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Narrative Technique and the Individual Experience in a Saudi Novel: The Case of Abdul Aziz Al Mesheri’s Saliha

By Hazamah Ali Al-Harshan

Abstract

The study explores the crisis of a woman’s selfhood in Abdul Aziz Al Mesheri’s novel Saliha. In this male-authored text, the woman protagonist is portrayed as putting herself first and caring for her welfare in her quest for identity and independence. She is economically devalued and socially marginalized, not just because of her sex and gender but also because she does not have an independent source of prosperity. She lives in a society with few opportunities to earn an income. She struggles to survive physically and psychologically in cultures that consider women inferior to men. Furthermore, she has an even greater struggle to be accepted as an equal by men and by other persons who share her social status. As a member of the oppressed class, she is confronted with a culture that does not generally reflect or acknowledge her experiences. Henceforth, the purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of feminism from the philosophy of existentialism through the women characters in the novel Saliha. The protagonist, Saliha, can likewise be analyzed from the perspective of existential feminism.

Keywords: Saudi Novel, Existential Feminism, Marginalization, Women’s Independence, Al Mesheri

Introduction

Literature is deeply rooted within an ideological system of traditions, values, and beliefs, and it dramatically reflects and shapes its cultural background and immediate surroundings. From this perspective, literature is a particular form of belief and way of seeing the world. This perspective includes our understanding of the economic and political factors in a specific society that influence, and at the same time are influenced by, literature. It is crucial to notice that literature is not a form of social documentation and that the history it embodies is literary. There is no symmetrical or one-to-one correspondence between literature and the natural world because writers recreate the world according to their beliefs. This understanding assumes that a literary text, the real world, and history are embedded in shifting dialectical relationships mediated by the author's beliefs. Linda Hutcheon (2003) asserts “that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past (‘exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination’)” (p. 89). She adds, “the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts.’ This is…an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs” (p. 89). By utilizing the expressive forms available, authors transpose a particular society's historical situation into a literary work's structure. We speak of literature as a "reflection" of social reality or a mediated representation. I hope to map out the interrelated

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Abdul Aziz Al-Mesheri lived in an age that functioned along with gender and class inequality. Although the industrial progress in Saudi Arabia during the 1970s had a striking influence, it still deprived women of the chance to achieve any possibility of economic success. The labor force was male dominated, while women were confined to their domestic sphere. Because of their economic dependency on men, women's economic activity and social status decreased objectively. Al-Mesheri seemed to be aware of this unjust distribution of power which empowered men economically and socially at the expense of women, as it always had been even before economic evolution. Literature accordingly tries to portray the social reality of Saudi women's struggle to shape their individualism and challenge oppressive systems within their culture. The critic Mohammed al-Shinṭi claims that “the female character in the realist Saudi novel in this stage … is mostly characterized positively. Novelists give… [Saudi woman] a great deal of attention and track her progress” (Alharthi, 2015, p. 9). Al-Mesheri has authored several novels that focus mainly on women’s struggles in the context of Saudi society. Al-Mesheri’s novel *Saliha* reflects women's experience in Saudi’s patriarchal society during the 1970s. It portrays the story of a woman rebelling against a patriarchal society. Al-Mesheri focuses on the traditions, and culture of the South Saudi people. His novel deals with the suffering of a woman and her struggle against male domination. The heroine, Saliha, is subject to domination by the system of patriarchal oppression at that time. She tries to assert her voice in a world dominated by men and struggles to achieve self-identity.

