

Feminist Reading of Leila Aboulela's "The Ostrich"

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Abstract—The marginalized and oppressed women in Sudan, alongside the subaltern women living on the margin, are depicted in the current work. "The Ostrich" by Laila Aboulela shows the protagonist's life of Sumra both in Khartoum, Sudan, and London in the UK. Sumra represents Sudanese women struggling hard to find their place in a patriarchal society. The structure of this article can be articulated in two arguments; the empowerment of patriarchal supremacy and the power of tradition implanted in Sudan and most third-world countries to marginalize and silence the role of women so that they can never be heard. Although women have got their studies at universities, they are still marginalized and have no full right to decide for themselves. Appropriating the analytical descriptive approach, the current study aims to demonstrate the marginalization and oppression of women in Sudan.

Index Terms—marginalized, oppression, patriarchy, domination, Sudan

I. INTRODUCTION

Women's rights have been questioned for long years at the local and world levels. However, this problematic situation keeps moving back and forth since the early beginning of women's protests to call for their rights. In third-world countries in general and African countries in particular, women still fight to obtain some of their basic rights (Patrick & Chrisman, 1994). Oppression of women in Africa does not stop regardless of the end of oppression all over the continent by the end of colonization. "Although a key role played by African American women at various levels of the Civil Rights Movement, they are still invisible to the larger communities" (Bell, 2018, p. 1).

As put by Stephan and Mounira (2020, p. 1), "With the flame of protests in most Arab countries to attain the political reforms, the world quickens to announce that Arab Women are on the rise". It is stated that it is the first time that women representing various backgrounds join demonstrations. Regrettably, the protests of Arab women, the voting process, running for official offices, and organizations' leadership are always shoved into the back by the world since the rise of the Arab Spring years until nowadays.

Sudan is among the countries suffering for a long period from colonization and later on from the local civil war beginning between different parties in South and North Sudan. Amongst these complicated situations, the problem of women's rights in Sudan rises. Recently in Khartoum, Sudan, several Sudanese women have rallied against the phenomenon of violence against women in the Republic of Sudan. These protests are historically labeled as the number-one resistance display since the latest revolution of 2008. This issue has been covered by many literary works written by Sudanese writers. Among these Sudanese writers is the writer Leila Aboulela. The Sudanese writers' exploratory efforts pave the way for Western audiences to learn more about all social and political issues related to Arab Muslims through the media or books (Al-Ghalith & Shalabi, 2021).

Leila Aboulela's "The Ostrich" is a short story examining the position of women in Sudan. It sheds the light on the circumstances and the complicated situations of women in Sudan. For a long period, Sudanese women have not been given the right to obtain their full rights and among them the right to speak for themselves or decide what kind of life they want to live. The Sudanese women spent their whole lives silent, allowing their fathers, brothers, sons, or husbands to speak for them. Aboulela, however, highlights a very important subject matter which is the marginalization and absence of women's voices all over the country. Terrible stories hide behind this silence while they wait for someone to unveil them to the public. In "Can the Subaltern Speak", Spivak (1994) mentions how the woman is one of those subalterns and states that those subaltern people suffer from living all the time on the margin, confirming that this will be more complicated if you are poor, black, and female. Hence, this article aims to demonstrate the marginalization and oppression of women in Sudan using the analytical-descriptive approach. The structure of the paper is divided into five main sections, and the literature review is now presented.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The complicated situation of women in Sudan has been addressed by many researchers. However, most researchers have shed the light on the bad circumstances of women in Sudan to awaken all of the institutions that work for the rights of women to pay great attention to this critical problem. It is known that the independence of South Sudan has finished long-term political conflicts and socio-economic marginalization managed by consecutive governments in the

Republic of Sudan, noting that these conflicts impact Sudanese women in gender-based issues. With independence, women are granted opportunities that lead to social and economic empowerment, guaranteeing that the economic and political institutions and bodies in the new country reflect pledges to women's human rights and participation. One at a time, the process of women's empowerment contributes to strengthening the political and economic organizations in South Sudan.

In the same context, it is maintained that the unhealthy cultural and social acts against women help to complex the impact of marginalization and conflict. However, "There are continuous internal and external security threats, a limited gender equality understanding, and a tendency within communities to view gender as an illegitimate and alien concern, given the severe problems faced by South Sudan" (Nada, 2011, p. 1).

