Narrative Technique and the Individual Experience in Saudi's Novel: The Case of Abdul Aziz Al- Mesheri's *Saliha*

Dr. Hazamah Ali AI-Harshan

Assistant Professor at the Department of Languages and Translation, Faculty of Education and Arts, University of Tabuk, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

By utilizing the expressive forms available to them, authors transpose the historical situation of a particular society into the structure of a literary work. The study explores the crisis of feminine self in Abdul Aziz Al Mesheri's novel *Saliha*. The text is an authored-male text that portrays the female's quest for identity and independence by putting herself first and caring for her own wellbeing. The female protagonist (Saliha) like many women in her time, is economically devalued and socially marginalized, largely because of her gender, but also because of her lack of an independent source of wealth. Living in a society in which she has few options for earning a living when she is obliged to do so, and in which women are considered inferior to men, she faces a considerable struggle to survive physically and psychologically. She faces perhaps an even greater struggle to be acknowledged as an equal by men and by persons of both sexes whose social status is above hers. Moreover, as a member of an oppressed class of persons, she faces a culture that does not generally reflect or even acknowledge her experience. The study will follow Analytical Approach. The paper combines feminist theory and a close reading of the novel *Saliha*.

Keywords: Saudi's novel, marginalized, feminine self e, independent and Al Mesheri

1 Introduction

Literature is deeply rooted within an ideological system of traditions, values, and beliefs, and is greatly affected by their cultural background as well as by their immediate surroundings. From this perspective, literature is particular forms of perception and ways of seeing the world. This perspective includes our understanding of the economic and political factors in a particular society that influence, and at the same time are influenced by, literature. It is important to notice, though, that literature is not a form of social documentation and that the history it embodies is precisely literary. There is no symmetrical or one-to-one correspondence between literature and the real world because writers recreate the world in

accordance with their perceptions. This understanding leads us to the assumption that a literary text, the real world, and history are embedded in shifting dialectical relationships mediated through the author's perceptions.

By utilizing the expressive forms available to them, authors transpose the historical situation of a particular society into the structure of a literary work. It is in this sense of a mediated representation that we speak of literature as a "reflection" of social reality, the interrelated issues of historical change and a literary-historical tradition, or rather, a fragment of tradition, which I hope to map out using Abdul Aziz Al-Mesheri's novel Saliha (1998) as test case. The novel reflects the experience of women in a patriarchal society during the seventies period of Saudi society. The heroine struggles to assert her voice in a world dominated by man. She is subject of domination by the system of patriarchal oppression in that time. Her struggle is to achieve self-identity. Al-Mesheri offers the ideology of Saudi society and therefore the representations of social reality that reflects the author's consciousness and world view.

Al-Mesheri lived in an age which functioned along the lines of gender and class inequality. The industrial progress in Saudi Arabia during the seventies period had striking influence, yet deprived women of the chance to achieve any possibility of economic success. The labour force was male-dominated, while women were confined to their domestic sphere. This objective decline in women's economic activity was also linked to a decline in their social status because their economic dependence on men led to their subordination. Al-Mesheri seemed to be aware of this unjust distribution of power which empowered men both economically and socially at the expense of women, as it always had done even before economic evolution. "With regards to the female character in the realist novel in this stage," the critic Mohammed al-Shinṭi claims, "she is mostly characterized positively. Novelists give her a great deal of attention, and track her progress" (qtd. in Alharthi) [1]. Writing from his own personal experience as a male author, Al-Mesheri published this novel under a feminine name (Saliha). He did not conceal her identity under a neutral name to get his works published, and to survive as a writer in a male-dominated society. He was mainly concerned with the situation of widowed woman who suffered tremendously in a merciless and patriarchal society. He created his rebellious heroine (Saliha) as an expression of her strong resentment against such social and economic inequality. Al-Mesheri empowered Saliha against male and social-class domination. This leads to the assumption that the presence of the issue of feminism or emancipation of women in the novel *Saliha* is undeniable.

