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(The Quest for Identity and Self: A Feminist Study of Marwan Al-Ghafouri's Sa'ad's Braids)

عنوان المقال بالعربية: (البحث عن الهوية والذات: دراسة نسوية لرواية مروان الغفوري صفاء صعدة)

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Abstract

The present research aims to quest for women's identity and the self to free them from the restrictions of the Yemeni society as well as to explore the severe suffering of the maltreated women in Yemen depicted in Al- Ghafouri's Sa'ad's Braids. The objectives of this research are to focus on the issue of identity crisis and how women struggle to free themselves. It also highlights how the heroine breaks the constraints of the society by her contact to the main author. In Yemeni society, women were and are still oppressed and exploited in different ways, so the novelist emphasizes that every woman must search for her self-recognition, and creating a good place for herself in her region and in all parts of Yemen. According to feminist perspective, the woman as awareness is more important than woman as the object in the society. It is concluded that Al-Ghafouri raises his concern about the oppression, injustice, illiteracy, exploitation, and maltreatment of millions of women in all parts of Yemen. Thus, the protagonist seeks to break her silence in order to love, live and coexist peacefully with other groups despite of having different religions and cultures in her society.

ملخص

يهدف البحث الحالي للبحث عن هوية النساء والذات لتحريرهم من قيود المجتمع اليمني بالإضافة إلى استكشاف المعاناة الشديدة للنساء اللاتي تعرضن لسوء المعاملة في اليمن المصوّرة في رواية صفاء صعدة مروان الغفوري. أهداف هذا البحث هي التركيز على قضية أزمة الهوية وكيف تكافح النساء لتحرير أنفسهن. كما يسلط الضوء على كيفية كسر البطلة لقيود المجتمع من خلال اتصالها بالمولف الرئيسي لرواية. تدور رواية الغفوري حول نية البطلة كسر القيود الاجتماعية والدينية والثقافية التي يفرضها المجتمع اليمني. في المجتمع اليمني، كانت المرأة ومازالت مظلومة ومُستغلة بطرق مختلفة، لذلك يؤكد الكاتب أن على كل امرأة أن تبحث عن تقدير أو تمييز ذاتها، وخلق مكان جيد لها في منطقتها وفي جميع أنحاء اليمن. وفقاً للمنظور النسوي، فإن المرأة كوعي أهم من المرأة ككائن في المجتمع. وخلص إلى أن الغفوري يركز اهتمامه حول قضايا القهر والظلم والامية والاستغلال وسوء المعاملة التي تتعرض لها ملايين النساء في جميع أنحاء اليمن. وهكذا، تسعى البطلة إلى كسر صمتها من أجل الحب والعيش والتعايش بسلام مع مجموعات أخرى على الرغم من وجود ديانات وثقافات مختلفة في مجتمعاتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

التعايش

الهوية

الحب

الحرب

اليمن

1. Introduction

Marwan Al- Ghafouri is one of the most influential writers not only in Yemen but in all over Arab World. He began his literary career as a poet, a political writer and novelist. He has won the Sharjah Prize for Arab Creativity in 2006. Most of his works has been translated into several foreign languages such as English, German and so on. Sa'ad Braid's is one of the most well-known novels in Arab World. It undoubtedly condemns suppression and oppression of women, causes of civil war, killing of men, women, children, killing that does not distinguish between a destruction and building, between love and hatred, between progress and regression. It also clarifies the responsibility of those aggressive people who have lost the logic of tolerance and the language of dialogue, respect for the right to life for everyone, and the right of everyone to embrace whatever positions, ideas and religion they want. It is really interesting work for the intellectuals, writers and artistic to portray the real picture of Yemen. In Marwan al-Ghafouri's *Sa'dah's Braids* (2014), "women take a central role in the narrative, telling the story of crushed womanhood in Yemen. This specific portrayal of women in the novel is structurally related to state politics and tribal traditions" (Al-Rubaidi, 2017).

Al-Ghafouri informs us on the dimension of feminism in the novel and its transformations, where representations are intellectual observations, cultural and social events and facts that make the concealed perceived, and the hidden clearly shown. Its goal is the reality which is the sum of representation and its anticipated and observed result in order to achieve important steps towards upholding a woman's voice and the confirmation of her life effectiveness, socially, culturally, educationally, and in all aspects of life. However, this entity of feminine identity and self has created a crisis within the society and culture for it is considered as a matter of existence and presence, especially if the matter is related to the Arab woman who, for

centuries, has been a hostage to the prevailing cultural patterns, placed in the body as a body, not a conscious and educated creature. "Nonetheless, all women in the Arab world even the non-Muslims are exposed to the same threat when wars or political struggles erupt and all of them are subject to the legal discrimination of the civil laws, threats and discrimination which affect them in different ways"(Abdalkafor, 2014,p. 36). Hence the woman was that culturally-stolen creature who derives her legitimacy only from men. So, she has to search for her identity, prove herself and obtain her rights.

2. Literature Review

The Yemeni literature has entered the world of the novel through its wider and correct door in the thirties of the last century, and continued to the sixties and seventies of the same centuries. During that time, the poetry gave way to the novel with its newest specifications and the time of narration begins as an imaginative art that takes its raw material from reality in an indirect and unfamiliar manner. As Altwaiji and his friend consider the modern Yemeni novel as "the narration that is a collage containing nearly folk tales, legends, myths, oral poetry, superstitions, tales, music, fictional adventure that represents historical incidents, humanitarian situations and cultural" (Altwaiji & Telha, 2020, p. 319).

The novel *Sa'ad Braids* has become a very dominant topic in literature that studies a number of women's problems and creating awareness among them. The search for identity and self receives a move in feminist and post-colonial literature. The search for identity and getting self is the central plot of the novel. This process is both social and psychological breaking the path towards female distinction and an understanding of the individual self. The most important theme of the novel is the theme of identity and self. "The curiosity of people about knowing each other and concern for self and the other to

understand the human condition and explore the importance of human life and to understand one's experience" (Jayyusi, 2005, p. 1). The reasons why women lose their identity, self and are distracted from the reality and why they follow their masters blindly without even trying to investigate about the truth are clearly analyzed in this novel, *Sa'ada Braids*. The female character of Iman has been globalized and developed to comprehend the reality around her, and Al-Ghafouri symbolically depicts the names of the female characters, their behavior, and dialogue to deepen the dilemma and the crisis caused by the masters and their beliefs, especially against women.

