad are, in one way or another, bound to embrace totally or partially the culture of the host country. Psychologically, individuals cannot escape impregnation by the other's culture whatever the form of resistance is. This point is clearly laid by Al Maleh who affirms that the 'diaspora' can be seen as a befitting abode […] giving […] [authors] a literary 'home'(as cited in. JumanaBayeh). For writers, the case is even worse. They find themselves as the legal voices of their brethren in the mother country. Hence, they express their nostalgic attachment to it by seeking its rejuvenation. Their critical voice pictures a deep impress of the Diaspora. Whether they use European languages or Arabic, their writings express their dual belonging: a past heritage that cannot be ignored, but one that needs to be liberated from all forms of imprisonment; and a partial belonging to a Western society that ensures the flourishing of their writing. Halvorson-Taylor (2021) adds here that the new space (location) impresses the engagement of their narratives. Therefore, the West symbolizes a liberating thought that casts its shadow on Diasporic writers. The latter cannot, hence, evade the impress that the host country deploys on their literary orientations. Whether consciously or unconsciously, writers find themselves caught in a stream of thought that aspires to denouncing all forms of 'imprisonment' and freeing their brethren in the home country from all chains. Commenting on this point, Salwa El Naimi asserted that the Mahjari movement (Diasporic literature) was 'the most renovating, revolutionary and comparatively modern literary movement' (as cited in. Zafirah Binte Jeffrey, p.1).

It is true that the West's liberating thought affected the orientation of Diasporic writing, yet the style followed by the writers' reflected their proper conviction. Here Najib Mahfouz argues,

> As for us, the writers who belong to what is called the "developing" or

> "backward" world, we used to think that achieving our presence will have to come at the expense of cancelling our existence. The European narrative format was sacred, and deviating from it an apostasy. . . . Nowadays, our vision has changed. True novels spring from an internal tune. I do not want to imitate the maqâma. I do not want to imitate James Joyce. Indeed, what infuriates me these days is imitation; even that of tradition. (as cited in.Al Ghitani, 2006, p.175)

So, if the Diaspora liberates the authors' thought how does it impinge females' writing? Female authors belonging to developing countries, particularly Asia and Africa, embrace the West's revolutionary ideas because of the great cultural shock between Western and Oriental societies. In this juncture, Arab female writers maintain a hatred for their patriarchal environments that, through time, silenced their voices. Their high education and contact with Western taught inspired their rebelling attitude. Henceforth, it is not surprising to find their narratives impregnated by a great reproaching of their traditions, and perhaps even in a greatly exaggerated way. This is, conspicuously, epitomized in the cases of Hanan Al-Shaykh , Salwa al-Neimi, Joumanna Haddad, and Assia Djebar. All have been in touch with the Western society, commingling with its peoples and adopting not only their ways of life, but also their way of thinking. Let's then examine the kind of themes unearthed by those authors.

3.*Themes of Arab female Diasporic writing*

The Western society and its liberal emancipating thought galvanized, in varying degrees, the thinking and aspirations of these female writers. They started, hence, to envisage the disrupting of the existing social order and the conventional norms, and the unleashing of a cultural revolution that would annihilate their moral expunging. They achieved this by evoking taboo themes as sex, adultery, homosexuality, and abortion. All, except Assia Djebar, wrote in Arabic. Djebar, on the other hand, wrote in French given the great sway of this language in the Algerian society as a result of colonial rule.

The major theme for those novelists was the reprobation of the patriarchal society that held women in an extremely subsidiary position as docile domesticated individuals. According to Suyoufe and Hammad (2009), this writing targeted the victimization of silence, inertia, and obedience imposed on women by the male-dominated society.