Even though the novel *Saliha* is a male-authored text, Al-Mesheri is unique in how he presents women characters in his work. Salīha’s perspective is conveyed through the perspective of the male narrator, ultimately Al-Mesheri himself as the storyteller. He titled the novel with a feminine name (Salīha) and did not conceal the identity of its protagonist by choosing a gender-neutral title to get his works published and survive as a writer in a male-dominated society. His work was seen as a direct challenge to the patriarchy and a break with representations of women as passive victims of their society, a view which dominated earlier Saudi men’s narratives. The novel is an obvious critique of the patriarchy. The late 1990s marked the beginning of a new era for Saudi novelists in which writers started to demand reform and criticize women’s position in their society. Their novels reflect an engagement with women's issues and rights. For instance, the Saudi novelist Ibrahim Al-Nassir dedicated two of his novels specifically to the subject of women’s issues: (*ʿAdhraʾ al-Manfā*) *The Virgin of Exile* (1978) and (*Dam al-Barāʾa*) *The Blood of Innocence* (2000). Al-Nassir features women characters who represent the liberation of women in society. The character of Buthaina, for example, tries to change conventional concepts about the role of women in a developing community by raising the level of social consciousness about this issue; Buthaina does not give up even after the failure of her marriage. Three images of women characters are portrayed in al-Nassir novels: conventional women, modern women, and radical women (Alharthi, 2015, p. 229). The Saudi critic Hussain Al-Manassera’s book *Readings in Feminist Narrative Perspectives* (2013) is a survey of Saudi fiction which includes novels and short stories by both men and women in which feminism is the major concept of the literary narrative. Furthermore, Hassan Al-Nu’ami’s book *The Saudi Novel: Current Trends and Historical Metamorphosis* (2009) is a historical study describing the major changes in Saudi novels and addresses important issues in the content of these novels, such as questions of gender and identity. Saudi novels have become one form of public and political participation, with most novelists “committed to the emancipation of women and developing feminist consciousness, both very political commitments” (Al-Rasheed, 2013, p. 207). However, Al-Mesheri supplies enough

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\(^2\) Arabic to English translations from *Saliha* and secondary sources were done by the author of this article.
information about Saliha’s character traits, values, and experiences to understand her character and history. He was mainly concerned with the situation of a widowed woman who suffered tremendously in a merciless and patriarchal society. Al-Mesheri created his rebellious heroine to express his strong resentment against such social and economic inequality. However, Saliha is portrayed entirely from a man’s perspective (including women like Mrs. Fatimah and Mrs. Azza, whose views adhere to the male-dominated ideology inherent in their society).

**Feminism and Existentialism**

This paper aims to explore the concept of feminism from the philosophy of existentialism through the women characters in the novel *Saliha* by Abdul Aziz Al Mesheri. Feminism became a dominant force in literary studies in the late 1970s. The term feminism encompasses all works by and about the woman that are characterized by the internal reflections of a woman’s life and beliefs (Selden. & Brooker, 2013, p. 206). It aims to reveal the layers of a woman's experiences and aspirations concealed in her subconscious mind. According to Mary Eagleton (2014), "the feminism of a writer may be reflected in a consideration of the effect upon a woman's psyche of external events around her" (p. 213). Feminism as a theme should not be considered a mere call for women's rights by the writer or characters. Feminism is also a statement about women’s consciousness, feelings, beliefs, and experiences, that is concerned with reflecting the women characters’ sensitivities and expectations. The patriarchal ideology is an essential obstacle faced by feminism and its writers. According to this ideology, there is a focus on masculine traits, while the feminine are marginal and subordinate. Women live in an environment that identifies men as active, dominating, rational, and creative.

In contrast to men’s traits, women have come to be identified as passive, acquiescent, emotional, and conventional. Hence, the patriarchal ideology implies the process by which certain assumed qualities are attached to a woman and are used to justify her oppression. Feminism rejects the idea of a patriarchal society. That society prevents her from realizing her productive and creative abilities in a culture created by and for men. Feminist writers create space for a specific audience whose experiences, sorrows, and sufferings are acknowledged through art. This art grows out of their determination to explore the possibilities of what a woman could be, despite many obligations forced upon her. Feminism was formed to address how race and gender influence women's lives and how their needs are ignored by men. This research paper focuses on the woman character in Al Mesheri’s novel who struggles to survive in economic conditions after her husband dies. Various impediments come into her life but are not a hindrance for her, which reveals a woman who has supremacy over herself and a strong will to survive.