The novelist shows the consciousness of her female character and traces her distress, fears, dilemmas, contradictions, and aspirations. He is an outstanding writer when he deals with humanitarian issues of concern to all of humanity. A woman is sometimes seen as a possession, a commodity like an animal, land, or any other property of a man. Even today, most Yemeni women do not have the freedom to choose their husbands and "a woman is not an independent entity in the family but has to be under the custody of a male relative" (Al-Mutawakel, 2006, p. 15). His fictional works are generally described by female heroines who make every attempt to discover their identity. There is no doubt that they are haunted by memories of the past and they feel a kind of insignificance and worthlessness, but they recognize themselves in the final stages. In his novels, he portrays Yemeni women and also analyzes how they have changed due to the prevailing society even in the twentieth century.

The issue of female identity is considered as one of the critical issues, as it is an emission from the self and being, and it is an aesthetic feature and a cultural value that the self-controls in highlighting it. And if we contemplate and look closely at what this term is, we will find it very difficult and complex, especially in the Arabic language, as it is a

foreign or an intruder to it, and it is very far from its system. But its general meaning is that it refers to the self or essence or stability. Thus, the novelist talks about contradictory personalities in a single circle of suffering, and encourages and forces the, especially females (like the heroine of the novel, Iman) to present their identities, and face and fight the multiple crises, and to struggle to live, to love, to prove the self and for the sake of survival. It is so clear that from the feminist side, the novel depicts the suffering of women and their struggles, the various types of social crises, oppression, repression, disdain, violence and deprivation that the Yemeni women face in their lives. "A woman is the central character of the novel which also shows how women are abducted from the scenario of life as if she is a kind of disease that may harm the body" (Saeed, 2020, p. 314).

Moreover, the novelist shows that exploiting, oppressing, depriving, and contempting women is a wrong social system, not only in Saa'da governorate or in Yemen country, but also in most Arab countries, even if it has multiple images, and , therefore, the novel calls for sympathizing women who are stripped of their human identities and self by suspecting or accusing them immorally, intimidating them psychologically, excluding them socially, depriving them educationally and from all aspects of life. This kind of punishment places "subaltern Arab women in a position where they are doubly oppressed because of the political affiliation of their male relatives and because of gender" (Abdalkafor, 2014, p. 26). So, it calls and inspires the feminist gender not to give up at all, and to stand steady in the face of those difficulties and to present themselves in the society as strong human members who have all their identities and all their rights to live, to love, to learn, to think, to say, to express, and to participate in all sides of life. This raises the novel to the level of humanity, because the essence of the novel touches the needs and

sufferings of all women, listens to them, asks for their rights, searches for their human, social, religious, health, economic, educational and emotional identities, and triumphs for them.

By the way, Al-Ghafouri, in his novel, focuses on many ideas regarding the place, the people who live there, and how politics, religion and also social customs and traditions are well utilized by some people, groups or sects for some religious, ethnic, sectarian and personal matters. "Although the novel focuses on many ideas, its main object is to show how people are lost when they are divided by blind beliefs, and how war and disunity take place instead of love, intimacy, and peace" (Saeed, 2020, p. 315). The Yemeni society is vividly divided and described by strange religious and ideological and ethnic beliefs, strange social customs and traditions which cause woman to suffer a lot and to lose most important rights as a result of being enslaved, neglected, abandoned, and deprived of human and social identity. This is a call, an appeal, an inspiration, a motivation, and an advice for the female, not only for the time being, but also for the future, to search for her identity and to prove the self, and not to succumb to the culture of ignorance, illiteracy, oppression, deprivation and isolation in order not to participate in creating social crises and fall into them as those females before her did.

The novelist describes the critical situations of the remaining numbers of the Jewish minority in Saada – Yemen. It also reminds us of how minority of Jewish lived in the districts of Yemen for a period of one thousand four hundred years without witnessing a case of violence or abuse at all. "During the armed conflict, this religious intolerance reached its peak...Religious intolerance also extends to several Jewish families living in a neighboring village of Al Salem, who are forced to abandon their homes" (Suvorov, 2020, p. 22). Even after the overwhelming majority of them emigrated at the end of the forties of the last century, the few who chose to remain in Saada

and other Yemeni areas under the popular and official patronage. But after the strife awoke from its ashes, those numbers began to be threatened and harmed, and everything became possible after a Muslim kills his Muslim brother with unparalleled primitive brutality. Yemenis have known sectarian differences since a long time, but they have coexisted with its. The drums of wars have been beating several times. Thus, it is not for the sake of sect, but rather for politics and monopolizing power. It is not logic that a rational person accepts himself to belong to a sect or a party whose mission is to spread the deepen hatred against the other. The only weak souls whose eager to take revenge and seek to tear the ranks in order to serve the demons of humanity. Consequently, the novel "Saada Braids" is a poem of love, a rational, and victorious call to reconsider our positions on each other. Thus, the coexistence emerges as a first title, and a deep meaning for a life that accepts the differences in culture and religion (Al-Subari, 2020, p. 3). The Yemeni people must stand against the logic of fanaticism and hatred to live peacefully and harmoniously in spite of different religions and sects.

3. Theoretical lens of the study

This paper is premised on the theoretical framework of feminist theory and its relation to feminist identity of Yemeni women and the evolution of identity-crisis not only in Yemen but also in the contemporary Arab world. The female identity is a form of ego awareness and self-affirmation, as examining it and determining its nature is the origin that gave me (as a researcher) a fertile subject and a project for the research. The novelist in his novel shows us that the female who is enslaved and restricted familiarly, socially, religiously, educationally, culturally, etc., has become today able to use multiple methods to search for her identity and to find and prove it, and writing is one of those methods, as Iman

did. According to feminist theory , identity is "an expression of the image rooted in the minds and of the phenomenon repeated in the generations, that the female is low, marginalized, incomplete, subjected to the principle of man's guardianship, forbidden from public participation in society under the pretext that she is incomplete in mind and she provokes seduction and lust" (Samia, 2018).