The novel is presenting an honest view of male perspectives of women and not falling into the trap of projecting male thinking into Saliha's mind. Al-Mesheri is working to depict Saliha as a woman who develops a feminist consciousness. The images of women in literature model the way we see women and it is important to recognize and to question these images since they provide role models and indicate what are "acceptable versions of the feminine" (Barry

117) [2]. The feminism, which Al-Mesheri wants to attribute to Saliha, is apparent in the words she is made to speak. Saliha proudly asserts her developing independence when she states that she does not "need a man" to take care of her after the death of her husband announcing that "she is not deficient in handling the life of her family" (534-35) [3]. Al-Mesheri has create his own fictions in order to emphasize Saliha's attempt to step outside of conventional patriarchal society and to define herself outside of male fictions about women. He sees in her an independence of spirit and a determination will. Saliha is thus a male representation of a woman rather than an un- biased representation of a woman in her own right. As a male construct within a culture filled with male mythologies.

Although the issue of feminism is central to the novel *Saliha*, the heroine's point of view remains absent from the text, Saliha remains objectified and never becomes a subject in her own right. She functions as "a form of challenge to her own ego and history as a female who chose to carry on experiencing her own life without male existence" (Al-Naami 90) [4]. Everything known about Saliha is mediated through the male perspectives of, the narrator, and ultimately Al-Mesheri himself as orchestrator. He provides sufficient information about Saliha personality traits, values, and experiences for one to understand her character and history by the time one has finished reading the novel. Saliha is a functional object. Arguably, literary criticism rejects essentialist notions of "reading as a woman," however, for it is evident that both women and men have been trained to read through the perspectives of the dominant culture. Elaine Showalter points out that feminist criticism is more precisely concerned with the "hypothesis" of a female reader and the ways in which that concept can change the reading of a text (25) [5]. This critical approach, as Jonathan Culler notes, utilizes the "postulate of a woman reader" to challenge assumptions regarding the reading experience and encourages readers-men and women-to question not only the literary but also the cultural and political perspectives on which their reading is based (51) [6]. However, *Saliha* is depicted exclusively through male perspectives (this includes women such as Mrs. Fatimah and Azza whose perspectives (in the novel) adhere to the dominant male ideology inherent in their society). Thus, her portrait remains a construct of masculine ideology and Saliha retains the status of object, figure, or symbol rather than of a whole female character.

2   Methods

The study will follow Analytical Approach. By a combination of feminist and a close reading of Al Mesheri's *Saliha*, the aim of this essay is to analyse how Saliha's identity evolves during her quest identity and independence and what influence the relationships with the male characters has on her identity. I will argue that even though Saliha is longing for protection and defence she resists the male dominance and remains true to herself. The feminist criticism is used to examine power relations and patriarchal traits.

3   Results and Discussion

The issue of feminism in *Saliha* encompasses three dimensions: social, existential, and narrative. Existential dimension is primarily a response to social and political pressures on the individual to conform. Social dimension, a concept that is the opportunity to choose between alternative social "realities" which confirm and strengthen one identity, it is a way, therefore, of choosing an identity, there is some overlap between social and existential dimensions in the sense that both give the individual the opportunity to choose, but existential dimension needs a choice independent of any sustaining community. Sartre says that in choosing our own essence we are choosing, in a way, for all humankind, but he also states that "every man, without any support or help whatever, is condemned at every instant to invent man" (353-54).There is a certain eventual reassurance, even comfort, that comes with social dimension; the emotions associated with Sartre's existential autonomy, in contrast, are anguish over our responsibility in choosing (351) and despair because we know we may rely only on "that which is within our wills" (357)[7].

Narrative dimension comprises "autonomy" of fictional characters from their authors. It is the autonomy the narrator speaks of when he asserts that a "genuinely created world must be independent of its creator.... It is only when our characters and events begin to disobey us that they begin to live" (Fowels 81) [8]. Such choice is always difficult to claim. Saliha does achieve a kind of social independence in this novel, and she is the primary example of narrative autonomy, to the extent that such a thing can be attained. She can be judged, first of all, in terms of her reactions to the social conventions of the society's norms. She may represent a kind of social choice, perhaps because of Al-Mesheri's emphasis on existential freedom. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe the possibilities for attaining what they term "individualism," which they explain as a combination of awareness of choices among discrepant "realities" and identities, and the ability to construct a self out of the choices available (171) [9]. According to Berger and Luckmann, all humans are born into "symbolic universes" (96), social structures a society has institutionalized as "reality." Socialization is the process by which the new individual internalizes that society, making it his or her reality, too. This socialization is accomplished primarily through the mediation of significant others (the parents in childhood; friends, co-workers, and others later on), with whose roles and attitudes, and ultimately with whose world, the individual identifies. In identifying with the significant others and their world, the individual acquires a coherent identity.