In another work, Hashim (2018) concludes that women experience systemized violence as a worldwide phenomenon demonstrated in different practices. Like other abused women, Sudanese women are no longer an exception as they are exposed to various mental and physical forms of violence. Additionally, the state, society, and the family are among the main proxies and agents precipitating violence against women. As put by Hashim (2018), despite its great complexity and complications, violence against women in Sudan has been resisted by various forces, i.e. women in exile, women in NGOs, along with women members of political bodies. The next section gives insight into the conceptual framework adopted in the study.

In this give-and-take discussion, Makuchi and Nfahn (1997) agree that feminists among black women thrive to speak of their stories of suffering to voice their viewpoints on the culture and silence of black women. Women's total and hegemonic conceptualizations by African American men and Anglo-American feminists are rejected as they claim to represent the entire Negroes and thus erase and subsume the voices of the black women. This article based on the analytical-descriptive approach is an ongoing effort of the previous scholars and academia to depict the marginalization and oppression of women in Sudan.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The nature of the research paper necessitates the use of an analytical-descriptive approach to analyze the text. The short story "The Ostrich" by Leila Aboulela is analyzed to reveal the bad conditions suffered by women in Sudan. This story helps the researcher shed the light on different sides of women's life in Sudan. The study is also concerned with the traditions still common in Sudan as these traditions do not allow women in Sudan to enjoy their full rights. With the use of the analytical-descriptive approach, this research also raises questions about the future of women in Sudan, opens the eyes of women's associations about the critical situation of women in Sudan, and finds a way that helps these women get rid of patriarchal domination.

More importantly, the analytical-descriptive approach is mainly used to analyze the selected text to reveal the sufferings of women in Sudan to answer the following questions: Do women in Sudan aim to obtain their full rights or not? And do women in Sudan long for free life from the chain of Sudanese traditions? With that being said, the next section presents the textual analysis and discussion.

IV. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

"The Ostrich" is a short story written by Leila Aboulela. The story revolves around two Sudanese couples Sumra and Majdy who traditionally got married without a love story. Majdy is a Sudanese man who studies in London to get his Ph.D. certificate and wanted to marry a Sudanese woman. Later on, he proposed to Sumra who came to know him just the moment he proposed to her, but her family considered him a perfect bridegroom, accepting his proposal to their daughter. The story focuses mainly on the marginalized and subaltern women in Sudan. "The Ostrich" is concerned with the position of women in Sudan. Furthermore, it is concerned with giving women space to express their life prevented from living their life the way they want, but like any other female in problems and experiences to be heard by other people. Aboulela is concerned with silenced women in Sudan, and within her writings, she insisted to give silent women the right to speak for themselves. "The Ostrich" sheds the light on the marginalized female "Sumra", she is the protagonist in Sudan, as she is a marginalized voice that no one can listen to her or even give her the right to speak. The protagonist Sumra represents oppressed women in one of the third-world countries Sudan.

Sumra has happily lived her life in Sudan where she studied at one of the Sudanese universities. Like any female who lives in Sudan, Sumra always lives obedient to her parents, her society, and to the traditions in her country; therefore, she has no right to speak loudly or to decide her future the way she likes. Hence, Sumra is in love with her country, she did not plan to leave her memories, her friends, and her whole life behind to live outside Sudan. Sumra was proud of her color and her nationality and she never felt that she has to change herself for the sake of others. After her graduation, she received a proposal to marry a Sudanese man "Majdy" who studies Ph.D. in London in the United Kingdom. Her family considered this as a good chance and that their daughter will live happily there in Britain. Even without asking her, they considered this marriage as a good chance that their daughter must accept.

Also, Sumra was enforced to accept this arranged marriage although she wasn't in love with Majdy she didn't know him before. But, in Sudan that wasn't a great matter, the people assume that the woman will love her husband after marriage. If we trace the life of Sumra since her first days of marriage and her travel back and forth from and to London,

the reader can notice that Sumra wasn't happy about her life in London; she couldn't find herself there. She was estranged from the environment. She liked it more when she leaves London and goes back home to Sudan. Sumra is a female enforced by her family and society to accept that marriage. Society and her family didn't give her the right to decide the life that she wants to live or to marry the man that she will fall in love with one day.