The female, especially in the modern era, the era of technology, Internet, and social media, has become able to write, to correspond, to communicate, to express, and to search not only for her self-related identity (as a person or as an individual), but for the collective identity of the female, that is, of the female world. It is the awareness in writing and in feminine identity for which the female searches to find, to restore and to confirm her human, familial, social, emotional, educational, cultural, and religious and health identity, as a body and a soul. Saada Braids is one of the most popular novels that seek to advocate for the women rights in Yemen. According to feminist theory, Marwan is a talented writer who has insight vision to show the real and deep issues of women that have faced in Yemeni society for achieving their equal rights with men. Hooks in her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (2000), she talks about the goals of feminist movement is to struggle for ending sexual oppression and patriarchal system. She points out that feminism is not about being women against men, it is about rights and how women fight for equal rights as men. The thing that makes men practice patriarchy is the assumption that they are superior to women and their belief that the only way to maintain this patriarchy is through controlling, exploiting and oppressing women. She states that:

"Feminist struggle takes place anytime anywhere any female or male resists sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. Feminist movement happens when groups of people

come together with an organized strategy to take action to eliminate patriarchy" (Hooks, 2015, p. Xii).

The main cause of changing her name from Zainb to Iman is both social restrictions and patriarchal systems in Yemen. According to the oedipal dynamic loosely borrowed from Freud, "daughters never want to supplant their fathers but instead compete with other women for his affection. To win such a competition they cannot very well rebel against tradition but instead must submit to it" (Rooney, 2006p. 101). In the novel, the writer tries to humanize the oppressed and marginalized protagonist Iman by giving her a chance to express about her own suppressed suffering and feelings. He explores the fragmented identity and self of Iman, her inner fears, her quest for her awareness and existence and the ways that race, gender, and class affect her identity.

In this case, women are suffering the most from the identity crisis for being women living in a violent country. The effects of patriarchy and the social restrictions play a significant role in increasing the identity and self-crisis of women that are obliged to face their destinies in Yemen. Consequently, women have to struggle for getting rid of any feelings of alienation, suffering, depression, oppression and exile. As women often suffer from the negative effects of patriarchal oppression and discrimination, so that the constraints of Yemeni society and patriarchy join hands in oppressing and dominating them. Nina Lykke states in her book *Feminist Studies: A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*: "Woman' comes from the bodily unease that empirical women experience when the category 'Woman' is violently imposed on them, denying their diversity and difference and constructing them as Man's inferior other" (2010, p. 114).

According to feminist theory, the protagonist wants to identify with herself and tries to find her suitable place in the fictional world as an attempt to belong and live in open society. Moreover, she is affected by the appearance of new relationships, new careers and new styles of life in modern countries. It is like a desire that she strives to fulfill her wishes in order to feel that her life means something new. Anyone in this world wants to build his or her own identity that is different and distinguishing him or her from others. The author begins to guide her to the real world around as an attempt to find the self and identity. On the other hand, if someone fails to construct an identity of his or her own, this will lead to great depression and confusion or an identity crisis. In this case, Iman begins a journey of struggle to get rid of this depression and confusion and building a new identity by corresponding with the writer of the novel. For Lifton, "the protean self emerges from the confusion of contemporary society, in which we feel buffeted by unmanageable historical, economic, political, and social uncertainties" (Ashmore, Richard D. and Jussim, Lee, 1997, p. 87).

Anyway, the novel highlights the issue of feminine identity within the narrative text for it constitutes the essence and source of the woman who suffers from deprivation and marginalization within the society. And Marwan Al-Ghafoory is, however, considered one of the few and rare Arab male writers in whose novel the crisis of feminine identity have taken a major part. And as for the private level, it is related to female woman as a marginalized object who suffers from a loss and crisis of identity at the level of the self, and at the level of the family and society culturally, educationally, morally, emotionally, psychologically, judicially, economically, and so on. The process of giving "voice to themselves, and making visible new communities of women, was understood as one of healing historical and

psychic wounds created by internalized racism and self-hatred" (Rooney, 2006, p. 245). Thus, the novelist devotes an obvious importance to her female character, Iman, and never gives deep attention to the revolution of 2011. This shows the writer's real and full concentration on woman's life and the importance of her presence and existence. He distinctly wants to manifest the necessity and importance of equality without which there is no meaning for humanity which is more important than revolution.

4. An analysis of Iman's identity and self

The novel, *Sa'ada Braids*, takes place in Sa'ada a governorate in the north part of Yemen, shows how people there use religion to impose and achieve their racial, and sectarian propaganda and agenda which destroyed the city and the country, ripped the community, deprived people of peacefully happy life, of all their rights, and even of their identities, especially feminist identity which became crushed and lost. From the very first message from Iman, there is a strong implicit indication of the existence of a feminine identity, but it is restricted and absent, and it appeared only under a false identity which indicates to what most females do, especially on social media (using pseudonyms). However, this stands for the tendencies and desires of the females to search for and to find their identities and to prove their selves. According to feminism, "without the categories (and identities) of woman and women, the fight for women's rights is incoherent. The urgent need to act in the "real" world, where illiteracy, poverty, and violent subordination still plague many women, precludes any "deconstruction" of women as a social group or as an existential category"(Rooney, 2006, p. 85). But there are several factual obstacles that the females face and suffer from, such as the fear of the family and society, the restriction of wrong religious ideas and false social customs and traditions, ignorance, backwardness and misconceptions spread among the society

circles. Anyway, the very first letter of Iman to the writer shows clearly a great mixture of the feminist confusion and contradictions of feeling. There is a search for identity and self, but in a hiding way; there is fear and despair of not to be, but there is hope and certainty to be; there is feeling of defeat and pain, but insistence for victory and revenge. This is shown very clearly as the girl, Iman, in her letter, says:

"I am a girl from Saada governorate. My name is Iman, and this is just a pseudonym. I have a story. Actually, I am a story. If you find yourself wanting to hear it, let me know. I don't know how to narrate it to you, and how you tell it to your readers. I feel a wish in death, and I am afraid that my story will die like me, or with me. I do not claim that you will find a lesson to consider in my story, but a pain. I thought for a long time: Should the oppressed spend the rest of his/her life waiting for the moment of revenge, or what is called the moment of victory? What does it mean to finally win after a great defeat that led to your complete collapse? I mean your collapse from the inside" (Al- Ghafouri, 2014, p. 5).

