

November 2024

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Recommended Citation

Abou Adel, Mohammed; Mohamed, Amr M.; and Altwaiji, Mubarak (2024) "The Representation of Women with Disabilities in Shahira Al-Hasan's Cochlea's Secrets," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 26: Iss. 6, Article 8.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol26/iss6/8>

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The Representation of Women with Disabilities in Shahira Al-Hasan's *Cochlea's Secrets*

By Mohammed Abou Adel¹, Amr M. Mohamed², and Mubarak Altwaiji³

Abstract

This study examines the representation of women living with disabilities in Shahira Al-Hasan's novel *Cochlea's Secrets*. This is an important endeavor as it highlights fiction's role in advocating for women with disabilities, particularly in the Arab region. Such a study is crucial for increasing awareness and support for women with disabilities, especially in literary writing. Also, worldwide readers can learn about the impact of Arab novelists in supporting women with disabilities. Fiction, like the media, plays a pivotal role in promoting the status of women living with disabilities and enhancing their societal role. By addressing this topic from the perspective of an Arab narrative, the study aims to highlight the contributions of Arab novels in addressing injustices against women living with disabilities and exploring opportunities for their empowerment. The research adopts a structural-formative approach by studying characters' psychological and social relationships within their environment. This approach aligns with the study's emphasis on understanding the portrayal of women with disabilities in the Arabic novel by examining the psychological impact of their interactions within society. The article also integrates a subjective narrative voice an explicit feminist methodology that validates lived experiences as both the personal and the political. Research in the Arab region remains incomplete thus leaving a gap in the understanding of the experiences of women with disabilities and their societal roles. A second feature of the research examines how this topic is portrayed in narratives by offering a fresh yet underappreciated perspective, namely Arab fiction's portrayal of women with disabilities, their psychological worlds, their suffering and obstacles, and their potential for sustainable growth. The paper also seeks to reveal how Arab novelistic innovation bridges the gender gap, eliminates discrimination, and ends violence against disabled women. It stresses the significance of empowering disabled women for Arab societies to achieve the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by meeting their psychological and physical needs as one crucial dimension of sustainable

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development. Rehabilitation and empathizing with disabled women are crucial features of society's growth and in achieving gender justice.

Keywords: Women with disabilities, Feminism, Fiction, Gender, Sustainability

Introduction

Globally, more than one billion people have some form of disability. Women who are 18 years of age and older have a prevalence rate of 19.2% with 12 %of men which represents one in five of the population (UN Women, 2018). The suffering female body is largely outside the Arabic literary imagery, and little Arab theoretical work has been done on the intersection of gender and health well-being (Alshammari, 2021; Hamdar, 2010; Richardson, 2016). Additionally, Alshammari (2022) stated that many Arabic texts center women's experiences through memorable protagonists, illustrating their place in society and oppression. However, Hamdar (2010) points out that women with physical disabilities have been absent from Arab women's writing since the late nineteenth century. Additionally, Alshammari (2022) stated that many Arabic texts center women's experiences through memorable protagonists, illustrating their place in society and oppression. Despite abundant women protagonists in Arabic literature, narratives about women with disabilities remain rare.

Since women with disabilities are isolated, they are unable to gain enough awareness in mainstream society to advocate for solutions to their problems (Barile, 2002). Dibernard (1996), a feminist educator who attended a festival for women with disabilities and was inspired to advocate for their support, illustrates why researchers are encouraged to choose topics that resonate with their experiences. She includes literature authored by women with disabilities in her teaching sessions to integrate their voices into societal discourse. A lack of understanding regarding her experiences and emotions as someone with a disability limits our capacity to provide her with the necessary care and support. This somewhat personal approach links novelistic creation and literary criticism to society by articulating its challenges and fostering artistic development. In this context, a nuanced portrayal of the inner experiences of girls with disabilities in novels becomes pivotal. It enables me to forge stronger connections with her, facilitate a mutual understanding, and guide her towards personal growth and empowerment.

It is essential to understand how the Arabic novel raises awareness about the imperative to empower and support women with disabilities in order to integrate them in the development and prosperity of Arab society. In impoverished nations, women with disabilities are often neglected the most. Marginalized and discriminated against because of both their gender and disability, women with disabilities in both in Arab societies and globally face significant challenges (Yosfi, 2019). However, women's empowerment in the post-WWII era has become globally significant due to the importance of women in sustainable development and in international human rights discourse. Development across social, political, and economic sectors (Aufi, 2023). UN decisions that empowered women through gender equality, as outlined in international human rights law, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) also benefited the Arab region (United Nations, 2019).

