

Women's Social Status in Western and Arab Novels

المكانة الاجتماعية للمرأة في الروايات الغربية والعربية



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Abstract

This study examines women's social status, which stands as a principle of feminism theory that calls for equality between men and women in all aspects of life. Women struggle to acquire their rights in a patriarchal and masculine societies. This study adopts a comparative approach. It argues that each selected novel reflects the era of its social attitude towards women and how each character tried to reflected its social status through the novel. It portrays a clear image about women's social status in two different societies (Western and Arab) under feminism umbrella in two selected novels of Jane Austin's Emma and Fadia Faqir's Pillars of Salt. Women struggle and suffer differently according to the living conditions and environment in accordance to oppressive of each society. A thorough discussion is conducted in order to prove that both writers depicted different social status suffering of women.

Key Words: Emma, Pillars of Salt, social status, subordinate, stereotype, struggle.

المستخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة المكانة الاجتماعية للمرأة، والتي تمثل مبدأ من مبادئ النظرية النسوية التي تدعو إلى المساواة بين الرجل والمرأة في كافة مناحي الحياة. وتكافح المرأة من أجل الحصول على حقوقها في مجتمعات أبوية وذكورية. وتعتمد هذه الدراسة على المنهج المقارن. وتزعم أن كل رواية مختارة تعكس عصر الموقف الاجتماعي تجاه المرأة وكيف حاولت كل شخصية أن تعكس مكانتها الاجتماعية من خلال الرواية. وتصور صورة واضحة عن المكانة الاجتماعية للمرأة في مجتمعين مختلفين (غربي وعربي) تحت مظلة النسوية في روايتين مختارتين هما رواية إيما لجين أوستن وأعمدة الملح لفاديا فقير. وتكافح المرأة وتعاني بشكل مختلف وفقاً لظروف المعيشة والبيئة وفقاً للقمع في كل مجتمع. ويتم إجراء مناقشة مستفيضة من أجل إثبات أن كلتا الكاتبتين صورتا معاناة المرأة في مكانة اجتماعية مختلفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إيما، أعمدة الملح، المكانة الاجتماعية، المروسة، الصورة النمطية، النضال.

Introduction

Social status is the position of an individual in a society. According to Farkas (2022), it “express the location of the given individual or group in society” (p, 417). This status or position can also affect, how they are treated by other members of society. Also, it refers to social position, social location, class position, or social situation which mainly related to the power of an individual in his society. This society could be small like a family where each member has its own position and status or big society which include different people of many races and origins a “Society is a kind of collective entity, as is a nation, a state, an organization, and a family” (Copp, 1992: 183). Analyzing a group by the social status of its members can shed light on the intra-group dynamics. Social status affects all parts of life and the occurrences in communities of various types (religious, workplace, political, etc.). The social standing definition is the perspective of others on one's social status, and how that perspective affects how they treat each other.

A person's social status and social standing have drastic effects on how they can and cannot function in their society. Social status was strongly supported by feminist theorists, especially by Simon De Beauvoir (1908-1986). The French writer who laid the foundation for the modern feminist movement. In her book *The Second Sex*, she explores how it was like in the past and present to live as a woman in a patriarchal world. She shed light on many feminist issues one of them is the social status of women “indicate the social standing of the woman (her standard of living, her wealth, the social circles to which she belongs” (p, 505).

Beauvoir (1956) discussed how gender differences are based on biological differences to be inherently inferior beings to men. Thus, women have to resist to acquire their rights within patriarchal society. To obtain their freedom, power and to rid of oppression, misrecognition, inferiority, discriminations, hegemony, being Other in a society where they represent a half percent of all humanity. Also, she criticized the masculine society that created a stereotypical image for socially subjugated women “One is not born but rather becomes a woman” (p, 273).

Through history up to the present time, any subjugated, powerless individual who lives as Other in a society resists to change its situation



and position whether in personal or social level. The best who reflects and represent the oppressed people are those who born from the womb of suffering. The finest defender for women's cause is women themselves.

There are many ways to resist and express yourself in society. The accurate way is the soft resistance represented by writing literary works. Literature is the best way to talk to mind rather than bodies in order to change the ideology and thinking of any society "literature reflects society and how it reveals truths concerning our social interactions" (Bressler, 1994:117). Literature is the mirror of any society. the social situation of women does not depend on the place or time. Women suffered from subjugation through the ages. The writers of any society and at any time "taken some account of the relation of individual authors to the circumstances of the social and cultural era in which they live and write And relation of a literary work to the segment of society that its fiction represents or to which the work is addressed" (M.H., 1999: 288).