The novel, therefore, introduces the story of a Yemeni girl, the heroine of this novel, who tells her story through corresponding letters to Marwan who is himself the author of this novel. From the very beginning, the novel shows how identity and self are lost or crushed, especially the identity of females. It starts with Iman introducing herself as a girl with unknown or lost or hidden personal identity. *Sa'ada Braids* is a novel that sheds light on the suffering of the various disadvantaged, marginalized and persecuted women who live in villages, or who move or flee with their families to cities that may not accept them and do not differ much more from the villages due to the absence of order and just law, due to gender, ethnic, social, sectarian and other sorts of discrimination, and due to ignorance, oppression and persecution imposed by false customs and traditions, false and wrong extremist religious

ideas, and because of the control of religious, and ideological groups. According to feminist theory, "Women's desire is what is most oppressed and repressed by patriarchy, and what most needs to find expression – an all but impossible task since, according to them, language is itself patriarchal" (Rooney, 2006, p. 153).

So, Iman thinks that searching for, finding and proving her identity and self may cause her personal, family and social problems due to the wrong consideration of the authoritarian and oppressive male society and the wrong look at that as a shame, a disgrace, or ignominy which will blemish and smirch the family, tribe, or society. This is what makes most females lose their true identities, and if they want to appear, they appear in veiled identities like the way they veil their faces in order not to be known. This makes them unable to rise and appear to prove themselves, reveal their problems, express their opinions, demand for their rights and obtain their due places in the society that deprives them of most or all of their rights. In spite of that, the importance of the appearance of feminism grows rapidly in the novel. Despair and depression start to be removed and replaced by hope, and insistence increases and becomes persistence and strong will and determination and a strong feminist attitude to highlight and prove the world of feminism, even if not now, at least later. This is obviously indicated in the words of Iman's letter:

"Tell people about me. I will not beg you as the Majzoub did with you, or with your protagonist. I am just telling you that I am a girl named Iman who lived in a mountain in Sa'ada and she has a story that should not die, or better not to die" (Al- Ghafouri, 2014, p. 6). The three sentences above show clearly the writer's deepest purpose and aim in the importance of women's existence and life, and in highlighting the feminist identity and ego to be present strongly, and the necessity of feminist existence, manifestation and good reputation in the society. According to

feminism, "Despite sexist discrimination, exploitation, or oppression, many women feel their lives as they live them are important and valuable" (Hooks, 2015, p. 29). The writer's inspiration and encouragement for Iman to say, to tell and to imagine the reality of the stories of Yemeni women emphasizing his inspiration, motivating and encouraging her to look for, and to find her feminist identity and self in order to get out of the darkness of absence, ignorance, deprivation and oppression, psychological suffering, and to be present in the world of reality, knowledge, media, acquaintance, fame, and to be a role-model for other women to imitate and follow. This is shown in Al- Ghafouri's reply to Iman. He continues inspiring Iman, saying:

"Tell your story, Iman. We do not tell our stories to defeat the enemies, but rather because we do not want to die. Especially us, Iman. We are the ones above each of whom there is a stone, and under each one of us there is a victim, to one degree or another"(Al-Ghafouri, 2014, p. 8).

Al- Ghafouri's novel "Sa'ada Braids" is talking mainly about Sa'ada and the girl, Iman, who tells her story to the novelist who himself is the narrator. How Iman's hair braids are fallen from the top of the mountains, the secret of her swollen belly, love, war, and traditions are also highlighted in the novel. Also, those who utilize religion to fulfill their ethnic, sectarian, political, and personal desires have important roles in the novel and they become the reasons behind obstinacy, conflicts, hostilities, and war which also help in crushing womanhood. So, the shore of the deepest sea of feeling that is the sea of love in which the female in Sa'ada is forbidden to wash or swim, or even touch or see. At first, whether she is 25 or may be older, it is absolutely sad and pathetic that the girl is still unmarried and deprived of her rights to get her love identity. She also has psychological suffering and a great oppression due to political and patriarchal system of her society. Forbidding or depriving a woman of

her love, feeling, freedom, self and identity is considered the utmost crime against humanity. By the way, Iman tells the writer that she is 25 years old, and tells him not to change her age, but to write it as it is when he writes her story. "I am twenty-five years old. Please do not interfere with the amendment of the text that I will write. Agreed?" (p. 9).

The most important thing that the writer exposes is the female's hidden identity of love and lives peacefully. Although the feeling of love is hidden inside the girls or they search for love secretly, it appears and can be implicitly indicated to in a way or another. "The social reality of later periods and up to the present, is that girls do not have the freedom of choosing their husbands and many are informed as if as an afterthought" (Al-Mutawakel, 2006, p. 88). Thus, the writer shows that the females in Sa'ada, like other females elsewhere, have their feelings of love. They have to love, have to search for love, and need to be loved, but their love identity is hidden, banned, lost or ruined. When I finish it (she means finish writing the story), we will revise it together. Well: What is the meaning of the word "TOGETHER?" (Al- Ghafouri, 2014, p. 9).

By 'together', she means herself and the writer. When they will be together, (either in a love meeting or after getting married), they will revise her story. In Sa'ada, it is forbidden for the female to meet or be with any other male than her house male relatives whatever the importance or urgency of the matter is. "Feminist struggle takes place anytime anywhere any female or male resists sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (Hooks, 2015, p. Xii). So, Iman wants to break and destroy these restrictions since there is nothing immoral or illegal in meeting a male, especially in a case like hers. "You are from Sa'ada? Ok. Impressive. A victim wants to get a victory on a defeated rival"(Al-Ghafouri, 2014, p. 7). It is clear that Al-Ghafouri is surprised when he discovers the

geographical identity of that female correspondent, Iman. He did not expect her to be from Sa'ada, a place where the woman is restricted to only housework by the tyrant ideas of the masters, wrong social customs and traditions. She is also subjected to illiteracy, deprivation, slavery and internal and external sufferings. So, the novelist describes her as a defeated victim, and his reply also shows how terrible that place is, by the way, the character writes. Sa'ada is described as a place where people are killing each other and this is why he uses the term "defeated". Thus, Iman asks her friend Zainab to give an appropriate answer for her question but in vain. Zainab said to me, smiling: "In Heaven, I will wait for Ibn al-Halal, and then he will decide what we want" (p. 12). Clearly, the setting reflects the purpose of the novelist of showing the imprisonment of women's life that caused by the masters and their misuse of religion. In other words, it is not worthy living there as the people, especially women, are surrounded by these false norms of politics and religion. They do not have control on their life, but they find themselves led by some ugly false ideas.

