



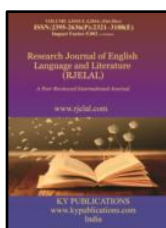
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SHADES OF TRANSGRESSION: AN ANALYSIS OF SHORT FICTION BY ARAB WOMEN WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

Women writers of the Arab world have been under the influence of a traditional, conservative and patriarchal set-up. In spite of facing various societal challenges in their writing career, the women writers are able to bring to the fore various narratives which indicate an elevated consciousness of the Arab Woman, or at least a consciousness which is not gratified with things as they are around her. This study makes an attempt to analyse the tendencies of transgression evident in short stories by Arab women writers. As Chris Jenks asserts, "Transgression, then, is that conduct which breaks rules or exceeds boundaries" (Jenks 3). The objective is to bring out the various subversive practices of resistance by Arab women namely through writing, working outside their homes, extramarital affairs, marrying by their own choice, exploring homosexuality, refusing to get married in order to carve their own identities, and to attain liberation from the stifling confines of the patriarchal world. These are narratives of courage and resilience which hint at the possibilities that threaten the boundaries which confine the women of the Arab world.

As Jenks opines, transgression involves dualities, "both vertical and horizontal, such as sacred-profane; good -evil; normal-pathological; sane-mad; purity-danger; high-low; centre-periphery" (Jenks 2). As a result, the idea of transgression is complex. Exploring this complexity, Nura Amin in "My Mother's Friend", pictures a bold and provocative description of a bored, dissatisfied woman who crosses the boundaries of sexual experience permitted to her by law or religion. Instead of running after a disinterested husband who prefers to stay out of the house on the pretext of business, she focusses her sexual interest on a remarkably attractive woman Abla Safa:

Abla Safa was very beautiful and graceful. She never married and never fell in love, despite the fact that all the young men in

the neighborhood could not take their eyes off her. I used to think it strange that my mother would not let me talk to her or visit her, even though Abla Safa lived alone. As for my mother, she herself showed little inclination to talk to her, although it was clear that in every household Abla Safa had a woman friend—even if not a close friend—whether a young girl, a wife, or a mother. Some fascination made these women cultivate friendship with her, although she did not visit all of them regularly. (*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 81)

Narrated through the voice of a daughter, the story delineates the mother's heightened sense of possessiveness with Abla Safa when she continues

to weep and make a hue and cry when she sees Abla Safa getting physically involved with Auntie Asmat's servant and eventually she has her all to herself:

Abla Safa did with my mother what she had done with the maid, then they vanished into the bedroom and locked the door, emerging only at midnight, before my father returned from his trip abroad. All I knew was that afterward Abla Safa stopped visiting other women friends, and came only to our house. Nevertheless, my mother would not let me talk to her. Perhaps this is the reason that today I still dream that Abla Safa is cupping my breast with her hand and taking it out of my school uniform, and it's as if my breast is budding and blossoming in her hand . . .
(*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 81-82)

Hence, the story ends with the daughter's desire of seeking joyful existence in her mother's way – a way that challenged the boundaries of normalcy. Amin's narrative throws light on the threatening of the heterosexual societal order with the account of sexual transgression in an orthodox society.

Transgressions also hint at an alternative way of living. Foust states that :

As transgressions exceed normalcy, they threaten the community's imperative toward conformity... —in the moments in which they are enacted, such alternatives (however uninspired) reveal social order to be a fluid and fragile system of power, one which requires constant maintenance to appear stable and orderly. More complex transgressions may threaten the legitimacy of authority structures that maintain the "common good," for they undermine the hierarchical basis of a social order (Foust 4)

Threatening the boundaries of marital propriety, Layla al-Uthman's "The Picture" is a sensitive and delicate portrayal of a middle-aged woman dealing with her mid-life crisis. On her 45th birthday, unable to deal with the boredom and the loss of youth and beauty, she decides to have an extramarital affair. Her body and spirit yearns for excitement, adventure, for rebellion:

How? When? With whom? I wasn't concerned with finding answers to these serious questions. I was at a moment of resolution. I resolved to embark on an adventure—I felt I needed it. An adventure that would bring back feelings of youth. A woman of forty-five, but desired, longed for. She has another man. He dreams of her, thinks about her, cares for her. Just like those other women, the ones who attracted my husband's attention...(*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 74-75)

Baffled and anxious, she tries to immerse herself in some work and having failed at that, starts roaming the market aimlessly. She collides with a middle-aged woman and recognizes her as the one her son had a sexual alliance with, for one night. Her son had described his brief sexual encounter in a letter which said:

"Please, Mother, don't be angry. I've spent an unforgettable night with a middle-aged woman. She likes to enjoy herself like a young person, even though her own young days are over for good..."