According to National Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia supports the empowerment of women with disabilities (Mohammed, 2021). Similarly, in 2013, Iraq ratified this agreement to address the urgent need for empowering women with disabilities. This step was especially significant given Iraq's tribal societal structure, in which the authority of men historically dominated women

(Bayati, 2022). This study offers a novel perspective on women with disabilities in Arab fiction by analyzing a portrayal in Shahira Al-Hasan's *Cochlea's Secrets* through the lens of literary theory. The semiotic approach examines the semantic aspects of textual language, whereas the structural-formative approach delves into character psychology and societal dynamics. Moreover, the discussion below briefly introduces some prior studies indirectly related to the topic. However, it's notable that the Arab literary landscape lacks a comprehensive study addressing the empowerment of women with disabilities in Arabic fiction.

Hall (2015) emphasizes the humanitarian message of disability literature by urging for the acceptance and equal treatment of individuals with disabilities. Likewise, the study presented by Puthiyedath (2021) sheds light on the pivotal and pioneering role played by fiction in advocating for women's empowerment during the early decades of the nineteenth century. This period marked the emergence of pioneering efforts, albeit characterized by timidity, reactionary attitudes, and incompleteness. Puthiyedath highlights Brontë's emphasis on the importance of education for women, envisioning their primary societal roles within the domestic sphere as homemakers and mothers. However, Brontë's novels also convey a forward-looking perspective, advocating for women's engagement in the workforce and their quest for financial independence.

Ahmed (2009) demonstrates that empowering women in fiction serves as a proactive measure toward their empowerment in reality. It showcases literature's significant educational and enlightening role within society. Ahmed illustrates how women characters authentically mirror real-life struggles through examples of Pakistani novelists' creativity. Ultimately, these fictional women achieve independence and contribute to societal progress and sustainable development goals. Continuing, Pfeifer (2020) explores the portrayal of women with disabilities in Agatha Christie's works, revealing themes of inferiority and discrimination. However, she approaches the concept of disability more broadly than the traditional understanding through encompassing disabilities that result from the control of patriarchal authority in society. This includes disabilities arising from age and inability to reproduce, as well as disabilities resulting from sexual encounters with men. In contrast, Hall (2002) suggests that disability, metaphorically speaking, encompasses women's experiences of marginalization, which impedes their ability to fulfill their roles effectively within society. In other words, the suffering of Arab women is not limited to physical disabilities. Still, there is a societal disability caused by societal oppression and patriarchal authority that limits their roles to early marriage and preoccupation with having and raising children, preventing women from contributing to society in a way that achieves sustainable development.

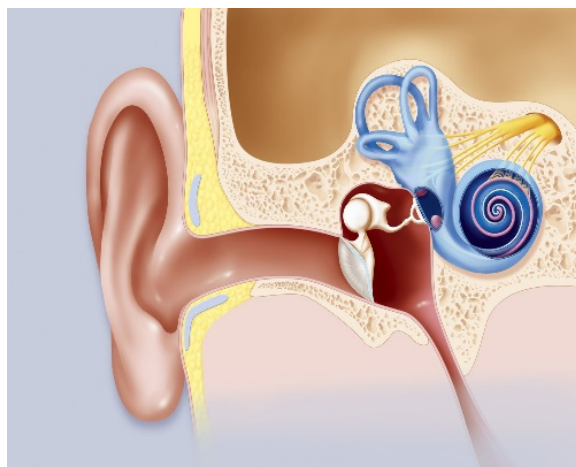
To save their daughters from what they consider to be immoral situations, Arab parents feel pressured to marry them off before they reach adulthood—a theme that is emphasized throughout *Cochlea's Secrets*. The assumption that parents know best frequently results in marriages that do not involve the bride or groom's consent. The narrative mirrors conventional Arab perspectives about matrimony. Even though polygamous partnerships are becoming less popular, they are still portrayed as socially legitimate.

Aesthetics of The Title of *Cochlea's Secrets*

The study emphasizes the significance of paratexts, such as titles and dedications, in influencing the reader's comprehension of the primary text. Similar to how margins engage with the main content, these paratextual elements are essential in contextualizing the story. Considering the margin's dynamic interaction with the central text, the study emphasizes paratexts (including the title and dedication). In the novel's central narrative, they too were overlooked, akin to women

in society. Now they must be recognized. Literary works and fictional characters often have titles that reflect their content (Al-Jazar, 1998), whereas people's names are often arbitrary and may not correlate with their personalities (Fakhouri, 1990). This is because individuals are named at birth before their traits are known. Thus, understanding a novel's title can aid in analyzing and comprehending its content (Hamdawi, 1997) so we examine the title *Cochlea's Secrets*.