In Al-Ghafour's novel, *Sa'ada Braids*, he finds that the female identity is almost, if not completely, lost because of the reluctance or aversion of the male culture, due to the ignorance and lack of societal awareness, extremist religious ideas, thoughts, doctrines and ideologies, tribal traditions and customs, and due to sexism or gender discrimination, class, social, racial, sectarian and ideological discrimination. But despite all that, the writer strives to highlight the female as a living human being, not only doing her duties, but also and essentially having her privacies, her freedom, her sheer and complete rights for whose sake she searches for her identity and strives to prove her own self. Thus, Iman tells Marwan about the real definition of women: "You (women) only have to wait. It is the only

decision you have, and it is the most indicative action of anxiety, fatigue and pain" (p. 41).

Anyway, in this novel, the heroine Iman, through her correspondence with the writer, she wants basically to prove her lost identity and her smashed self. So, she narrates her story to him, in addition to some stories of some neighbors and of some residents of her village and city as samples of the society as a whole. The crushed and lost female identity is revealed along the story, starting from the woman's personal identity which is symbolized by the different names or pseudonyms that the main female character of the novel exposes in her letters, such as Zainab, and Iman. According to the history of Yemen, the voice of woman was shameful, "in an idealized male world, a woman's voice should not be heard by unrelated men" (Dresch, 2000, p. 17). It is also a very evident example of the wrong and bad family and social habits and traditions which consider it as a shame if the woman lets others know her real name or listen her voice. "Women must learn to accept responsibility for fighting oppressions that may not directly affect us as individuals. Feminist movement, like other radical movements in our society, suffers when individual concerns and priorities are the only reason for participation" (Hooks, 2015, p. 64). Thus, Iman tells the writer emphatically to publish and narrate her stories. Even if he neglects to publish her stories at the present time, she asks him (in her letter) that he must at least publish them in the future. "Please write about me, don't let me die in the mountains alone. Narrate people about me" (Al-Ghafouri, 2014, p. 6). Moreover, Iman tells the author to narrate her sufferings and other females' sufferings with their families. She also tells him about her society restricted by customs and traditions, society filled with hostile religious sects, society ruled by tribal or extremist religious sectarian and ethnic groups, and a society that restricts the female's

freedom and deprives her of her rights, love, education, job, work and so on.

5. Illiteracy: The Killing Weapon against all Humanity

Furthermore, the novelist, Al-Ghafouri condemns illiteracy which is expanded as a result of the increase of the misconception of wrong beliefs and traditions that are embraced and practiced by people in Sa'ada city, or in Yemen as a whole. Many people become the victims of illiteracy as they were led and taken to the battlefields like goats. Women's progress in education is very low and slow. "The high rate of illiteracy among girls is due to social, cultural and financial restraints. Education is not considered a priority for women socially" (Mutawakel, 2006, p. 20). Even women become one of those victims. They are always the poles of suspicion deprived from their education, freedom and having no identity. Iman, the daughter of a Yemeni city called Sa'ada, recounting her story and how people with their suspicions and strange traditions condemns her unfairly, is obviously the symbol of every Yemeni woman. She echoes all the Yemeni illiteracy and education. According to feminist perspective, "Between women and men, sexism is most often expressed in the form of male domination, which leads to discrimination, exploitation, or oppression"(Hooks, 2015, p. 48).

Furthermore, the whole village of Iman is free from any public school. She says that one cannot see any schoolboy or school uniform in any place in Sa'ada. It is a disastrous situation which attacks every individual there as people neglect every aspect of civilization because of their strange ideas. This all happens because of misunderstanding of the concept of religion which creates this kind of misconception. So, Iman refuses and revolts against this ugly situation. Her feminist refusal and revolt which is the ladder for a woman to find her identity and self to reach her real status is

shown in Iman's words to Marwan about the real situation of Education in Sa'ad. "If you stand on the top of the mountain directly above our house and for a while, you forget the long strands of Iman, and look at the vast space in front of you, you will not find a single government school" (Al- Ghafouri, 2014, p. 40).

The evidence of ignorance of people, absence of education and knowledge, wrong medical, unscientific methods and beliefs that the masters use and the people blindly believe in, on one hand, and the scientific identity for which Iman is supposed to search and inspire her people to search, on the other hand, is very obviously revealed when Iman' describes how the people believe completely that their master who has knowledge of the holly medicine can cure them. Iman says that: "The father reads the Qur'an on sick men, and the aunt reads on sick women. The condition of many people was getting worse, and they were transported on shoulders to the nearest bus stop, a half-hour away on foot" (p. 48).

However, Iman does not surrender to these wrong medical superstitions. She uses her mind properly and pursuits her quest to prove her identity in finding real medical treatment for her disease (the inner tumor in her belly) lest she should die like her father. Therefore, she goes to Sana'a where she gets her good medical treatment and gets well, unlike her father who probably or most certainly died from the wrong and bad superstitious treatment methods that the master used, such as tying their hands and body, splashing cold water over them, and strongly beating and slapping them, and so on. This conversation between Iman and her brother Hassan shows her search for her identity , self and need freedom to live without being prisoned or gender discriminated by some extremist or false racial or ethnic and religious beliefs , misconceptions , strange , wrong social customs and traditions. She talks to her brother: "I am sick, Hassan, the pain cuts my intestines, sometimes I suffer from severe

bleeding and sometimes it cuts off completely. Hassan, in my guts, is a monster that is devouring me, not a lamb; I am afraid" (p. 108).