Many female authors influenced by the suffering of their gender so they tried to depict that in their literature. Jane Austen (1775-1817) and Fadia Faqir (1956) through their novels they reflected the social situation of women through the characters in their novels. It sheds light on a novel written by an Anglo-Arab writer and another by an English writer, both of whom made significant contributions to Arab and English culture and literature, respectively. The current study compares the Western civilization shown in Austen's Emma to the Arab culture depicted in Faqir's Pillars of Salt, employing both cultural and feminist perspectives. Furthermore, the significance of this work stems from the fact that it depicts the picture of man-woman relationships and social ties within the society in two distinct cultural environments: British culture and Arab culture.

Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature, as it adopts a comparative approach. The term 'qualitative data' is not equally self-explanatory, as it has very different meanings in various scientific disciplines as well as in everyday life. In human resources, for example, it entails areas such as employee satisfaction, motivation, and work environment as opposed



to quantitative (hard) data, such as personnel costs, headcount, etc. text is still the dominant type of qualitative data in social sciences, psychology, and education. The methods of qualitative data analysis described in the following are originally designed for the data type 'text' and texts will be used in the examples shown.

Flick's textbook, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (2016), begins with a note on the dynamics of qualitative research: Qualitative research is an ongoing process of proliferation with new approaches and methods appearing and it is being taken up by more and more disciplines as a core part of their curriculum. (p. xi)

Analysis and Discussion

This part of the study is dedicated to analyze and discuss the selected novels under study, which will be as follows:

Section I:

Jane Austen the novelist who was born "at Steventon in the county of Hampshire Dec. 16, 1775, and buried in this cathedral July 24, 1817" (Butler, 2004: 1). Her father, the Reverend George Austen, was rector. She was the second daughter and seventh child in a family of eight members:

six boys and two girls. Her closest companion throughout her life was her elder sister, Cassandra, who also remained unmarried. Their father was a scholar who encouraged the love of learning in his children. His wife, Cassandra (née Leigh), was a woman of ready wit, famous for her love to verses and stories.

She wrote about six famous novels that still captive readers after about 200 years of her death. Her earliest novel is *Sense and Sensibility* (1795). Between October 1796 and August 1797, she completed the first version of *Pride and Prejudice*. *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), *Northanger Abbey* (1817) and the last *Persuasion* (1817) in addition to many other juvenilia and unfinished works.

As she was a 19th century writer, her novels were full of irony, people we can recognize from our everyday lives, many of Jane's stories begin with young, middle class or working-class women being sent to live with wealthy relatives or neighbors, opening up a whole new social and romantic world to these young heroines. She mocks the social culture of her time, providing a sometimes-harsh criticism on the



duty of marriage.

Emma was written by Jane Austen and published in 1815, is a famous novel about the life of its protagonist, Emma Woodhouse. Marriage and social status have long been interwoven in human life back at that time. Both are mirrored in Jane Austen's work Emma, which was set during the Victorian era, when there was a strong conviction in marriage with the same social class, which was mostly demonstrated by upper-class individuals. The problem of the novel is how people's social position effects their decision on whom to marry. The novel depicted three marriages that controlled and influenced by social position and the impact of their position on the success and fail of marriages:

Marriage of Mr. Weston and Miss Churchill

Mr Weston was born in Highbury. He weds Miss Churchill, a member of a wealthy and influential family. Mr. Weston is of a lower class than Miss Churchill. Miss Churchill accepts Mr. Weston's proposal because she falls in love with him.

“Captain Weston was a general favorite; and when the chances of his military life had introduced him to Miss Churchill, of a great Yorkshire family, and Miss Churchill fell in love with him,” (Emma: 16)

Marriage of Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor

Mr. Weston quits the militia and begins trading. He still owns a tiny house in Highbury where he spends the majority of his leisure time, and he alternates between productive occupation and social pleasures. Then he marries for the second time with Miss Taylor. This second marriage is happier since their socioeconomic standings are more equal. Miss Taylor is a governess, and she is quite fortunate to be relieved of her need to work by her marriage.