Figure 1: Anatomy and Function of the Cochlea, n.d.



The cochlea is the inner part of the ear that houses the hearing section (Figure 1). It comprises a spiral chamber that has about 2.75 turns in humans. Due to their similarities, the term “cochlea” derives from the ancient Latin word “cochlea,” which means “snail shell.” In biology, mollusks and turtles possess protective outer shells known as “cochlea.”(Wikipedia, 2024) The word entered into Arabic with its Latin pronunciation and accentuation, resulting in the term: So-and-so is isolated (*Mutaqawqi*), indicating withdrawal and a reluctance to socialize. Affected by their psychological state, some individuals find themselves compelled to isolate, resembling a snail withdrawing into its shell in response to innate anxiety and fear. Similarly, a turtle feels safe and protected within its cochlea throughout its life. This phenomenon also extends to hearing-impaired women who may avoid socializing to avoid embarrassment. Therefore, cochlea is cleverly employed in its terminological and linguistic senses to add depth and enhance the text.

The second part of the title, *Secrets*, alludes to the hidden realms of privacy among women with disabilities, which the study unveils. This paper explores the psychological worlds of disabled

women through delving into psychological, social, and physical demands enforced upon them as they strive to become active citizens. The allure of *Secrets* lies in its enigmatic visual and expressive qualities by captivating readers and stirring their innate curiosity. The title's opening, *Cochlea*, enhances the mystery by portraying a woman with disabilities and the secrecy of her life. Hayat reads in her mother's diary:

I take out of my bag a large, pink conch shell, a gift I had thought a lot about before buying. The conch whispers magical secrets; it would be delightful if you could hear them! I bring it close to her ear; she listens carefully, then opens her honey-colored eyes in astonishment! Yes, the conch whispers! (Al-Hasan, 2020, p. 120)

In this scene, the mother's description of the cochlea and its secrets aligns with the novel's title which implies a symbolic connection between her daughter and the body part. . In the novel, Hayat reads her mother's diaries that vividly portray her anguish and daily struggles as she copes with her daughter's condition. As her daughter's hearing gradually diminishes, leading to instances like missing the bus horn and enduring her teacher's persistent complaints, the mother begins to face the challenges posed by Hayat's deafness.

Shahira Al Hassan's novel *Cochlea's Secrets* revolves around three main characters: Hayat, Azad, and Nawar. Hayat represents a girl with hearing disabilities who seeks to challenge social tradition. Her friend Azad reflects on women's complexities, revealing the oppressive challenges in society. On the other hand, her friend Nawar represents the new generation seeking freedom and expression, pushing Hayat to achieve her ambitions. Together, these characters shed light on the struggles of women with disabilities in Arab countries, the need for continuous support, and the necessity of activating the role of Arab women with disabilities in contributing to sustainable development.

Cochlea's Secrets refers to the hidden psychological suffering of the girl with a hearing disability, whose pride prevents her from revealing it to others. However, with its ability to uncover the secrets of the human soul, the novel was able to take us to the psychological worlds of the heroine with a hearing disability. The cochlea symbolizes the reticent girl, as she resembles the cochlea in her closure on herself. What reinforces this meaning is that the cochlea resembles the drawing of the ear in its convolutions.

Aesthetics of the Dedication

To understand *Cochlea's Secrets*, it is essential to comprehend the significance of the dedication that precedes the narrative. This heartfelt expression that is rooted in the author's personal experience emphasizes the need to view the novel and its dedication as interconnected (Bilabid, 2008; Adel, 2019). The novel's humanitarian message and support for women with disabilities are evident in its dedication. Al-Hasan dedicates the novel to individuals who triumph over physical or mental obstacles to achieve their goals, as expressed in the dedication:

This book is dedicated to those with remarkable resilience who haven't allowed physical or mental limitations to thwart their ambitions. They've embraced opportunities, excelled in various fields, and become a source of inspiration for others. My heartfelt dedication goes out to all

those who've supported their rights, encouraged them, and ignited their passion to succeed and create. (5)

Shahira Hasan avoids the derogatory term “people with disabilities” due to its negative connotation. This expression reinforces their inadequacy and powerlessness by reminding them of their flaws. Instead, Al-Hasan refers to them as “people of high determination,” a popular Arabic accolade. She emphasizes the positive, reinforcing in them and the reader's imagination the idea of their immense potential that compensates for their impairment, urging them to regard this designation as a practical behavior. The author refers to them as “people of high determination.” In this way, Hasan emphasizes their ability to transform challenges into opportunities and adversity into blessings. People of determination inspire others by overcoming adversity rather than burdening society with their infirmities. As two exceptional people who overcame their hearing difficulties, the novel's primary characters, Hayat and Nawar may inspire generations of women with disabilities.