On top of that, Iman has a high degree of self-awareness and self-confidence. She always faces her brother regarding the tumor in her belly. She tells the author that she realizes how people look at her with suspicion, but she never gives up life. She persuades her family to take her to Sana'a for the purpose of therapy. Hassan tells her: "I believed in you, Iman," unless we were going up the mountains and going down the slopes, on our way to Sana'a" (P. 108). Iman is a prey of various kinds of hindrance, such as the psychological hindrance resulting from the false accusation for her in committing a crime of adultery and becoming illegally pregnant. This really was just an abdominal tumor, and that makes her life in nightmares and psychological sufferings that would destroy her life and make her delusion things that cause her live in confusion, depression and despair. There is another kind of hindrance resulting from social panic and family displacement due to the contradictions of life cluttered with tyranny, ignorance, backwardness, poverty, racial discrimination, hostility, wars, explosions and unemployment. According to feminism, "it is necessary for feminist activists to stress that the ability to see and describe one's own reality is a significant step in the long process of self-recovery, but it is only a beginning"(Hooks, 2015, p. 26). The other hindrance is shown in her thinking about the darkness of the past, the gloom of the present and the vagueness of the future. But she overcomes all of that with her strong will, passion and hope, as a means by which she turns what hinders her into its opposite, so that she can touch the truth. Iman clarifies her strong will at the beginning: "I told you at the beginning that I will defeat the enemies" (Al-Ghafouri, 2014, p. 19).

The main story of "Sa'ada Braids" is about Iman and her belly which is formed by a

strange disease that attacks her belly from inside. This story is used as an evidence to reveal the blindness of the people of her society towards humanity. One example of such blindness is that they look at Iman with suspicion and believe that she has committed an adultery due to which she has become pregnant. However, Iman does not surrender or get weak and she wants to prove to the whole village including her family that she is not pregnant and what she carries in her belly is just a tumor which is no more than a disease. Iman tells her father and mother:

"For three to four months, I was receiving killing threats from my father and my mother. And as soon as I burst into tears, then anger, then defiance, the prompt calmed down. She said: Let's travel to Sanaa, now take me to Sana'a. If it is proven that I am pregnant, kill me. If I am sick, I need treatment"(p.85).

Therefore, she decides to leave Sa'ada and go to Sana'a for therapy in order to prove to those people the real identity of reality, reality of her health identity of having a tumor in her belly, and reality of herself good feminist moral identity and innocence. In Sana'a, the doctors find that Iman has got a tumor inside her belly which proves that she has been misjudged by her people. Being suspected and misjudged reflects that what people in Sa'ada believe in does not authorize or entitle them to judge others correctly. The masters always behave as if they were superior to the others. This kind of superiority creates a kind of blindness and misconception of truth and identity. Marwan narrates that: "She (Iman) left the faith of the Prophet of the tribes in the village and now she is climbing the mountain in search of a prophet who gives her life, the Prophet of the city. Do not talk to her about the prophecy again, but about a surgical doctor to save her from the beast" (p. 132).

Moreover, the language used by Al-Ghafouri is a bitter language which directs its attack as a weapon against the living culture of the master's culture that looks down on the others, and it is used as a tool for revealing the

woman's voice which is magnified through the character of Iman. The author provides Iman with some skills to observe her environment and search and find the real identity and reality, and to picturize her life with the masters vividly. He uses the character of Iman to judge critically the masters and show how they think and rule. Iman narrates her story in a process of a quest for identity and self, and in an atmosphere of rebellion against the harsh thoughts and norms of the masters. She despises them with a considerable feeling of humanity in order to gain the sympathy of the readers on her story. Consequently, the readers do not only believe the story, but they also deal with Iman as if she were alive. Marwan replied: "You (Iman) are diligently deconstructing the secrets of the great village very easily; even your readers did not believe that you grew up in Saada. They will understand your story like me: It's the golden door for all of Yemen "(p. 52).

Through her letters, Iman shows how her society is blocked, and as a result, the woman is subjected to all kinds of injustice, oppression, and deprivation. She is not allowed to study, to love and marry her lover, to discuss, to say her views and opinions, to participate, to get a job, to work, because of the unbelievable vacuumed ideas, beliefs, customs and traditions embraced and practiced by the society there.

6. Coexistence: The Way of living together peacefully

Anyway, the novel revolves under the search for humanity which is the essence and fundamental pillar of life and the main human demand for everyone is to love, to coexist, to understand, and to live in peace and harmony with others despite different religions and sects. Because of the wrong social and religious slogans, customs, traditions and beliefs that caused discrimination, class and racial division among people, these things led to the total absence of humane essence. Al-Ghafoory, throughout his female character,

Iman, uses a harsh weapon and sharply criticizes the society in Sa'ada for embracing wrong religious and racial beliefs that discriminate people and deprive the females of getting and achieving their most essential right of humanity that is love and marriage. "Feminist movement happens when groups of people come together with an organized strategy to take action to eliminate patriarchy"(Hooks, 2015, p. xii). This is shown in the story of Iman's friend, Saffia, who is from the master's religious group and who can't get married to Yahia as he belongs to Alwhabi religious group that the masters are religiously and sectarianly hostile to. And mainly because Yahia is not from the master's prophetic and supreme race, as the masters believe and consider themselves. Iman's says: "Saffia's father is a venerable man in our village. She knows that she can't get married to Alwhabi Yahia. Her family will not allow this, not because of his different dress or he prays differently, but because her father believes that he is the prophet's grandson. Therefore, as one of the masters, Saffia has to marry a man who belongs to the same class. She will wait for a groom who has the quality of the masters. Their blood should be the same" (Al- Ghafouri, 2014, p. 45).

In addition, Al-Ghafouri has constructed the character of Iman in such a way to be independent, and to be able to reflect how and why equality should be there in her society. Iman interacts with the other characters such as Saffia or Shama'a in order to reveal their thoughts and shows how different they are. For instance, Saffia suffers from an excessive masterly pride while the Jewish lady Shama'a who is mostly considered as an abhorrent character to the master because she is a Jew, is attached with a kind of humanity and simplicity. Thus, Iman acts as a symbol of revolutionary voice against the whole misconceptual rules and beliefs of the masters. Iman's intelligence and liberal mind shows the clues about the exposition of social indifferences caused by the misuse of religion.

She is also free and brave to convey her views and opinions. For example, she advises Safia to visit Yaha's mother:

"How would master's girl dare to visit a stable woman? Even if her father allowed her, the village would not accept such a thing, they would think that she blew up not only their beliefs, but their history. It will look as if Safia took a large spade and dug the graves of their ancestors, and threw their bodies to eagles" (p. 46).