Existentialism is an ideology that accentuates human existence in the world. It is about seeking oneself and making decisions based on one's experiences, beliefs, and outlooks. The concept of existentialism, introduced by Jean-Paul Sartre in his remarkable book *Being and Nothingness* (1992), discusses not only the three modes of being but also freedom and conflicts in human existence. The three modes of being, according to Sartre, are “being-in-itself,” “being-for-itself,” and “being-for-others.” The first is an existence without consciousness, commonly considered the existence of inanimate objects or nonhuman beings. The second is the existence of human beings, with its main characteristic of possessing a consciousness that enables humans to make choices. The third is the social existence of humans in which conflicts necessarily exist in their relations with others since each person wants to be a subject by making others object (Sartre 1992, p. 800). Thus, conflict is characteristic of the social relation of human beings in Sartre’s concept of existentialism. Sartre defines freedom in this way: “by oneself to determine oneself to wish (in the broad sense of choosing). In other words, success is not important to freedom” (p. 803). Humans are responsible for being free to determine their
choices and responsible for the penalties of those choices. Thus, freedom is characteristic of a conscious human being. With consciousness, a human being has the freedom to choose, whatever the result of the individual’s choices.

This paper analyzes the novel Saliha and its woman protagonist from the perspective of existential feminism. Existential feminism is used to examine power relationships and patriarchal merits, advocating for liberty and the experience of living as a human body. It privileges autonomy and the experience of living as a human being. It is a way, therefore, of choosing an identity. Sartre (1992) says that in choosing our essence, we choose, in a way, for all humankind (p. 353-54). The philosophy of existential feminism is derived from the school of thought of Simone de Beauvoir. De Beauvoir adapts Sartre’s concept of achieving existential freedom through personal decisions and calls for more efforts to remove these deep-rooted constraints.

The most famous passage in de Beauvoir’s work The Second Sex (2010), “one is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (p. 14), suggests that gender difference is nothing but a social construction, assuming that women’s experiences are similar to men’s. According to de Beauvoir, women have historically been viewed as the antithesis of men. A woman is only defined in relation to a man, who serves as the subject and the ideal. One does not become a woman; one is perceived to be one by society. Additionally, women have adapted naturally to their position of inferiority as de Beauvoir proclaims: “I first have to say, ‘I am a woman;’ all other assertions will arise from this basic truth” (p. 25). De Beauvoir turns to existentialism, a philosophy most associated with Sartre’s thinking to resolve this historical inequity and free women from their inferior position. Existentialism acknowledges that people have the inherent freedom to choose their paths in life, and this freedom is always present; a woman who is forced into a submissive role by society preserves her existential freedom. "For three centuries, they have almost been the only ones to possess concrete independence in society,” de Beauvoir argues, “and today they still hold a privileged place in it” (p. 835). She maintains that women cannot be subjugated.

According to de Beauvoir, women are oppressed because their presence is neglected, and men are assumed to be the absolute subject and women to be only objects. The process begins with biological realities and progresses through patriarchal history until women are forced into reproductive and domestic responsibilities. Women are viewed as unconscious creatures. This is what has led to women's subjugation throughout history. The difference between men and women stems mainly from the fact that social construction marginalizes women, with the majority of this process occurring through self-internalization of social constructions. The critical question is whether women can be freed from object status. Women can take ownership and participate in the positive activities within society. Nothing prevents a woman from building herself, and she can be a being who does not underestimate her own essence and nature. Women must resist assimilating to patriarchal beliefs. Furthermore, women can be thinkers and participate in movements promoting gender equality. When people think, observe, and define, they are engaged in intellectual activity. Intellectual activity ceases, however, when one becomes the object of thought, observation, and definition. De Beauvoir invited women to read authors such as Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, and Emily Bronte, who employed their craft to explore themes of pain, death, and life, demonstrating that women can also struggle to transform society (p. 862).

Sartre and de Beauvoir believed that economic power was one of the keys to a woman's freedom and autonomy. De Beauvoir reminded women that accepting the role of marginalization is accepting the status of an object which means “rejecting the Self-Subject” who is creative, has autonomy over oneself, and takes the risk of experiencing insanity, which is the result of involvement in continuing to lie. Therefore, women's liberation is necessary, but does not mean that they should be entirely independent of others: “men and women must,
among other things and beyond their natural differentiations, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood” (p. 863). *The Second Sex*, therefore, concludes with de Beauvoir’s optimistic attitude toward feminism. Women need to “grow a political and social sensibility,” “take aggressive action,” and “have faith in their future” (p. 860).