Image Aesthetics and Color Symbolism

Women with hearing loss often rely on visual cues, such as colors, to compensate for the loss of auditory experiences. Accordingly, the study investigates the symbolism of colors and their capacity to enrich literary works, subtly enhancing their intended meaning creatively and indirectly that should not be overlooked (Chakravarty, 2015). Hayat likes dark colors:

After trying several pieces, she buys a few, opting for light colors and modern designs. She never wanted to attract anyone's attention, especially after the scars of the illness. She always preferred hiding behind her dark clothes, shrouded in her emotionless smile. But now she wishes someone would see her in colors that complement her, with vibrant accessories that empower her. Can it be that she has started seeking perfection in appearance to hide her flaws? (55)

After Nawar's encouraging talk, Hayat, who has a hearing impairment, changes her color preferences to colorful and light hues, reflecting a positive change in her attitude and feelings. As her confidence grows, so does her self-acceptance. Hayat's mood and psychology improved with her new choice of clothing and color shift. Considering that even the protagonist's closest friends are unaware of the inner world of a woman with hearing disability (Toxirovna, 2020), delving into the novel's use of color offers a precious insight into the psychological state and profound emotions of the fictional characters.

The novel accentuates the importance of sight as a compensatory mechanism for the absence of sound; Hayat must focus on lip movement to understand speech. Individuals with hearing problems tend to rely on visual cues more than the rest of society. This is beautifully illustrated in the wedding scene, where the perspective of the bride Nawar and her groom vividly portrays this: “The groom enters joyfully. He places the engagement ring on his bride's finger and adorns her with a delicate gold parure. He's also deaf, unable to hear the song's melody, yet the beat of their love is sufficient for them to dance to its rhythm with innocence! The surrounding commotion of joy may not reach them, but the joy reflected in their eyes certainly does.” (104)

The reader's imagination conjures visual scenes without sound, reminiscent of old silent movie scenes. This is how the Arabic novel depicts the world of women with hearing disabilities.

Life's dialogue unfolds visually, a language perceived through sight rather than hearing. Due to her deafness, she perceives communication through various means—observing physical gestures, written exchanges via electronic messages, or diary entries that occupy a significant portion of the novel. Therefore, Hayat's inner thoughts, akin to monologues, often dominate over dialogues.

Challenges Faced By Arab Women with Disabilities

Despite numerous studies advocating for Arab women's empowerment, few have addressed the challenges disabled Arab women face in navigating societal norms and religious constraints, both in their professional and personal lives (Bou Ledras, 2021; Peter et al., 2018). Due to their customs and traditions, Arab women have unique qualities compared to other women with disabilities, especially when it comes to contributing to sustainable societal development.

The novel *Cochlea's Secrets* portrays the journey of a girl with a disability who is forced to relocate to Canada with her divorced mother following their separation from her father during her childhood. Such a start in life will negatively affect a person's psychological formation. Later on, Hayat faces difficulties within Arab society when she has to move back to her father's home and share living space with his third wife after her mother's death. Al- Hasan writes:

She once bought small brass bells, reminiscent of those adorned the balcony by her mother's room during her childhood. Each time the door opened, their delicate chimes would dance, and she felt as though she could hear their gentle melody, just as the wind used to play with her mother's bells. Yet, her stepmother quickly grew irritated by them, recalling the day she spoke to her in haste and frustration, resenting the bells for their disturbance and arguing that a deaf person should not concern herself with such matters. Hayat remembers shedding tears that day, stowing the bells away in her mother's notebook box alongside her cherished photos. (113)

This recollection sheds light on the experiences of disabled women during childhood. Hayat must come to understand and acknowledge the implications of her experiences as she approaches adulthood and prepares to engage with society. While both boys and girls encounter family challenges, it is crucial to provide greater attention to girls with disabilities. Hayat's most significant challenge is her father's remarrying. This event leads to the disintegration of her family with her mother relocating to Canada and subsequently passing away. Now, Hayat finds herself back in her father's home, where his third wife, unable to provide care or acknowledge her emotions, complicates matters further.

In contrast to men, women are often not permitted to travel alone, even between cities, which poses a challenge for disabled women like Hayat as her father opposes a visit to Dubai to meet her aunt from Canada.

In the aftermath of a devastating road accident that leaves Azad, the other main protagonist, deaf and takes the life of his wife, he withdraws from the world. Through the experiences of this disabled character, we gain deeper insights into the character of Hayat as he is concerned about teaching Hayat due to his deafness and her lack of a veil: "I was apprehensive. After losing my hearing, I was less sure of my choices as if the universe had stopped and nothing was left to do." (172).