Also, the above lines show that how those people utilize religion to fulfill their ethnic, sectarian, political, and personal desires. These things have important roles in the novel and they become the reasons behind obstinacy, conflicts, hostilities, and war. These reasons also help in crushing womanhood. In addition, the novelist displays the reality of how the masters rule in inequality, and the deceiving way of how use and utilize the religion for their political and ruling purposes when they talk about equality in hereafter. But in this life, they discriminate between people, and consider themselves superior and the others are inferior to them.

Furthermore, the novel portrays the misconception of belief, and what it comes after. For instance, the title of the novel "Sa'ada Braids" suggests the dark side of the muddle that surrounds people there. "Braids" suggests the inequalities among people which help to create the class distinctions and discrimination based on the misconception of religion which causes that the whole community is flawed and divided by this kind of misbelief. This kind of misconception increased among people of the same nationality which is nourished by misusing religion, and consequently, the masters and those who believe in them become narrow-minded. According to feminism, "families are not just households composed of husband, wife, and children, or even blood relations; we also know that destructive patterns generated by belief in sexism abound in varied family

structures" (Hooks, 2015, p. 38). For instance, Iman's mother believe entirely of what the masters say, and even she hates the Jews, not because of some personal matters, but because the masters say that they are bad. The following dialogue between Iman and her mother about Iman's meeting with a Jewish lady called Shama'a reveals this kind of bad and wrong attitudes that people are forced to adopt and what is imposed on them blindly.

Mother: Your father does not want you to visit Shama'a anymore."

Iman: "Why?"

Mother: "The Jews do not like us, and we don't trust them."

Iman: "But, why? They are Yemenis like us. They believe in the prophet Mohammed, and they like our land exactly like us" (Al-Ghafouri, 2014, p. 31).

In the above dialogue, the misconceptions and wrong attitudes that Iman's mother has against the Jewish woman. It shows how those who call themselves masters and rule Sa'ada impose what they want on the people there, especially females. It also shows how they empoison their minds, and how they crush and ruin the people's identities of belief, knowledge, cognition, coexistence, friendship, and equality of citizenship. On the contrary, Iman's situation, attitude and conceptions reveal that she wants, not only her mother, but also all females and males to relinquish those hostile attitudes. both men and women have to search for, to find, and to obtain, to regain and liberate their identities, to free their minds from ignorance and misconceptions, prejudice and fanaticism, and to illuminate their minds and also life with knowledge, truth, love, intimacy and coexistence.

Al-Ghafour's novel, Sa'ada's Braids, depicts the true definition of humanity and the real social situation in which the female strives and searches for her absent or lost and smashed identity, and shows how individual, especially female, is important. Anyway, the humanity places big importance on the female individual who is deprived of or removed

from any identities and rights that must be given, granted and added to her through socialization. Instead of presenting a ready-made fact, "the novel tends to expose this 'truth' to the reality of the dialogic human condition and to distribute the quality of search after truth among the differing social voices" (Al-Rubaidi, 2020, P. 17). In other words, to be humanist is to respect basic human identity regardless of any gender, ethnic or religious affiliations or geographic belongings or boundaries. It also implies respecting the individual's attitudes and convictions. As Iman tells Marwan about the critical situation of women in her society: "We were in chamber, my father's chamber alone. The time is before midday. At this time the woman is the owner of the house in our village. After an hour you (woman) will become a chef working voluntarily" (Al-Ghafouri, 2014, p .42).

Moreover, Iman describes the poor thinking of her people, even those who are supposed to be intelligent readers like her father, follow the masters blindly without investigating or questioning them. And instead of guiding them to the reality, the masters drive people into another dilemma. According to feminist's views, "It should clarify for women the powers they exercise daily and show them ways these powers can be used to resist sexist domination and exploitation"(Hooks, 2015, p. 95). Iman also reveals how women are deceived and how blindly they believed. This is clearly shown when Iman asks her mother who is supposed to be from "the masters" about religion. Through the conversation between Iman and her mother, it shows an absolute blindness of Iman's mother faith: "The mother warned her daughter not to mention such ideas again because they are against their beliefs. Mom, they are also speaking about the paradise young people." Iman says: "My mother quickly puts her hands over my mouth and does not let me continue speaking, and she said: "Shh. Be careful, Iman" (Al- Ghafouri, 2014, p. 15).

The religion is considered that as it helps people acquire the best virtue as a bridge of connection with God, so it must also help the people to build a good relationship with each other, to spread love and respect, and let them take the right decision regarding the good beliefs, faith and traditions. It must eradicate the differences between people and all together help each one to get rid of that. Al-Ghafouri shows the masters' wrong use of religion and their bad deeds against women in his words about the masters' bad deeds against Iman. He says: "The woman of your village want doubtlessly to prove your guilt not because it is attributed to God, but defending themselves. They have polluted your chastity and the war has smirched their blood "(p. 81). It is clear that Iman is a revolutionary character and she can express her thoughts regardless the social and religious obstacles the masters have enrolled upon people. It is unconventional for a girl from Sa'ada to begin a conversation or correspondence. However, Iman rejects the silence and the place the masters have planned for people in Sa'ada. She becomes courageous enough to express her own thoughts unlike her other people.

There in Sana'a, Iman regains her real identity and self that were lost. She starts breathing a new life as if Sana'a is the symbol of hope, the safest place for her and her story, and where her story will not die as she is afraid of. She is now like Albringo who lived in a deserted place such as Sa'ada. Both Iman and Albringo could live either in Sa'ada or in the Atlantic because they have a strong will and a strong faith of success. Comparing Iman's story to Albringo, Al- Ghafouri wonders: "How did Albringo live all that time in a horrible place in the Atlantic? You are a woman who got out of a jungle and came into a jungle" (p.23). Thus, the author puts the elements of seriousness in his story from the very beginning as Iman tells him that she is afraid that her story may die out, that

expresses her fear about the death of her identity before she finds it.

Iman's journey to Sana'a is similar to that of Robinson's journey where both characters are looking for innovations, freedom and improvements whether on the level of personal or social purposes, except that Iman represents the feminist side. Iman wants to overcome all the social obstacles made by the masters against women. She faces a lot of problems and difficulties, and as a result, she has become an obstinate character enough to achieve her feminist goal which is the equality and peace. Iman's journey to Sana'a is considered as a mission of search and hope. On her way to Sana'a, Iman faces or watches many sights of difficulties whether the road itself which is full of "frightful cliffs, or the several villages abandoned by the war" (p. 128).