*Saliha* includes an existential dimension which responds to social and political pressures for individuals to conform. This study analyzes how Saliha’s identity as a woman protagonist evolves in her quest for identity and independence. She resists male domination and stays true to herself allowing her to embody Sartre’s second mode of existential being: “being-for-itself.” Saliha does achieve a kind of existential individuality in this novel. She can be judged, first, in terms of her reactions to the social conventions of society’s norms. She may represent a kind of social choice, perhaps because of Al-Mesheri’s emphasis on existential freedom. However, Sartre's idea of individual freedom includes the idea that “existence precedes essence,” which suggests the freedom to become what one chooses, and not that there is a “real self” waiting to be uncovered. When Saliha tells the villagers that she will remain in the place she belongs (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 353), she appears to have discovered that existential “real self.”

### A Feminist Existentialist Analysis of *Saliha*

From an existentialist perspective, women are not necessarily dependent on relationships between men and women. Saliha, as an existentialist woman, emphasizes her existence and her way of being in her world. She explores herself and makes decisions from her experiences, principles, and perspectives. At the story's beginning, she seeks to prove her identity and individuality as she devotes herself to her family’s welfare. Saliha does not choose to end her life after the death of her husband. She is, in some respects, a type often found in Saudi fiction: an uneducated woman of limited income who is forced to gain her living autonomously. She would be expected to suffer from her undefined social status. However, she has nothing in common with the other women in the village. Her independence is combined with an ability to see into others and understand their true worth; after the death of her husband, she rejects all aspects of female adornment and takes on the burden of demanding work. We are told: “when her husband died, she was still pregnant with her baby, Hamad, and holding the hand of a little girl (Saaedah).… She was determined to sacrifice herself to her two children” (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 534). She deserted and rejected the idea of marrying again. In this respect, she epitomizes de Beauvoir’s notion that the bane for women (in a patriarchal society) is entering into the institution of marriage. De Beauvoir argues that:

> In marrying, the woman receives a piece of the world as property; legal guarantees protect her from man's caprices, but she becomes his vassal. He is economically the head of the community and thus embodies it in society’s eyes. She takes his name; she joins his religion, integrates into his class and world; she belongs to his family and becomes his other "half" (de Beauvoir, 2010, p. 506).

Instead of being a submissive wife, Saliha struggles with the patriarchy and accomplishes her obligation as a mother and independent woman. She must confront the tyranny of male characters (Amer, the farmhouse’s owner; Al-Fakeeh, the jurist; and Ibn Rabah, the greedy merchant) who possess authority and financial power in her village. They are hypocritical as they hide evil intent and greed while pretending to be righteous and pious.

Al-Mesheri highlights the transformation of marriage from a holy relationship to a platform for ambition and avariciousness. In this context, marriage is viewed as an opportunity to improve one’s lifestyle, and money has the upper hand over affection in Amer’s life. Amer's
decision shows self-centered, cruel aspects of human behavior, which causes the people around him to suffer. Amer plans to fulfill his ambitions through Saliha’s wealth, which is more attractive to him than her love. The narrator writes that Amer increases his wealth illegally by claiming goodness and swearing false oaths to take away the rights of the people (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 538). To force Saliha to marry him, he kills her cow, steals her wheat, and sets fire to her house. However, she resists his repeated proposal to marry her. She refuses to sell her house because it is not her family’s property, and she understands his masked intention of possessing her property. Saliha explains her opinion of Amer, “the wickedness of this man cannot be concealed... he comes to offer his helping hand because he has a wish of owning [my] house, and farms to increase his wealth and property” (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 537). Amer also conspires with Al-Fakeeh and Ibn Rabah to destroy Saliha’s strong will; nonetheless, their evils do not break or deteriorate Salih’s determination and individuality.

Saliha’s existentialist struggle for self-fulfillment and survival is demonstrated as the story progresses. Al-Mesheri portrays her strong will in times of famine. Saliha suffers from various hazards, and she overcomes those struggles to survive. Once more, she suffers at the hands of men who deprive her of food in the hope that they will break her willpower. She embodies the virtue of a responsible woman and working mother who sought to supply food and a decent living for her children. She builds up “reserves for famine times,” lamenting that “it is a day when nothing is hidden from hunger” (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 536). Thus, Saliha gained by selling her jewelry to feed her children.