The Story of Zahra by Hanan Al-Shaykh pictures the story of a Lebanese woman who decides to rebel against patriarchal violence, silence, and submission by disposing of her body and her decisions. As a child she is strongly distressed by her father's brutality against her mother who is engaged in adultery, and against her too because of her complicity with her mother and her constant pimple-laden face scratching, 'all I knew was that I was afraid of my father, as afraid of the blows he dealt her as I was of those he dealt me' (Al-Shaykh, 1995, p. 15). As a result of this harshness, she decides to have her own way and to find refuge in sex relationships, first, with a married man called Malek. But the latter reproduces another instance of debasement, both sexual and emotional. When Zahra gets pregnant for two times, Malek obliges her to commit abortion, a deeply painful episode in her life as she finds herself 'denied control over her body' (Showalter, 1971). Haunted by those bad souvenirs, she moves to West Africa where her uncle, a political activist, lives. However, the latter developed affection for her that unfolded in sexual desire. Struck by this, she accepted the offer of marriage made by her

uncle's friend, Majed, a man she didn't care about. Yet, again this relationship is unsuccessful when the man could not accept her breakdown through her 'indecent' conduct of listening to loud music and singing outside the house. Hence, she leaves him and returns to Beirut, a country ravaged by civil war. To evade her double deception (her personal life and her country's impasse), she starts to have secret meetings with a man who was a rooftop sniper. For the first time she falls in love, but she is deceived by his intolerable, inhumane violence as he shoots an innocent passerby.

The novella unveils, glaringly, women's oppression in a society geared by traditions that give a high importance to females' obedience, and prioritize marriage and children as safe anchors for females. Hanane Al-Shaykh gives here channel to a female's voice to feature the plot of women, essentially domestic verbal, and emotional violence (Atiyat, 2018). Females' right to enjoy and speak about sexuality, exemplified in the mother's adultery and Zahra's drifting from one man to another, stands as their liberation from the chains of the Lebanese culture. Males' sexual abuse of Zahra typifies their image of women: a simple sexual commodity. This attitude leads inevitably to their self-annihilation as was the case for Zahra (Abudi, 2011, p.286).

Al-Shaykh's second novel, *Women of sand and myrrh,* is a feminist narrative that empowers four friends, Suha, Susanne, Tamr, and Nurr to women's malaise in Arab culture in a nameless country in the Middle East. They overtly victimize the constraints of the traditional society in fading women's voice, aspirations, and dreams. Women's reservation for the home is an assault against their emancipation and embodies a danger for their wellbeing as revealed by the following quote, 'the feeling I'd started out with of losing my sensitivity to the life going on around me was growing stronger, as was my awareness of the complete absence of women, at least from the outside world'(Hanane Al-Shaykh, 1992, p.16). To break this obscurantist world, they decide to defy this environment by giving voice to their whims. Suha, the well-educated woman, is annoyed by all the deprivation and, hence, maintains a lesbian relationship with the wealthy Nurr. Suzanne, the Western woman, takes revenge against her gay husband by entertaining relationships with men. Tamr, the strong willing woman, shows her contempt for the constraints imposed by tradition such as arranged marriages. She openly displays her strong character by affirming her self-confidence, "The dejection which had taken hold of me was transformed into a kind of daredevil courage. My name is Tamr daughter of al-Tawi,' I declared, not caring if anyone heard me or not" (105). Supported by Suha she gets divorced and liberates herself from a marriage affair that took place when she was barely twelve. Afterwards, she opens her proper business destined only for women. Nurr gets married to a Western-educated man who held reformist ideas.

Salwa El Naimi's novel, *The Proof of the honey,* is a feminist tale that unveils the pleasures of sexual reasoning amidst a female desire-inhibiting society. The characters are unnamed and the protagonist, a Syrian librarian expatriate in France, who exhumes overtly her erotic life and her sensation about body and sex as highlighted in the quote, 'some people conjure spirits. I conjure bodies. I have no knowledge of my soul or of the souls of others. I know only my body and theirs' (Al Neimi 2009, 13).Body discovery and sex pleasure are exalting activities for the narrator who reports such erotic enjoyment in two periods respectively termed 'the first Jahiliya' and 'sexual renaissance. The first corresponds to the period before she met the French Thinker, a period where she entertained passionate liaisons with a number of men. The second alludes to the time of her sexual apotheosis with the Thinker, "The Thinker came along and [. . .] in the hollow of our bed, I told him about my secret

readings. The two secrets - him and my readings - mingled and merged into a single torrent" (19). Her magnificent sexual harmony with that man gave her incentive to put her research prowess and write on classic erotic literature in Arabic. At that point, she enlists the nuisance of sex abstention as "psychological and physical disease[,] Madness, dejection, and melancholia all at once"(19). The narrator philosophizes also on lesbianism and adultery to depict the ailments of a censuring society.