The young man is quiet, reluctant, weak-willed, and unpassionate, but Hayat changes his mind. She was reared in Canada and does not wear a veil which defies orthodox Arab social and religious standards. This departure is noteworthy, especially in countries like Oman, where veiling is profoundly ingrained in society despite a visible shift as more women go without. Finally, Hayat's father changes his mind and allows her to travel to Dubai. Hayat feels lonely when her lover does not meet her at the airport or hotel. This absence intensifies her feelings of unworthiness which is exacerbated by her impairments and a pervasive sense of inadequacy. With Ayham, her cousin, seemingly hesitant to consider marriage while she remains deaf, Hayat questions the priorities of Ayham's mother and sister, who are actively seeking a spouse for him despite her presence: "Yes, I forgot... Who am I to marry spoiled engineer Ayham? How can I entertain him? I can't hear!" (Al-Hasan, 2020, p. 85). This outlook suggests a fear of what comes after experiencing a hearing loss (post-hearing loss), an apprehension that she might burden both herself and others with an abundance of love. Hayat worries that it will be difficult for her to meet the duties of a wife and mother, especially communication with her prospective spouse.

Exploring her mother's grief and anxiety about Hayat, we examine her early childhood when she cannot care for herself. The trials of caring for her deaf daughter teach the mother compassion and love. When Hayat describes sleeping with headphones, because of her deafness, her mother is intrigued and worried, but she does not ask further. After it happens again, she softly says, "I wanted to hear you at night. I want to wake up if you cry," whereupon her mother hugs her and cries" (170). Such scenes vividly portray the mutual sympathy shared between a mother and her daughter as the struggles intensify and her sorrow deepens for those who love her, especially her mother. Although, as a girl with a disability, she finds solace in the sympathy and concern directed towards her, Hayat is tormented by the looks of pity and sadness that serve as constant reminders of her disability. Thus, the mother becomes her daughter's unwavering ally as she faces the prospect of total hearing loss. She works tirelessly to mitigate its effects and gradually comes to terms with it. Refusing to back down, Hayat's mother confronts the situation head-on by helping her daughter to find inner strength and adapt to her disability with resilience. The novel illustrates the vital role of parents in protecting their daughters with lifelong disabilities. Her regret over the oversight of vaccinating her daughter against mumps, which resulted in her daughter's deafness, fuels an even stronger determination to protect her. Hayat's mother reflects, "I was searching for questions to silence my conscience. I believed this illness had a vaccine for prevention. How did she contract it? Was it my fault? All these questions perplex me, killing me slowly. The doctor sensed my confusion, or perhaps my eyes betrayed me. He pointed to a wall full of papers, then explained that mumps is caused by a virus that causes inflammation." (152). As she struggles to come to terms with the fallout of her choices, this scene emphasises her emotions of shame and powerlessness, underscoring the burden of mother responsibility.

Arab parents want their daughters to marry before adulthood to avoid moral faults that could lead to murder. Thus, they feel responsible for marrying their daughters. In some rural, non-urban societies, a woman may be married to the first suitor without her consent under the ruse that her parents know what is best for her. Marrying a spouse who protects and takes responsibility for her is expected to bring her happiness and care in her old years. The novel emphasizes marriage and reflects Arab views. The fact that Salem's first wife had no children makes Hayat's mother's diaries particularly interesting. Arab polygamous partnerships are socially justified by this story, especially as they are becoming less popular.

In Arab cultures, particularly conservative ones, parents are the ones who arrange marriages for their daughters. Their esteemed status commands respect from their daughters

which often prevents them from questioning or opposing their parents' decisions. This authority is more pronounced over women than men as the concern of a girl reaching adulthood without marriage is a far worse outcome than that of a young man. Thus, Hayat's father's insistence on her early marriage, regardless of the age gap or marital status of potential suitors, stems from his concern that her disability will hinder her chances of finding a partner:

You're a young woman, and I am concerned about your future. I worry about you just like any other parent would. Despite receiving proposals from several young men, you haven't accepted any. Each time, you dismiss them before meeting them! ... Recently, a thirty-year-old man has proposed to you. He's completed his education as you wished and holds a position in the royal court. He says it with a bright smile, adding with the same enthusiasm: Plus, he can hear! Not seeing any reaction from Hayat, he continues with less excitement: He was previously married, but his luck turned sour with his deceitful wife. He's a devoted father; he wouldn't risk his child's upbringing with her. Hayat's father seems deeply touched by the story, showing unwavering belief in the husband's innocence (158-159).