The entire story mainly shows the journey that Sumra started to join her husband Majdy in London; it is mainly concerned with the feelings and hardships that Sumra faces to accommodate in London. Some flashbacks during her flight to London shed the light on some of her oppressed desires towards one of her colleagues in the university "The Ostrich" the way his friends used to call him. The journey seems to be a real one in the flight and an imaginary one in Sumra's mind. These flashbacks take Sumra back to Sudan where she finds salvation from this journey to London. Her memories about "The Ostrich" and about her colleagues in the university reveal the oppressed desire towards her previous life in Sudan.

The civilized city where Majdy lives is in contrast to Sudan where Sumra longed to live; this imaginary civilized city doesn't reflect the civilized man Majdy who lives in London. The moment Sumra reached the airport, she planned to tell her husband about her pregnancy, but the tough welcome of Majdy in the airport made her change her mind. Majdy started a conversation with Sumra saying "You look like something fresh out of the third world, and I let myself feel hurt, glancing downwards so that he would not see the look in my eyes" (Aboulela, p. 7). Majdy feels shame about his origin and country; he refuses any sign that may remind him of Sudan. He also underestimates everything that reminds him of Sudan, accepting his wife on one condition, that she must change herself.

Once of a sudden, Sumra started to feel that she is out of place, she belongs somewhere else, and she doesn't look like the people in the terminal where she stands waiting for her husband. Even her luggage which seemed to be natural before now turned to be something that doesn't belong to this world, as she says "Our shabby luggage, our stammering in front of the immigration officer, our clothes that seemed natural a few hours back, now crumpled and out of place" (Aboulela, p. 8). Suddenly, Sumra felt that her clothes as she doesn't belong to this world and everything around her enforce her not to be proud of her nationality or country anymore. The coldness of her husband's greeting also made her decide not to tell him about the baby, saying "So I didn't tell him about the baby though I imagined that I would tell him right away in the airport as soon as we met" (Aboulela, p. 8).

The feeling of inferiority and oppression passed through her mind as Sumra was enforced to walk next to her husband and not a few steps behind as she does in Sudan, saying "I had to remember to walk next to him not loiter behind" (Aboulela, p. 9). Sumra continues "He dislikes it if I walk a few steps behind him and he sneers at the Arab women in black Abayas walking behind their men" (Aboulela, p. 9). Majdy insists that the word oppressed is used by people to think of them.

Majdy reminds Sumra that she is supposed to behave now like civilized people and not like Sudanese people. Other than that, the people in London will look at them as uncivilized people who live in a civilized country. Sumra is incapable of fighting back and she has been raised to be a follower of a man; first her father then her husband. Sumra believes in her identity and all of her traditions, and she doesn't care if the British people wouldn't like her behaviors or her lifestyle. Sumra is proud of her country and her people; Sumra likes Sudan even if it is an uncivilized country.

What bothers Sumra here is not that she comes from an uncivilized country, but that her husband behaves in an uncivilized way in a country that he considers to be civilized. Escaping from an uncivilized country to a civilized one didn't protect Sumra from patriarchal oppression, but it increased her suffering and sense of oppression. Now, she must do what her husband wants her to do even if she doesn't like it. Sumra doesn't find it tempting to leave everything behind and live in London, as she is a Sudanese woman who believes in her history and her country, a woman who has left her roots behind and will keep yearning for Sudan. Her way of thinking made Majdy mad, and he had answers to all the objections she raised, and he started reminding her of how miserable their life was in Sudan, saying "I can't imagine I could go back, back to the petrol queues, books in the library that are years old, computers that don't have electricity to work on or paper to print on" (Aboulela, p. 11).

When Majdy asked Sumra if she met anyone on the plane that they know, she lied and said no. Sumra met "The Ostrich" who was her colleague at the university; he was traveling with his wife. Sumra had feelings toward "The Ostrich" that prevented her from telling her husband about him. Sumra is deeply connected with her country, and since the moment she met "The Ostrich" on the plane, she couldn't stop thinking about him. Her flashbacks sent her back to Sudan and university life, where she was happy, and where she met "The Ostrich" for the first time. Now, she can tell that "The Ostrich" was in love with her, but he can't tell. Sumra remembers him when he told her that I looked nice in blue though she mocked him; Sumra felt attracted to him, saying "Sometimes I looked into his eyes and they were beautiful, amber and clear and mysterious like a newborn child's" (Aboulela, p. 12).