In *I KilledScheherazade: Confessions of an Angry Arab Woman*, Jomanna Haddad presents a series of thought-provoking essays that revolve around sexuality, exploration, erotic poetry, feelings of alienation, atheism. It was addressed both to Western and Arabic readers; this is why it was first written in English, and then into Arabic. It reveals her hatred for the Arab men and the veiled women. She depicts the former as narrow-minded, and the latter as submissive, vulnerable, and ignorant, as put in "an invisible face masked by layers of fear, vulnerability, and ignorance, and utterly cancelled by the Islamic hijab" (27). The narrative is an autobiography that characterizes the author's vision about womanhood and feminism. It is a plain call for sexual liberation and women's self-assertion, freedom of speech, and thinking. She blames religion for shunning the voice of women. She also criticizes Western Judeo-Christian culture for its pseudo-sexual freedom and blames Western society for its stereotyping of Muslim women especially after the 9/11 events in America. She admits that Arab women have benefitted from education and employment, yet other realms of social life like marriage and inheritance need to be 'liberated' and noticed. Additionally, she acclaimed her aversion for censorship, above all in females' writing, and castigated all forms of sexual deprivation embodied in the virginity tale, female circumcision, pre-marital sex, and honor crimes.

The novel of Assia Djebar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leurs appartement* (1980), interweaves the stories of the lives of three Muslim Algerian women: Sarah, Baya, and Fatma. The novel explores the quest for female identity by shedding light on women's lives in the pre and post-colonial eras. She depicts basically women subduing and suffering in a male-favoring society. Boibessot (2001) says that the Maghrebin woman experiences a double-paternalistic empress invoking both of internal and external jails. The first refers to the traditional Algerian culture; while the second exemplifies the French alienation and stereotyping of traditional culture. For that, she uses three expedients: delectation with body discovery and liberation, females' solidarity, and males' debasing. To exemplify that, one can cite the scene of the 'hammam' (public bath) where women reveal their naked bodies to Fatma, the masseuse, picturing a form of liberation from the chains of taboo. The bath is a kind of union of women's bodies because in this space they discharge their spirits and bodies from the hard agonies of life. The hot water cleanses and evaporates all the linear and deep dirt, "chuchotements entretenus des peines, une fois les pores de la peau bien ouverts…"(Djebar, 1980, p.40). By massaging women, Fatma, exercises a magic therapy that releases the weight of troubles. The act of speaking and exchanging words frees the voices of women and loosens their feeling of seclusion. Another aspect of women's liberation is the devalorizing of men like Ali, the surgeon husband of Sarah, who dare not alleviate the pains of his wife by making the surgery or the Hazab who has not even the right to attend his son's circumcision as it is now the doctor who takes charge of that. Hence, Djebar makes room for the emergence of females' voice and female liberation. According to Lopez (2003, p.129), the hammam as a women's space gives birth to their renaissance.

In sum, the oft-mentioned narratives of Al Chaykh, Haddad, El Naimi, and Djebbar excavated the dark sides of the Arab societies, notably the heavy weight of patriarchal order that kept women in a