The father talks about the qualities of Hayat's suitor, stressing his ability to hear. It may seem insignificant, but he wants to assure Hayat that he is willing to marry someone with disabilities. Having her parents insist on her marriage as soon as possible adds further psychological pressure to an Arab woman with a disability. Despite Hayat's close matches with her preferences, her parents are puzzled by her refusal of suitors. They argue that it should be enough for him to have disregarded her permanent disability and consented to marry her, thus demonstrating his willingness to endure the hardships caused by her deafness. Her marriage is viewed as the greatest challenge in an environment where even non-disabled women may find it difficult.

In Arab countries, a girl with a disability often elicits a mix of awe and compassion from people: "The seller frowns upon the idea of a customer wearing headphones!" (54) Some may exhibit sympathetic behavior, masking their pitying gazes. The seller continues loudly promoting his merchandise by repeating words successively to ensure they are heard, to which Hayat responds: "I heard him" (. 54). This behavior illustrates the attitude towards women with hearing disabilities. Although Hayat carefully hides her earphones in her hair, her gaze inadvertently draws attention to her congenital condition and gives her away. Hayat reads in her mother's diaries:

She made sure to arrange her hair, trying to hide the damn hearing aid, but I dare not admit to her that I knew about it, nor do I admit it to myself. I am like someone waiting for the train of change at a station with no tracks! I know she doesn't hear me as she used to, and I'm certain her hearing has weakened, but something inside me prays that my voice will remain by her side, shielding her in the cold of circumstances. I fear the day she'll stop using it. (99)

Given the sensitivity of the topic, her hesitation to talk about her impairment for fear of upsetting herself and others may cause psychological discomfort. Such a debate requires courage, mindfulness, and compassion to promote healing without further hurting. Her parents' obsession

with keeping her from going out, working, and traveling risks Hayat to become unable to care for herself and contribute to society.

Opportunities for Arab Women with Disabilities

For an Arab woman with a disability, a compassionate mother is an important arena of support provided she (and the father figure) are not overbearing, crushing her agency. Fueled by innate maternal love and deeply rooted within the fabric of Arab societal norms, her mother stands as a beacon of strength and guidance. Embracing cultural traditions and responding to the inherent authority figures within their close-knit community, including family, relatives, and neighbors, this nurturing presence becomes a cornerstone of empowerment and resilience for a woman with a disability through shaping her journey with profound care and determination. Criticism and opposition from society often confront a mother who, feeling vulnerable, considers abandoning her daughter with a disability in order to remarry and start anew. This is why many mothers choose the path of selflessness by sacrificing their aspirations to provide continuous care and support for their daughters thus demonstrating deep dedication and resilience.

The support network of a woman with a disability plays a pivotal role in facilitating her journey through life. In this novel, the mother emerges as a beacon of positivity by actively strategizing and envisioning her daughter's future and ensuring she can fulfill her societal role like any other member of society, despite her disability. Al-Hasan writes of the mother's perspective:

Hayat has insisted on attending all evening ballet classes with me for months. She claims she's mastered the basics and dreams of becoming a professional ballet dancer, just like me! I don't know if I should be happy about it or worry! I want her to become a doctor, engineer, or science teacher, but it doesn't bode well. I've never heard of a deaf doctor! And have you ever heard of a deaf ballet dancer? (118)

The mother is actively guiding Hayat in her pursuit of suitable paths for her future and carefully considering professions that she could undertake. Despite the challenge of finding occupations that do not rely heavily on hearing, the mother remains determined to explore every possibility for her daughter's success.

The mother's relentless efforts in helping her daughter thrive are paying off as Hayat becomes a teacher at the school for the deaf and mute. She not only inspires her students but also trains them in the art of ballet dancing, demonstrating her unwavering commitment to their education and empowerment: Al-Hasan writes of Hayat:

It feels like a dream come true; whenever I guide one of them, I sense my mother's spirit beside me. I see myself reflecting her dreamy gaze, gentle instructions, and vast experience in every movement. How joyful she would have been to witness my training, just as she once did? (131)

Integrating women with disabilities into society yields reciprocal benefits. It fulfills a psychological need for active participation and contribution. Their involvement energizes and gives them vitality by adding meaning and significance to their lives and evoking cherished memories that bring delight and fulfillment.