"This woman sat beside me. She chatted to me about her young days. To be honest, although she was rather silly, what she said was amusing, especially when she told me about her marriage, and her husband, and her awful life with him. She really made me forget the long journey. And after that she made me forget the departure time of my train back. And then she was inviting me to spend the night with her. (*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 77)

She sees a part of her own self in that woman, who like herself is going through a passionless existence and makes a desperate attempt to feel alive again. The protagonist's desire to have an alternative way of living hints at the challenges that the conservative Muslim culture faces in the fast changing world.

"The Beginning" by Salwa Bakr is an eye-opening portrayal of Muna, a working woman who exhibits zealous ability in balancing her household duties with her work. The story delineates transgression as resistance technique – a final way

of dealing with a chronically pathological relationship. The story narrates a single day in the life of Muna when her husband's boss is coming over to their house for lunch. Throughout the day, she works like a robot cooking, cleaning the bathroom, dusting the vases, mopping the floor only to be told ruthlessly "the television screen is all dusty!" (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 281) by a disapproving and an inconsiderate husband. Her thoughts are transported again and again to the image of her old friend she had accidentally bumped in the market a few days ago. The youthful, exuberant, cheerful persona of the friend made her realize her loss of beauty and slender figure even more acutely:

At that moment she felt sad about the good old days, when she had been the prettiest and slimmest girl in the neighborhood where she lived with her family. But after her marriage and the hellish whirlwind of married life, her body had thickened into the shape of a huge perch. Although she was annoyed by her friend's words, because they were true, she didn't let it show,... (*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 282)

Her sole accomplishment in marriage is not hers but her husband's who has obtained a doctorate and landed a job as a professor in the university. Even after working relentlessly, she doesn't earn the love and respect of her ever-complaining husband. The moment she tells him to iron his own shirt, he starts seething with anger and hurls abuses at her:

He exploded with anger. He cursed her, and accused her of being neglectful and stupid. She flew into a rage and accused him of being insensitive and inconsiderate. Then she lost her self-control and added, "My God, you have no shame!"

As usual, he jumped from his place and attacked her, slapping her hard across the face... (*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of short Stories* 282)

But her reaction to this beating is not the same. She doesn't weep or sit in the corner. Her friend's image and bitterly true remarks keep on ringing in her ears and instil in her a sudden inexplicable strength and

vigour and she hits her husband, curses him, abuses him, digging her nails into his body as if giving a much – longed for vent to all the years of repression in her marriage. After her anger had subsided, she refuses to be the victim to the emotional, physical and sexual torture of a brute and walks out on him:

She ran out of the bedroom, removed her light slippers, and took her shoes out of the hallway closet. She loosened her hair from the clasp, and walked calmly toward the apartment front door. She opened it, went out, and slammed it shut behind her. His voice mingled with the chiming of the clock, which announced the end of another hour. (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 284)

Bakr indicates the reformatory nature of transgression in this narrative delineating the need for transgression in a society that idealizes traditional relationships. The story is able to challenge the idea of a woman trying to live with her husband in which way he deems fit.

In "Pharaoh is Drowning Again" by Sakina Fuad, using the metaphor of Pharaoh for her husband, the wife narrates in the first person how she is nothing more than an object in the husband's household. Using the image of spider's web, she highlights the ennui and listlessness of her conjugal life. Rather than a wife, a companion, a partner, she is a rare thing to be possessed, owned and to be added to his valuable collection:

...The silence, the stillness, the smoothness drag me to the bottom of the earth. I sink under its layers. The spider's webs wrap my feet together, twisting my steps around each other. I whirl around from room to room. The tombstones of furniture rise higher every day. I recite the verses of the Fatiha. The reciting voice rings out in the silence. The walls close in. They move, advance, press together. They turn my body into a flat, dry surface, a leaf preserved for millions of years between the pages of a book made of brick, concrete, and iron. My heart is overflowing with longing... (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 167)

Fed up of her death-like existence, she firmly resolves to leave her husband's house to lead a liberated life where she would not be chained or fettered by fear. The recurring image of the sea-eternal, boundless is evocative of the sense of solace and upliftment that she yearns for:

I'm still moving as I sit on the ground, watching the sea: the movement of the water takes me on a journey across the whole world. My heart is a bird that has left my breast to flutter on a horizon where the earth joins the sky. My body is a ship that stops at harbors to take provisions, then continues its travels.