domineering position, denying them the right to dispose of their lives, specifically their bodies. Defiance, hence, is chosen by those writers to 'break this iron prison' by uncovering the doors for sexual life, through heterosexuality or homosexuality. The disclosing of women's right to sexual pleasure is a form of assault against the male-dominated society and a denunciation of the non-functioning of the Arab Muslim society. The re-appropriation of the body is a way of release from traditional imprisonment. Thus, women's disposition of their bodies grants them a force to demean males' superiority. The overt use of women's desire is employed to assert women's presence and affirm, thereby, their identity. With regard to the use of same-sex desire, Zimmerman and Haggerty (2003) maintain that it is 'allegorical of militant protest by women against an alienated condition and an act of ultimate defiance against a male-dominated and brutal social order' (p.51). The recalling of past events by women in the bath (in Djebar's novel) draws them together 'both in celebration and in sorrow' (Fayad, 1995, p.151). Those narratives lend, hence, an analytical eye to the females' individual psyche with a view to showing how destructive their seclusion and underestimation were (Roxanne,2021, p.2). On the other end of the scale, those writings were a reaction against Western annihilation which depicted the Arab society as sexless, particularly Flaubert's declaration in 1847 "there is no sex in Islamic society!"(as cited in Silverman, 2009, p.221)

4.*Reception of their narratives*

Arab female writers were warmly applauded in the West because their narratives featured aspects which were strongly opposed and despised by the Europeans and Americans. To the Westerners, those writers were rebellious figures who rejected the 'backward' cultural forms and practices as patriarchy, female chastity, sexual taboos. Djebar, for instance, was elected in 2005 to the Académie Française , a notable French organization catering for the promotion of the French heritage and language. She was the first Maghrebin woman to be granted such a prestige. Similarly, in 2018 Haddad was selected as one of the world's 100 most compelling Arab women for four successive years. Western media described her as a"lone voice" engaged in women's liberation (Laala Kashef Alghata, 2013).Besides, Western readers acclaimed Salwa EL Naimi as the first Arab woman to evoke sex issues. The Western audience inscribed those authors' writings within the realm of anti-Muslim feminist works, and evidently, such topics stir the interest of the Western audience. The Egyptian author Hasan Talab, for example, adamantly antagonized ' exhibitionist literature whose sole intent is stirring base desires and reaping fame and profit' (as cited in Khalaf 'All Hasan,2009). Here, Amal Amireh adds that Western publishers usually manipulate Arab female narratives for market purposes (as cited in Ludescher, 2006). This manipulation unfolds in writings that transgress the Arab Muslim society and position Arab female authors as Western allies that betray enormously their environments (Fayed, 1995).

At home, however, Arab female writers were charged with immorality and profanity, especially those who made room for females' sexual pleasure (Goodreads, 2021). Taking the example of *Burhãn al-asel* that was published in Beirut in 2007 (The Proof of the Honey, 2009), it stirred vehement criticism from Arab critics, resulting in its banning from many Arab book markets, with the exceptions of those of Beirut, Abu Dhabi, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco.

5.*Conclusion*

In a nutshell, contemporary Arab female writing was both sarcastic and, relatively, nostalgic, of traditional society. It produced a post-colonial re-writing of the Arab heritage through a female perspective. The common denominator of these authors' themes was the voicing of women's oppression, subjugation, and forced silence. Female authors, hence, voiced women's grievances and lamentation about a patriarchal social order that silenced women, relegating them to the background. The evoking of erotic scenes, romance, love, emotions, and desires as well the description of the body parts epitomized a transgression of the Arab traditional order where such things were considered as taboo and a scandal. The act of daring to speak about such 'outlawed topics' was itself a rebellion, and a liberation of the women's voice, body, and power. However, this transgression and diabolism of the Arab society could not have been evoked if it was not for the impress of the Diaspora and Western education. Indeed, their commingling with the Westerners and associating themselves with their philosophies was, unquestionably, to shape their thought. On the other end of the scale, females' narratives pictured some form of home longing expressed through reproach. It is true that the novels explored in this study were written in different periods (stretching along the twentieth and twenty-first centuries) that necessarily underwent a considerable evolution in women's access to education and employment, impacting consequently the change of their status and involvement in the public sphere. Nevertheless, the liberating progress was not fully achieved for all the categories of women. It is at this level that such writing should be channelized in the future, with voices preaching women's attainment of self-concept and self-efficacy.

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