The loss of loved ones is particularly challenging for individuals with disabilities, who rely heavily on the love and support they receive from those closest to them, such as their mother and extended family. As a result, the loss of a mother heightens the emotional struggle for individuals with disabilities, adding to their already significant challenges. Hayat's mother strives to support her daughter in overcoming her disability. Hayat reads in her mother's diary after her death:

I cried a lot and felt broken, but then I realized that my tears wouldn't help her or change her situation. So, I decided to create a schedule of trips filled with sounds, hoping they would be ingrained in her memory for when she can no longer hear! One day, I'll be by her to show her pictures of our journeys together. I'll tell her I didn't just sit back and watch; I did my best, and you'll do the same. You'll try to do your best. (116)

In the face of her own impending absence, Hayat's mother remains steadfastly committed to her daughter's welfare. This dedication reveals her wish to make memories with Hayat that go beyond her deafness, demonstrating profound love and the value of perseverance. Amidst this emotional backdrop, Hayat begins her educational journey, learning to navigate the world without her main support.

However, as Nawar once reminded her, Hayat holds a distinct advantage: education. Being a trained teacher and a recognized legal entity in society, her educational background plays a pivotal role in her inclusion in the labor market—a critical step toward empowering women with disabilities in the Arab region, especially in a developing country like theirs where women with disabilities often lack education (United Nations, 2019). Due to her past residency in Canada, Hayat now enjoys a distinct perspective and heightened awareness. This gives her added advantages in navigating the complexities of the Arab region.

In a chapter titled “Half the Cure Lies in Accepting the Disease,” the novel delves into the teacher's character, Nawar, who also has a hearing disability. Nawar embodies the resilient, proactive nature of individuals with disabilities through the showcasing of her capacity to confront and adapt to her condition. As an inspirational teacher to students facing similar challenges of hearing impairment, Nawar exemplifies how individuals can live with and thrive despite their disabilities and make meaningful contributions to society. She refuses to surrender to her disability or feel ashamed of it. Living her life as if she were like anyone else, Nawar draws inspiration and motivation from her disability. This drives her to give more and compensate for any limitations with her continuous achievements. Al-Hasan writes:

Nawar is a generous and confident person. Her hearing loss never dimmed her smile or generosity. This set her apart and made her the most radiant girl on the day of her engagement. It was Hayat's first time attending a wedding ceremony in the Palestinian style. It was a simple gathering at home, where Nawar sat in the living room. She was seated on a chair elevated by a wooden platform, allowing her to shine and capture the attention of all attendees. Her lack of hearing didn't hinder the women from ululating, nor did it prevent the girls from joyfully performing the popular Dabke in the middle of the room. (103-104)

Nawar's wholesome and thoughtful approach to life is what enables her to continue living like any other woman. Nawar transforms her adversity into a gift thus demonstrating her resilience and determination to thrive despite her challenges. Her education is paramount and represents a crucial link to her empowerment. Research consistently emphasizes that the schooling women with disabilities receive has the most profound effect on enhancing their opportunities within society by equipping them with the ability to adeptly manage their lives within their communities (World Government Summit, 2019)

Further, Hayat shares her love for Ayham, her cousin, with Nawar, and Nawar responds with advice and guidance, which helps to strengthen Hayat's self-confidence: Nawar says: "Every deaf girl longs to be with a hearing boy. But being deaf doesn't mean compromising, nor does it make you any less than him. Morally, you're superior. Remember that" (135). Thus, Nawar's supportive presence is reminiscent of Hayat's deceased mother. Like her, Nawar offers a balanced perspective by urging Hayat not to view her disability as a limitation but rather as a unique strength. She assures Hayat that it is precisely this positive mentality that will make her admired by others. Society's tendency to treat women with disabilities with excessive secrecy exacerbates their challenges rather than resolving them. Conversely, a woman's acceptance and understanding of her disability can alleviate the discomfort felt by those around her. Al-Hasan illustrates:

Nawar puts on the hearing aid with confidence. Today Hayat has learned that the lack of hearing is not a flaw. The true flaw lies in our actions that go against moral principles! And the lack of hearing is certainly not a disability. Disability is that which prevents us from enjoying our most beautiful moments with those we love! And today, she found out what the doctor meant when he told her the day she put on the hearing aid - half the cure is accepting the disease. She thought: "He was right then. I wish I had not been so naive as to ignore his words. I have had my share of hearing. How many years of my life will I lose before I accept that I am deaf?" (104-105)

Continuously dwelling on her disability, feeling distraught, and grieving over her limitations only serves to further hinder a woman with disabilities' potential for significant personal and societal accomplishments.