“He had never been an unhappy man; his own temper had secured him from that, even in his first marriage; but his second must show him how delightful a well-judging and truly amiable woman could be.....” (Emma: 18).

The equality between man and woman brought more delight to their life because none them feels that he is higher than other. Equality is the key factor for any human being whether he is a male or female.



Marriage of Harriet and Martin

Harriet was of unknown parentage. However, her parents' identities are eventually revealed. She proves to be the daughter of a wealthy tradesman. Meanwhile, Martin is a farmer who works on Mr. Knightley's land. Harriet falls in love with Martin, but she rejects his proposal to marry him due to Emma's recommendation. Which show women looking for social status to improve their social position:

“Which makes his good manners the more valuable. The older a person grows, Harriet, the more important it is that their manners should not be bad; the more glaring and disgusting any loudness, or coarseness, or awkwardness becomes. What is passable in youth is detestable in later age. Mr. Martin is now awkward and abrupt; what will he be at Mr. Weston's time of life?” (Emma, 39)

However, Harriet and Martin eventually marry and lived happy life. “Before the end of September, Emma attended Harriet to church, and saw her hand bestowed on Robert Martin with so complete satisfaction....” (Emma: 592).

Social status in Emma concentrated on choosing the husband who will make you live a good or bad life. It is like a jewellery that women wear to show that she has power and wealthy by marrying to rich and notable person. It depicts the traditional culture of Victorian society back at that time where women were busy to look for man of good class to satisfy their desire of being in a good social status.

Section II:

Fadia Faqir, a renowned writer born in Jordan in 1956, is currently an Honorary Fellow of St Mary's College and a Creative Writing Fellow at St Aiden's College, both at Durham University. Faqir earned a Master Degree in Critical and Creative Writing from Lancaster University in 1984. She returned to Jordan for a year before going to East Anglia in 1986, where she completed the first Ph.D. thesis in Critical and Creative Writing, which was awarded in 1990 and advised by Angela Carter and Malcolm Bradbury. (Chambers, 2011 :56-74)

Faqir the (Anglo-Arab) novelist wrote many famous novels like Nisanit (1987), our novel Pillars of Salt (1996), My Name Is Salma (2007), Willow Trees don't Weep (2014). In addition to many other poetic books, short stories and plays.

Faqir's Pillars of Salt (1997) sets the story in the early part of 20th century, in



which Great Britain declared the mandate of Transjordan. It investigates the situation of women who face injustice and inequity in Arab society. This concept is obviously expressed in the characters of Maha, the protagonist, and Um Saad, who come from two distinct socioeconomic circles. Detained in an asylum, they tell melancholy stories about their struggles in a male-dominated society. The novel's primary events began during the British mandate over Jordan. The novel examines numerous cultural characteristics of two separate Jordanian societies: the Bedouin society, which is defined by tribal rites and traditions, and the urban society, which is made up of people from various ethnicities and backgrounds. Nonetheless, both civilizations are subcultures of the larger Arab culture. Um Saad was born in Syria, and her father immigrated to Jordan due to the French occupation. Maha, Sheikh Nimer's daughter, and Maliha are Jordanian Bedouin women. The social formation establishes the relationship between men and women and their roles. (El Bwietel, 2015:2-3)

Pillars of Salt depicts the Arab culture presented in Jordanian Bedouin society which has traditional rules of patriarchal system where man leads while woman is subjugated and has to obey the man's rules. Angela Carter the British novelist and feminist said about the novel "Compulsive reading. A feminist vision of orientalism" (McKenzie, 2022). Bedouin society gave man authority over women so women in such cultures are inferior to man. Social inequity and injustice encourage man's evil attitudes against the innocence of women which represented by Daffash rape to Nasra (Faqr.1997:11). As a result of this incident, Daffash has more freedom to commit the crime against Salih's wife again. Nasra's life has been destroyed. In another depiction of social cruelty, Salih's wife would be slain if her husband learned about it.

In another social distinction between man and woman, portrayed another stereotypical Arab inferior woman represented by Sheikh Nimer, Maha's Father, tried to develop Maha's character by her accompanying her on hunting. He offered her a chance to work in the garden. Maha says "Since I had become a woman, he did not want me to work in the field because it was exhausting and shameful. A woman's place was in well closed room". Her father allowed her to take care of the farm because is doing well in the field. After the death of her mother, Maha lives with her father and her lazy brother who hates her. Maha's words express that the social codes and norms were



constraining woman's freedom at that time. The only suitable place for woman is working place but home. Since early childhood, women are fed the traditional concept of woman's role and duties. Although Maha marries the one who loves her, Harb but this does not change her social situation rather than a wife and mother. She reveals that:

" yes, I would sleep next to Harb every night of my life; yes I would wash his cloak, cotton shirts and drawers. I would prepare a meal for him & see his sparkling golden tooth every day for the rest of my life" (Faqr, 1997 :20-23).