The novel shows a clear and real picture of the struggle between love and war, war that brought about all kinds of miseries to the people and their country and destroyed their identity, self, love, happiness, health, security, and so on. This is clearly reflected by the miserable life of the main female and single character, Iman, who is surrounded by the oppressive and unfair traditions and wrong beliefs which deprived her of her human identity, self and her rights of living. Al-Ghafouri shows how woman is presented as a victim that cannot even speak about her rights of life, and if she does, she will be considered a traitor who must be punished. So, in exchanging letters with Iman, she tells him her story and he answers all her questions and encourages her to continue writing. Here lies the core of the search for her identity which later began to be found in the influenced feeling created inside Marwan. As Iman says:

"I wished to tell you that I am a Hashemite girl. And when I ignored your wish, you loved me on your way, as I had hidden your Hashemite girl in myself. But I loved you as a pure peasant who mistakenly stepped on the

road to his beloved, and did not notice" (p. 66).

In order to reach your destination, you must first search for the safe and secure route through which you will pass. You may have to pave it in order to remove any obstacles that may hinder you in order to search for Identity, self and obtaining them. Iman tries to change the wrong conception of the masters but the masters believe that the others are chosen only to be servants for them. In addition and moreover, the masters ban, forbid and criminalize love and marriage of their females to any others out of their race and out of their religious or ethnic or ideological sect or group or family which they oppose or hate or disparage or are hostile to. According to feminism, the power of males is "to exploit and oppress women in a manner far more grievous than the psychological stress or emotional pain caused by male conformity to rigid"(Hooks, 2015, p. 74). Thus, under the masters' rule, there is a complete absence of females' rights which in turn led to a loss of their identities, and there is an absence of a distinctive demand for liberty and freedom which are the basic fundamentals of humanity. In other words, social harmony based on logic, justice and mutual recognition are always dissolved and replaced by the misconceptions of reality and life. War and masters, Marwan describes Iman as a symbol of peace:

"Climb up the mountain slowly, and squeezing clouds on the militants. Fire out the smoke of battles with your braids, and grant your safety to the shepherds on the mountain. Tell them to spread your sheep; do not be afraid of the war. Tell the shepherds hiding in the burrows, who have been wronged by the war until the hour that the fire is exchanged by the Strugglers and Mujahedeen. Therefore, they will carry the sin until the end of time" (Al- Ghafouri, 2014, p.133).

The writer suggests that by love and coexistence people can reach peace and

unity. And this is why he uses the story of Zal and Rodaba which is another example of allusion borrowed from the Iranian history. Zal and Rodaba fall in love with each other and they get married in spite of all the difficulties and problems their families have made to stop their marriage. Their story is a tale of love and war in which love wins. Similarly, Marwan uses "Rodaba" as a title to call Iman in the sense that they both resemble each other. Marwan hopes that like Rodaba, Iman will also win the battle of life at the end. "I confess to you that I loved you as if I found you missing on the way. You did not fight the enemies until you got me, and you did not venture as Prince Zal did" (p. 65).

Furthermore, Iman has also exposed her history which reflects how different she is, comparing to others in the village. She has grown up as an educated lady who has read a lot of books in her life. She is influenced by her father and grandfather as they are good readers. She has read about the meaning of life from her teacher, Abdulhafeth. She is now accompanied by the car driver and Al-Sheikh's son and her brother Hassan. She frankly started exploring something related to her opinion about the war:

"The war has brought nothing but misery, whether its heroes were Mujahedeen or criminals. I told them while I was playing with the contents of my bag. As if I poured cold water on their heads. I shocked them, not only was I a woman talking in the car that was enough to be a big event alone. Rather, I also linked the "mujahedeen" to misery" (p. 128).

Al-Ghafoory's novel, *Sa'ada Braids*, is a valorous shout against the damned war and against the wrong oppressive religious and social norms of oppression, deprivation, despotism, and patriarchy practiced namely by a group of people called masters in Sa'ada city and in most Yemen. It condemns and curses the political and religious performances of those people who believe that they are God's chosen and, therefore, they are the only race

who have the rights to rule and impose whatever they want on the others.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, Al- Ghafouri has created an amazing female character such as Iman who searches for her identity and wants to find the self and prove it in her society. Therefore, she revolts against the stupid and ugly beliefs of the masters. He depicts her as a real and ideal feminist symbol that should be imitated and followed by all women because she shows intelligence, wit, charms, liveliness and courage in dealing with the problems of her society. By creating such character, Al-Ghafouri has finished his novel with an important message that the equality, love, coexistence among people should be taken into consideration. He inspires people, particularly females, to find their lost identities and gain their selves, freedom and voice in such society where masters dominate it, crushing womanhood and violating and killing humanity in general. It is the awareness in writing and in feminine identity for which the female searches to find, to restore and to confirm her human, familial, social, emotional, educational, cultural, and religious and health identity, as a body and a soul.

Furthermore, he encourages the importance of equality between female and male masters and the others in the twentieth centuries in spite of their different religions and culture. According to him, religion or any other social doctrines should be used to establish peace, coexistence and justice, to protect and enhance humanity which cannot be achieved without understanding the purpose of life, and to help in the spread of the belief of equality in giving the women their rights to live their true, perfect, ideal, practical and human life, and to be strong pillars in the society.

Through his female and main character, Iman whose name, in Arabic, means FAITH, Al-Ghafouri wants to send a great message, not only to all people in Sa'ada (who call themselves masters and the others), but also to

all people all over Yemen and the Arab world that the religion should not be embraced for some wrong worldly personal or social or sectarian or ethnic or political purposes, and not to be practiced to wrong, oppress, suppress, deprive, discriminate people and to kill them, or to cause social class divisions which led to create different kinds of conflicts among people. But religion is very important for the individual and the society and must be used and utilized perfectly and rightfully to spread and enhance morals and good behavior among people as it organizes their behavior and dealing with others. It must be used to establish justice, humanity, coexistence, education, equality, liberty, peace, stability, and tranquility, and to enhance the process of social development in the societies. Therefore, Women should have a full right to live, free, love, coexist with others, respect and expression, and right to study and work free from favor, pressure and despotism of males.

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