Saliha's socialization has been very imperfect, although she is in some respects a type often found in Saudi fiction: the uneducated woman of limited means who forces to gain her living autonomously. She is different, however, in that her independence is combined with an ability to see into others and understand their true worth. She has nothing in common with the other women in the village and, far from internalizing their society and accepting it as "reality." At the beginning of the story, (Saliha) seeks to prove her identity and individuality as she devotes herself for her family welfare. After the death of her husband, she derelicts all aspects of female adornment. She tolerates the burden of hard work. We are told: "when her husband died, she was still pregnant with her baby, Hamad, and holding the hand of little girl (Saaedah), then she was determined to give herself to her two children" (534). She deserted

and rejected the idea of marrying again. She has to confront the tyranny of male characters [Amer-Al-Fakeeh (the jurist -Ibn Rabah (the greedy merchant)] who possess authority and financial power at the village. They hide evil, machinations and greed, and show righteousness and piety. The narrator writes that (Amer) increases his wealth illegally by claiming goodness, and swearing false oaths just to deducted the rights of the people. (538). Despite all the intrigues that were sown at the hands of (Amer) to subdue Saliha (killing her cow, stealing her wheat, and setting fire at her house), she resists his repeated proposal to marry her. She understands his concealed intention of possessing her property. Saliha has an opinion about him: "the wickedness of this man cannot be concealed, and he comes to offer his helping hand because he has a wish of owning [my] house, and farms in order to add them to his property" (537). Yet the conspiracies of the three evil males do not break and deteriorate Salih's determination and individuality.

Saliha's existentialist struggle of self-fulfilment and survival is demonstrated as the story progresses. Al-Mesheri portrays her strong will at the time of hunger. Once more she suffers at the hands of males who deprives her share of food in the hope that they would break her willpower. But she embodies the virtue of the responsible woman and the working mother who sought to provide food and a decent living for her children. Saliha had her "reserves for famine times." She said: "it is a day when nothing is hidden from hunger" (536), and thus Saliha bargained with the days by selling her jewellery to feed her children. The narrator comments that "it was not absent from villagers that Saliha works hard in her corn fields just the same as they do, and she lives in a house of stone and clay exactly like them. In fact, she may have been distinguished from some of men, that she possesses a healthy cow." In a parish society, things are measured by possessions and the people of the village are subject to respect according to the owning of house and land. For Saliha, the novelists refers that she is equal with her male peers of the village as having a house and a land (532). She may have surpassed others (males), but in the end, she is a woman who has been crushed by social norms.

The narrative autonomy also portrays Saliha's positive view of the universe. Rain and locusts are two concomitant indications, both of which are depicted in the novel as falling from the sky, and they represent a source of mercy. Both are sources of livelihood. In exchange, the locusts are feeding on the crops of the rural man, the latter hunting the former to be a source of food when time is scarce and famine abounds. Saliha and her neighbour come out to fill the bags with locusts. The narrator conveys the opinion of Saliha when her daughter is grumbling about the abundance of locusts that exceeded the rain: "O my daughter, God, gives from locusts Good and Evil" (530). If the rain is absent, the locusts are brought to cook in times of distress, and then the locusts and rain carry two dimensions that refer naturally to goodness and sustenance. Badha Al-Doosari, and Faizah Al-Harbi indicate that cosmic significance comes in the narrative in the duality of presence and absence, whenever these cosmic representations are absent, all that is evidence of the scarcity of time (167) [10].