According to existentialism, the individual must choose the life they want to live. In a long-term crisis of survival, Saliha comes to terms with the identity of her existence. She finds perfection in her loyalty to her family and spends most of the time plowing the land and raising livestock. Saliha’s process of existential struggle involves making decisions based on past experiences learned from her village ancestors. While she cannot escape her struggles, she is guided by the principle that no matter what happens in her life, she must keep going, and her continuation will lead her to finding meaning in her existence. The narrator comments, “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. She may have been distinguished from some men, that she possesses a healthy cow” (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 532). 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 novelist refers to her being equal to her male peers in the village because she has a house and land. By directing her attention toward her children’s well-being, she finds solace and recognizes her existence. So Saliha is going through an existential crisis, and as a responsible mother, she has accepted that fact and moved on with her life. Saliha demonstrates that existential struggles exist for both men and women, yet their struggles differ depending on the situation.

The narrative represents Saliha’s optimistic view of existence using natural images. Rain and locusts are two images which are depicted as blessings of heaven. They stand for a source of concern and maintenance. They are influential and powerful because they stand for vibrant aspirations and dreams intertwined with people’s perspectives on existence. Rain can symbolize rebirth and a character’s existential determination. Thus, it can be considered a life-giving source. It is being used to spotlight the idea that life will continue regardless of any obstacles. As for locusts, they stand for virtue, fertility, courage, fearlessness, forward-thinking, happiness, longevity, patience, tranquility, and abundance. Al-Mesheri describes the time when locusts are voraciously feeding on villagers’ crops, trees, and other plants. This feeding devastates the crops and grasses grown for villagers and livestock, causing famine and starvation in Saliha’s village. We are told that Saliha and other villagers come out to fill the bags with locusts to store them as food during times of famine. In exchange, the locusts feed on the crops of the rural farmer, and the latter hunts the former to be a source of food. Badha
Al-Doosari and Faizah Al-Harbi indicate that cosmic significance comes in the narrative in the duality of presence and absence. 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 (Al-Doosari & Al-Harbi, 2020, p. 167). The narrator conveys the opinion of Saliha after a happy grumbling about the abundance of locusts that exceeded the rain: “O my daughter, God, gives from locusts Good and Evil” (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 530). All of Saliha’s perceptions of herself and life are related to changes in her environment, including the people, things, and places around her. Her sense of her surroundings gives her a new philosophical perspective on her existence.

Al-Mesheri depicts the painful life choices for women who live on the margins of survival. Saliha decides to complain about the autocracy of Amer to Al-Fakeeh (the jurist) as the head of the village council. However, she is not allowed to join the council because she is a woman, and she confronts her autocratic opponent. The members of the village council are men; therefore any issues that concern women of the village are in the hands of men alone. Women are not allowed to take part, and if their presence in their community is required, their place is naturally outside the council (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 569). Ironically, as the narrator represents the situation of Saliha’s complaint about Amer, he simultaneously portrays the sight of a rooster who chased a hen, besieging her in the corner while she was screaming and running away. However, in the end, the hen gives in to the rooster, symbolizing an imposition of men’s power over women. (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 575).

The priest’s hypocrisy is exposed as he exploits the naivety and ignorance of the women that fall into his spiritual care. The narrator tells of this secondary event to reinforce the significance of the gender conflict. The man gives himself the right to exercise his coercive absolutism over the women. Furthermore, this incident plays an essential function in the narrative structure. It establishes the argument against Amer’s tyranny in front of villagers. Thus, Saliha must confront the patriarchal view that describes women as being “deficient and powerless,” and she “went after her desire” (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 535). At the jurist council, she turns the conflict and self-awareness from the subjective level to the communal level when the villagers confront Amer about his evil deeds. She blames him for the guilt of killing the cow despite his desperate attempts to evade the truth and accuse the villagers (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 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?” (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 577). She also confronts Al-Fakeeh (the jurist) and blames him because he tried to help Amer. He tried 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 to oblige Amer to pay compensation to her.