I will not return . . . until the sea has swallowed all the Pharaohs. (*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 169)

"The Filly became a Mouse" by Layla Ba'labakki is a story of a ballet dancer, a free-spirited filly who leaves dancing in order to get married. Her struggle tries to portray the struggle a female artist has to face in a patriarchal set up. In this case, "Transgression's violations of propriety may become celebrated as performances of radical individualism" (Foust 5). She is trapped like a mouse in the false promises of her husband that "... if I married him, he would let me dance, dance, dance. I could go on dancing between heaven and earth until the end of time". (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 203) But these words prove to be as hollow as the man himself and she is caught in the whirlwind of domesticity and duties as a mother-feeding her child, cleaning her and teaching her. After five years of being entangled in this confining trap, she gathers her inner strength to show defiance to her husband's wishes and to the societal and patriarchal marital norms. Rejecting a life of humiliation, she picks her dancing over a stagnant, demeaning marriage:

...I told him to put the magazine down and look at me. He became confused and obeyed me. The magazine fell from his hands, and he watched me in bewilderment as I tore the dress from my body and remained curled up, naked, on the chair. I repeatedly said to his face, "Don't take your eyes off me. I'm starting to move again

now. I was a filly once, and you transformed me into a mouse. I'm no longer bewitched. The magician has lost his magic wand. Look, I can move my hands and feet. I can get off the chair. I can walk and stretch. I can again become a filly." (*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 204)

For Jervis,

The transgressive is reflexive, questioning both its own role and that of the culture that has defined it in its otherness. It is not simply a reversal, a mechanical inversion of an existing order it opposes. Transgression, unlike opposition or reversal, involves hybridization, the mixing of categories and the questioning of the boundaries that separate categories. It is not, in itself, subversion; it is not an overt and deliberate challenge to the status quo. What it does do, though, is implicitly interrogate the law, pointing not just to the specific, and frequently arbitrary, mechanisms of power on which it rests – despite its universalizing pretensions – but also to its complicity, its involvement in what it prohibits. (Jervis 4)

Conveying this hybridization is Suhayr al-Qalamawi's "A Successful Woman", which revolves around the life of Naima who works at a hairdressing salon and who lives life on her own terms. Her creative skill- the skill to transform an ordinary face into an extra ordinary one through her hairstyling talent, is a sole and an eternal source of joy and contentment:

... At first, she would constantly look at herself in the various mirrors. At times, she thought her gentle, dark-complexioned face beautiful, and at other times ordinary. But she always seemed contented, especially if she was working on a customer. When she finished dressing the hair, she felt proud of her accomplishment, as if her face were the signature that she affixed to this excellent piece of work. Gradually, she stopped seeing the signature; it sufficed to see what was under the signature—a head that was not particularly striking, but which, at any rate, demonstrated her creative

talents. (*Arab Women Writers: An Anthology of Short Stories* 265)

The hair salon owner Abbas always admires and encourages her but eventually greed triumphs over love and he chooses to marry Miss Buthayna, daughter of a rich businessman. Heartbroken by Abbas's indifference and insensitive rejection, she tells her grandmother to take her back to the village. She is hopeful of finding comfort in the beauty of Nature but to her horror, she realizes that the messy and gross reality is poles apart from the rosy picture of the rural life she had pictured in her mind. This stark reality drives her to take a life-altering decision of settling down in the city. Owing to her hard work, grit and hairstyling talents, she gradually manages to own a hair salon, and one much more successful than Abbas's:

One salon's owner welcomed Naima, and then another one, and before long she had again established herself. A few years later, she used her savings to buy a hairdressing salon from a Greek who returned to his own country. Today she owned a salon, just like Abbas, only it was more successful than his, although Buthayna, whom he had married, had spent all the money that her father had given her for her trousseau in decorating Abbas's salon. But why make comparisons? She was not comparing anything, for she no longer cared... (*Arab Women Writers : An Anthology of Short Stories* 268-69)

Considering the strict and conservative social set up she is a part of, she exemplifies great courage in refusing to marry her paternal uncle's son because she was not in love with him and hence rejects a life of complacency, dependence and docility that the society has delineated for a woman. She resolves to take the reins of her life in her own hands- not bound in the traditional role of a wife or a mother- but as an independent and a successful career woman.

Thus, Arab woman writers are able to incorporate various shades of transgressive behaviour in their short accounts of the daily normative lives of Arab women. These narratives of challenging the boundaries and leading the way to

newer ways of living and existing (regarded improper by society in general) express the urgent desire in the hearts of the Arab women to be an agent of change in their daily struggle to live and exist.

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