Al-Mesheri depicts the painful experiences of life choices for women who lived on margins of survival. The hypocrisy of male rural society is exposed as the professional role of priests are used by men to exploit the naivy and ignorance of the females that fall in their

spiritual care. Saliha complains the autocracy of Amer to Al-Fakeeh (the jurist) as being the head of village counselling council. Yet she is not allowed to join the council and confront her autocratic opponent because she is a female. The members of village counselling council are males. The village's issues in the hands of males without females if they meet in the village counselling council to take a decision concerning the community or issues related to females. Females not allowed to participate, and if her presence in their community is required, her place is naturally outside the council (569). It is a sanctity in the eyes of those males who have masculine despotic rules and dictatorial protocols that (Saliha) as a feminine subject is not allowed to transcend. Ironically, as the narrator represents the situation of Salih's complaint of Amer, he portrays, simultaneously, the sight of a rooster who chased a hen, besieging her in the corner while she was screaming and running away, but at the end, she submits to him. He imposes his compulsive power on her! Paradoxically, this is what happened in the council when Salih complains Amer (575).

The narrator implies this secondary event to reinforce the significance of the female-male conflict. The Male gives himself the right to exercise his coercive absolutism over the female persona. Furthermore, this incident plays an important function to the narrative structure. It establishes the argument against Amer's tyranny in front of villagers. Thus, Saliha had to confront the inferior view that describes women as being "deficient and powerless" and that she "went after her desire" (535). At the jurist council, she succeeds in turning the conflict and self-awareness from the subjective level to the communal level in which the villagers faced Amer with his evil deeds and blamed him for the guilt of killing the cow despite his desperate attempts to evade the truth and accuse the villagers (579). The widow Saliha stands firm and has not been fooled by Amer's tricks, saying: "Come on now, be full of regret: do you remember the day when you came wanting to marry? (577). She confronts also Al-Fakeeh (the jurist) and blames him because of his attempts to help Amer. He tries to buy Saliha's cow at the behest of Amer to clear Amer's name, after his evils were exposed. Saliha's case ends with the council's decision ton to oblige Amer to pay compensation to her.

Al-Mesheri establishes the character of Marzouq Al-Toumi as a contrast to Amer's persona. Marzouq belongs to the charity team of the village. We are told that he is a generous man whose nobility and kindness can be touched everywhere. His treatment of broken hand people is distinguished. He treats the children of the village as if they are his children. He refuses to take the wages from Saliha saying: "Oh, daughter, the children of the village are my children, they are a gift of God?" (544) Marzouq's benevolent nature does not stopped Amer's greediness from raping his land that he had usurped with the testimony of false witnesses for not having a written contract (653). Yet Amer's satanic mischief is not stopped as he consciously bothers Marzouq and his family. We are told that Amer assaulted the daughter of Marzouq when she was tending her sheep by pulling her hair and hitting her in front of people (654). Consequently, Marzouq furiously stabs Amer and murders him. Undoubtedly, Amer's harm leads to his tragic death at the hands of Marzouq. The novel brings down the curtain on Amer's evils that affected everyone, including Saliha, the heroine of the novel; and Marzouq was strong enough to confess what he had done. Later on, he sets free and survives as Amer's daughter, Azza, forgives him. She was the opposite of her father as she possesses the natural goodness.

The scene of murdering Amer at the hands of Marzouq embodies a functional significance to the narrative discourse. It reflects the social stereotype of appreciating the village culture for those who take their rights by their own hands. It depicts the oriental society that improves theorizing and imposing its opinions and governance. Marzouq becomes the saviour of the villagers as they express their admiration "...the men take their rights into their own hands and do not wait for someone to grant them", and then Marzouk became the hero who "is referred to whenever the eye sees him: This is the one who killed Amer and saved us from his evils" (665). But, Marzouk regrets of killing Amer, considering his deed as a devilish one. "Yesterday, he was waiting execution, but today his heart shines with love of life, he promises himself to plant the land of Amer" (668). The narrator represents the quality of life and death as an objective equivalent for Marzouk to atone for his guilt.