Another picture for masculine Arab society represented by the father of Um Saad who subjugated her and forced her to stay at home and marry a man she does not like. Her husband destroyed her. After long years of being a loyal servant to husband, he marries another woman. Um Saad resembles the ideal Arabian daughter, mother and wife at that time in a society controlled by man. She receives no sympathy, neither from her father nor from her sons. She is oppressed and marginalized by her husband and everyone around her. She says:

"I cannot stand happiness. I cannot bear happiness. I cannot smell happiness" and "Twenty-five years have passed. Like a blink of an eye. Just incubate and boil caraway" (Faqr, 1997: 50-130).

The role of Um Saad summarized by being an ideal woman to be inside the walls of the house.

The disobedient female image is embodied in Maha, who refuses the subjugating cultural norms she's been through especially when she rejected the proposal of Sheikh Taleb who is a leading figure in his society. On the other hand, the total submissive female image is characterized by Um Saad who accepts the submissive and humiliating from men in her life.

Faqr provided a traditional image for Arab Bedouin society that shows men as superior while women is inferior specially in the patriarchal domestic relations. Father, as the head of the family, has to be respected. The relation between Brother and sister is conventionally taught to girls that they should respect their brothers. Other relation shown in the novel, is husband and wife relation which supposed be built upon love. Wife should be obedience to her husband domination and only allowed to manage her house businesses.

Conclusion



This paper sums up those women in both novels suffered from social status and have no freedom in comparing to man. Although the two novels are set in different social cultural environments but multiple similarities have been found like both writers belong to feminist movement. Women in Emma where more social while women in Pillars of Salt were more homely.

Social status and marriage are experienced in Jane Austen's Emma. The three couples love each other but they were challenged by the big gap of social status, upper class and lower class. The first couple is Mr. Weston who married Miss Churchill, a wealthy young lady and well-connected family. Miss Churchill is richer than Mr. Weston. Their marriage is not accepted by Mrs. Weston's brother and sister-in-law because they are different in social status. The second couple is Mr. Weston and Miss Taylor. It is the second time marriage of Mr. Weston. This second marriage is happier because their social statuses are more equal. The third couple is Harriet and Martin. At the first, Harriet refused Martin's proposal because she proved to be the daughter of rich enough tradesman, while, Martin is a farmer who works on Mr. Knightley's farm. But finally, they got married and lived happily. Through the novel, it is clear that social status influenced Victorian people's marriage which decide to whom you should marry. Social status is a very important factor during the Victorian age where women suffered positively or negatively. Positively, upper-class women should marry from man belong to high class. Negatively, lower class women cannot marry a man from upper class because of the social restriction that judge on any such marriage to fail.

While in Pillars of Salt, It is clear that unjust treatment of women fosters a sense of gender inequity, which can lead to chaos in any society. In such an unjust situation, women would never feel the independence that would allow them to be an effective half of any society. It is also clear that as long as gender discrimination persists in society, families will be unable to enjoy normal lives while raising children. Another significant issue is that it is considered that women's voices must be acknowledged by society in order to reconsider the overall position of women around the world. Pillars of Salt presents a great contribution in the Anglo-Arab fiction which enlightens cultural and social Eastern features of Arab societies. It tackles cultural issue within the Arab society criticizing the woman status in Jordanian patriarchal society of 20th century. Faqir rejects patriarchy as A social



and cultural framework that deprives women of their fundamental rights. She portrays the pain and anguish that Arab women experience. In *Pillars of Salt*, Maha and Um Saad suffer greatly as a result of their socioeconomic situation. They were both raised from childhood to be dutiful servants, and the irony is that they are rewarded by being imprisoned in an asylum. Both works imply that men and women are raised from childhood to play their respective masculine and feminine roles in a male-dominated society. Moreover, woman is raised to be wife and mother and to do domestic works. On the other hand, man is seen as strong and raised to be dominant and do an outdoor role.

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