Saliha’s social choice also addresses the philosophy of socialization espoused by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). They explain that all humans are born into “symbolic universes” (Berger & Luckmann,1966, p. 96) that have been institutionalized as “reality.” Berger and Luckmann describe the possibility of achieving what they call “individualism” as a combination of an awareness of choice between conflicting reality and identities and the ability to construct oneself from available choices (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 171). Consequently, socialization is the process by which the new individual adopts that society, making it his or her reality. This socialization is reached mainly through the intercession of significant others in which the individual identifies with their roles and attitudes and ultimately with their world, resulting in a coherent identity. Arguably, Saliha is far from internalizing her society and accepting it as “reality.” She struggles to identify herself and define her existence. Her resistance is mainly to achieve self-recognition.

Al-Mesheri shows different forms of struggle in the greater goal of survival. The narrative portrays 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 he is a generous man whose nobility and kindness can be recognized everywhere, specifically his treatment of broken hands. He treats the children of the village as if they are his children. He refuses to take wages from Saliha, saying: "Oh, daughter, the children of the village are my children, they are a gift of God?" (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 544) Marzouq’s benevolent nature does not stop Amer's greediness from harming the land that he had usurped with the testimony of false witnesses for not having a written contract (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 653). However, Amer's fiendish 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 (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 654). Overcome with existential struggle, 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 novel's heroine, and Marzouq was strong enough to confess what he had done. Later, he is set free and survives as Amer’s daughter, Azza, forgives him. Azza is portrayed as the opposite of her father as she possesses natural goodness. Marzouq finally chooses to exist for his salvation which reflects the existentialist principle that humans should live according to how they as individuals see fit.

The scene of Amer’s murder at the hands of Marzouq embodies a functional significance to the narrative discourse. On the one hand, it reflects the social stereotype in the village culture of appreciating those who take their rights into their own hands. The scene also depicts a society that establishes governance based on collective opinion. Marzouq becomes the savior 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;" then Marzouq becomes the hero who “is referred to whenever the eye sees him: This is the one who killed Amer and saved us from his evils” (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 665). However, Marzouq regrets killing Amer, considering his deed a devilish one: "Yesterday, he was awaiting execution, but today his heart shines with the love of life, he promises himself to plant the land of Amer" (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 668). The narrator represents the quality of life and death as an objective equivalent for Marzouq to atone for his guilt.

On the other hand, Amer’s death shows that contextual obstacles constrain the human quest for meaning making and subjectivity. Saliha’s journey to assert her existence transgresses cultural and social constraints symbolized by the marriage system and the existence of the oppressing subject, the figure of Amer in this case. Thus, the story's theme aligns with de Beauvoir's feminist existentialism. The story of Saliha is about the tension between existential status and social conditions constraining it. Saliha undergoes existential trouble and thus performs an inner struggle to justify existential freedom and its limits. She rediscovers and accepts the absolute freedom that social and cultural constraints had denied her. In this story, Amer's death means the destruction of those constraints so that women can live freely in asserting their existence as independent subjects, not as the oppressed Other.

The concept of sisterhood is another critical factor that influences the development of Saliha’s opinion about existential freedom. Saliha and Azza (Amer’s daughter) met each other during a shopping trip, becoming close friends soon after. Azza is the opposite of her father, as she has natural goodness. The two women characters, Saliha and Azza, need and complete each other like two sides of a coin. Saliha, therefore, stands for Sartre’s third mode of existential being, “being-for-others.” Both women form their deep views of what it means to be women in their own ways. Their individual opinions and affinities set them apart psychologically, if not socially, from patriarchal communities. They create vital connections that last forever. Saliha embodies the existentialist philosophy of Karl Theodor Jaspers concerning humans and their environment. Jaspers says that a person manages what is next to them and only with the support of this environment can they achieve goals and become a complete person in the world:
“There is no truth through which alone I could reach the object aimed at. I take part in what the others are and are responsible for what exists besides me…. Therefore, I reach the goal of my existence only if I understand what is around me” (Jaspers, 1932, p. 226). Saliha understands that human beings are limited by relationships and their surroundings. Therefore her bond with Azza allows for a sense of belonging for Saliha, who feels isolated and alone. A sense of belonging is essential to all women, and acceptance from the group can help individuals show acceptance and growth within themselves. Belonging prioritizes a harmonious existence where women respect and empower each other.