The sense of estrangement increased every time Majdy reminds Sumra of her uncivilized background; he kept telling her about strangers whom she must respect, strangers who were according to him better than Sumra. Majdy turned out to be the oppressor and instead of giving Sumra the feeling of freedom, he oppressed her more and more with his comments. Although Sumra is not happy about polygamy which was common and accepted in her country, she cannot deny that this is part of her country's tradition. She doesn't feel guilty when she mentions it. Although such a practice seems humiliating, the Sudanese people still practice it as a right given to them by God.

Once Majdy invited his British friends to a visit, during that visit Sumra mentioned polygamy that Allah has given us the right to do it, and continued that Majdy's father has a second wife. Majdy turned to be mad at Sumra and started blaming her and accusing her of not being able to behave well, and when she asked why? He didn't answer but he continued, saying "Why, why I asked and he slapped me more. It is worst when you don't understand, he said; at least have a feeling that you have said something wrong. They can forgive you for your ugly color, your thick lips, and rough hair, but you must think modern thoughts and be like them on the inside if you can't be from the outside" (Aboulela, p. 9).

As Majdy feels oppressed and silenced, Sumra is supposed to enjoy her freedom in a civilized city like London. Then, Majdy moved to London with the same patriarchal way of thinking. He wouldn't accept his wife living her life the way she wants. According to him, he has the right to order what to do and what not to do, and that is her duty as a wife to obey her husband. Sumra is also oppressed and humiliated by her husband when he mentioned her thick lips, color, and rough hair.

Sumra has been always proud of her color, her hair, her identity, and the way she looks. Majdy used his patriarchal power to humiliate Sumra as if she is a second-class citizen who doesn't have the right to answer back. This humiliation is part of the domination that Majdy practices over Sumra. This right is given to him by his society which classifies people according to their gender. In Sudan, men come first then women; therefore, women must follow what is said to them by their men. Women in Sudan are also raised to be followers and they have no right even to fight back for their dignity. Sumra is a beautiful woman with Sudanese features, but now she started feeling inferior according to her husband's words. Sumra was an oppressed woman in a civilized country, where her husband wants her to think in the way he wants, to behave the way he likes, and to speak the words he wants her to say. Sumra lost even her simple rights in a civilized country, where all the people live freely and behave as they want.

Now, Sumra turned to live on the margin, hence her husband would not allow her to do or discuss anything that he doesn't like. Even when she used her right to express herself in front of his friends as she mentioned some of their Islamic rituals and some of the Sudanese traditions, he silenced her and prevented her from talking about this topic in front of his English friends. Sumra suffers in two different ways, she is silenced by her husband; therefore, she turned to be one of the subalterns who does not have the right to speak for themselves on one hand. On the other hand, she was shocked when she discovered that her husband stopped believing in his traditions and rituals and started to adopt other traditions and other rituals. Against this, Aboulela's "The Ostrich" is a clear example of how the women in Sudan are marginalized, oppressed, and victimized by the male-controlled system prevalent in the African-Arab country, Sudan.

V. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the current study aims to depict marginalized and oppressed women in Sudan and the subaltern women living on the margin. The paper concludes that in a patriarchal society, women are prevented from expressing themselves, or having their point of view, noting that this patriarchal mentality does not change. Majdy, who starts to look down on his country and traditions, seems to live with the same mentality he used to while he lived in Sudan. Majdy changes the way he dresses and the way he behaves in front of strangers, but he goes back to his indigenous mentality when he talks to his wife. Throughout the story, Sumra stands as a symbol of a rebel woman who tries to rebel against any kind of oppression. Yet, she is incapable of going on with her rebellion against her husband. Finally, unless women come to a new starting point in which they abandon all of the chains that hinder them in Sudan, nothing will change the life that they are leading nowadays. Women in Sudan in particular, and the third world in general, still suffer from the domination of the patriarchal society, as they are considered inferior and discriminated against not only based on their gender but also class and color. Women in Sudan need to awaken all of the institutions that work for the rights of women to pay attention to women's rights in Sudan.

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