The narrative discourse terminates by presenting Saliha's defeat at the hands of social change. It is represented in the self-conflict when the individual finds himself/herself subjugated and compelled to accept conditions and circumstances of society. Saliha collapses when her house was destroyed as part of the municipal construction works to build a new road. Her own ontological conflict deviates from its individual level to embrace a larger dimension of defying the coercive chronological evolution of human existence. Saliha's determination falls apart. It is an end filled with cries and distress. She remains silent, not speaking, wiping away her tears, and the voice of destroying her house "shakes the ears, as if it is tearing down the ribs" (726). Saliha's self was crushed by the new line that must pass through her house and this necessitates the removal of her house, and then she was defeated in the face of the coming time, so her house was robbed again and herself was crushed that self she always fought for her victory.

4   Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to emphasize that the dialectical relationship between literature, the real world and history, which I have pointed out earlier, is shaped through the authors' mediation. In other words, how authors observe the world with its historical events is how they try to record them in literature. In this case, authors, who are certainly influenced by their social and cultural background, as well as their immediate surroundings, are the ones to determine the direction of a literary work. If social reality determines the authors' consciousness, then it must also inform literary works which are produced to express that consciousness. It is not easy to understand the way literature interacts with history and the real world unless we're familiar with the sources from which it stems. Understanding the background of a literary work enables us to learn, through literature, about the way things are, in as much depth and fullness as possible. It also helps us learn from others' experiences.

The novel that I have been dealing with derive its specific content from a patriarchal society that is conditioned by gender division. Despite the fact that the novel reflects the Oppression of women under patriarchy, the author focuses and highlights issues that mostly relate to his own personal perspective. Al-Mesheri's major concern is to voice his strong resentment against gender and class inequality within the domains of Saudi Arabia. He empowers his heroine by granting her full control over her own voice. He is simply giving us

his own worldview, one obviously influenced by her background as well as by her own experience as a Saudi man living in a patriarchal and commercial society. By reconstructing a patriarchal text from a feminist perspective, a different ideology is emphasized which gives voice and existence to all those who were previously silenced, oppressed, and deprived of their basic rights as human beings. In the world of Al-Mesheri's novel, we have witnessed the negative effects of patriarchy on the domestic sphere. We have also seen how patriarchal oppression controls social relationships in this sphere by emphasizing the inequality of power between men and women. These unequal relationships emphasize the domination of the male and the submission of women.

Acknowledgment

References

[1] Alharthi, Mazin. (2015). Social Transformations in the Saudi Novel: Ibrahim Al-Nassir as a Case Study. *The University of Leeds*. Available: https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/12168/

[2] Barry, Peter, (2009) *Beginning Theory*, 3d ed. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press.

[3] Al Mesheri, AbdulAziz, (2010). *Saliha*. (Anthology Chapters Series). Egyptian Book Authority No. 116.pp 519-726. Available: http://www.gebo.gov.eg/ .Since most of the resources available for this study are in Arabic, I will provide my own translations for the original Arabic novel text (Abdul Aziz Al-Mesheri's *Saliha*) and references.

[4] Al-Naami, Hassan, (2009). *The Saudi Novel: Current Trends and Historical Metamorphosis*. 1set Edition. The Ministry of Culture and Information. The National Literary of King Fahad Cataloguing Perses.

[5] Showalter, Elaine, (1979). *Women's Writing and Writing About Women.* London: Croom Helm.

[6] Culler, Jonathan, (1982). *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP.

[7]Sartre, Jean-Paul, (1975). *Existentialism: from Dostoevsky to Sartre*. Ed. and Trans. Walter A. Kaufmann. New York: New American Library Press, pp. 345-69-.

[8] Fowles, John, (1998). "Notes on an Unfinished Novel." *Wormholes*: Essays and Occasional Writings. New York: Holt Press, pp 13-26.

[9] Berger, Peter, and Thomas Luckmann, (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Doubleday.

[10] Al-Doosari Badha, Faizah Al-Harbi. (2020) Time Semantic Dimensions in Abdul Aziz Al-Mishri's Novels. *Kut University College Journal for Humanitarian Science* [online], Volume 1, Issue 1, pp 152-171. Available: https://jh.alkutcollege.edu.iq/article_5910.html

[11] AI-Harshan, Dadrih A,(2008) *The Image of the Hero* in *Abdul Aziz Al-Mesheri's Novels*. Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University. Unpublished manuscript.

www.hpsconf.org / info@hpsconf.org