The narrative terminates by presenting how one’s ontological conflict deviates from one’s ability to embrace a larger dimension of defying the coercive chronological evolution of human existence. Saliha collapses when her house is destroyed as the municipal construction works to build a new road. This new road must pass through Saliha’s house, resulting in the removal of her house. It is an end filled with cries and distress. She remains silent, not speaking, wiping away her tears, and the sounds of the house’s destruction “shakes the ears, as if it is tearing down the ribs” (Al-Mesheri, 1998, p. 726). Saliha’s determination falls apart because she is still attached to her house as part of her being. It is a symbol of her struggle against patriarchal subjugation. Saliha is defeated at the hands of social change. This is represented in the self-conflict when the individual finds themselves subjugated and compelled to accept the conditions and circumstances of society. We are told that Saliha’s house was robbed again. Al-Mesheri ends the novel with the scene of Saliha’s collapse, leaving readers curious: Was the determined self that Saliha fought for crushed?

Overcome with existential struggle, Saliha defiantly chooses to exist for her salvation. Arguably, although Saliha lost her house, she still owned her land, her children, and her independent self. We are told that she surpasses others (males of her village); she is not a woman whom social norms have crushed. Her awareness about herself and life is related to changes in their environment, including the people, things, and places around her. Her sense of surroundings gives her a new philosophical perspective on her existence. She will persist in asserting her existential freedom and existence because the result of asserting freedom, as de Beauvoir and Sartre suggested, is not the point of human freedom; in fact, freedom can only be practiced if there exist obstacles. Kaufmann notes an existentialist principle: “Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself…Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life” (Kaufmann, 1975, p. 291). Existentialism, thus, emphasizes that individuals should live their own life according to what they see as appropriate.

Conclusion

The novel Saliha derives its specific content from a patriarchal society defined by gender division. Even though Al Mesheri’s novel reflects the oppression of women under patriarchy, the author focuses on and highlights issues that relate to his perspective. Al-Mesheri’s primary concern is to voice his resentment against gender and class inequality within the domains of Saudi Arabia, by granting the story’s heroine voice and control over herself. Al-Mesheri is simply giving us his worldview, one influenced by his background and his own experience as a Saudi man living in a patriarchal society. It could be argued that Al-Mesheri probes the influence of ideas about the women’s liberation movement. He seeks to broaden women's self-awareness and challenge traditional stereotypes of women as passive, dependent, and irrational. Traditionalist beliefs and time-honored social customs are reasons for the slow pace of change with regards to women’s issues. Al-Mesheri wants literature to reflect the cultural pressures that shape women's social roles and diversify women's images that are often limited to virtuous and vicious stereotypes. The power of male authority tends to restrict the freedom and rights of women characters especially in closed places such as villages. Men contribute to the idea of dictatorial patriarchy in society; they are the sources of power, the
providers of the best opinions, and the breadwinners. Al-Mesheri’s heroine succeeds in overcoming some of these social obstacles and continues her struggle against other unresolved issues.

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 fundamental rights as human beings. In the world of Al-Mesheri’s novel Salīha, we have witnessed the harmful 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 men’s domination and women's submission. However, the novel describes the women characters’ struggle for existence and redemption from past life traumas and their beginning down a new path. Hence, it gives meaning to existence and presence in the world. The time allotted to the individual is between birth and death. In the fleeting period of life, one must satisfy one's soul. The novel awakens the value of life by exploring the idea that life must go on no matter what.

It is important to emphasize the fact that this Saudi male novelist has demanded freedom for Saudi women on the grounds that he believes that women have the right to be involved in all aspects of society. In his time, Al-Mesheri was considered to be the first great defender of women’s rights in his novels, as is clear from his works, which pay a great deal of attention to women’s issues. 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, it must also inform literary works produced to express that consciousness. Literature helps us to learn from others' experiences. This assumption supports the notion that the dialectical relationship between literature, the natural world, and history is shaped through the authors' mediation.

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