The exaggerated feelings of fear that dominate Arab women with disabilities make them believe that they are unable to enjoy life as others do. This is evident, for example, when Hayat travels to Dubai, as Al-Hasan writes:

Upon her return from the trip to Dubai, everyone eagerly asked: How was the journey? Did you have a good time? Did you ever feel overwhelmed by the hustle and bustle of Dubai? There's a shared curiosity about the experience of a deaf person visiting Dubai. There was a feeling of uneasiness among students regarding such trips. (105)

The questions from the students at the school for the deaf and mute reveal both astonishment and condemnation as they did not expect their teacher to enjoy her travels nor did they believe she

could manage her affairs alone in another country. This negative mentality, which perpetuates disability and the inability to live a normal life, can render women with disabilities dependent on society. Instead of fostering active, independent individuals with strong, confident personalities capable of managing their own affairs, this leads to a constant need for support and care from others. Al-Hasan describes:

Hayat doesn't know where these thoughts come from, but she suspects that most parents of the deaf and mute prefer to shield their children from unnecessary external interactions. Is this truly for their protection? Or is it driven by fear of embarrassment in these unforgiving times? However, in a moment of enthusiasm, she promises her students to take them on a trip to Jebel Sham, showing them that they lack nothing. She wants to show them that they can integrate into society and enjoy life like everyone else. Indeed, half the cure lies in accepting the condition. (106)

Herein lies the problem: parents' excessive concern for their daughters with disabilities coupled with embarrassment about their involvement in various life activities may constrain them, weaken their personalities, and limit their life experiences. This can harm their psychological well-being and social interactions thus making them less able to contribute to societal growth and development. Therefore, Hayat decides that her students who are women should engage in new life experiences to enhance their awareness, boost self-confidence, and fulfill their psychological need for discovery and change. She then informs the school principal about this initiative, "but she did not find any encouragement from her, just a cold smile." The principal dismisses her by refusing to entertain her request due to her deafness and her deep understanding of the potential challenges faced by deaf students. Al-Hasan writes of the principal:

...I suggested to her not to get her hopes up too high, explaining that most students wouldn't even dream of a long trip, let alone deaf students. When I assured her of the students' excitement about the idea, she laughed and said they didn't realize what that could entail. Stressing the importance of their safety, she preferred not to discuss the topic with them again. (106)

This scene serves as a clear illustration of the significant impact a leader can have by either extending a helping hand to women with disabilities to integrate them into society or by restricting and depriving them of the ability to interact positively. The principal's swift rejection of the proposal, which is driven by fear for disabled women students and a desire to avoid any potential responsibility, exemplifies this.

By not recognizing the importance of such an initiative in alleviating psychological distress among women with disabilities and acknowledging their right to participate in enriching activities, true progress cannot be achieved. This necessitates both self-awareness among women with disabilities and support from the surrounding community (Ahmed, 2020). This kind of negative reaction would fail Hayat as she needs someone to encourage and support her important community initiatives. However, she remains resilient against the principal's rejection, who proposes organizing an engaging activity for Deaf Children's Week instead of the trip. Despite her

aversion to the week, which she feels “reminds the whole world of her disabilities,” Hayat reluctantly agrees: “She’s deaf, whether she had hearing before or not! She’s deaf, and this week is a concern whether she likes it or not!” (106). The students’ enthusiasm for this week and constant discussion about its activities force her to hide her opinion for her students’ sake. Thus, despite the school principal’s reluctance, Hayat chooses to organize this event, even though it brings back painful memories. She defies her feelings of fear to ensure her students with disabilities can enjoy the occasion. She wants to be a source of inspiration by orchestrating events that uplift others. Hayat’s personality transforms because of the influence of her teaching colleague Nawar, who is active, positive, and brings about change in those around her with her strong, confident personality. Inspired by Nawar’s optimism, she embarks on a journey to improve her own life and the lives of her students with disabilities. Noticing her students’ apprehension about the trip, she organizes the school outings to help them confront their fears. She wants them to discover the sweetness of life, embrace change, and get out of the cochlea in which they live through engaging in life’s diverse experiences to develop their own personalities. She realizes this is the only way for them to gain skills to help them serve their communities.

Exploring the development of personalities is pivotal in understanding the empowerment of women with disabilities in Arab countries. This discourse is indispensable for breaking the negative stereotypes surrounding those issues and cultivating more constructive and empowering perspectives of people with disabilities. It is important that they make their own decisions and instigate positive changes in their own lives in order to serve both themselves and their communities. In this regard, it is important to identify the sources of change that influence the mindset of Arab women with disabilities. Azad shares insights from his personal experiences thus highlighting the impact of negativity:

When I lost my hearing, I withdrew from everything. I became more sensitive due to the difficulty of communicating with others, to the extent that I refused to attend Friday prayers because I wouldn't be able to hear the sermon! Until, one day, the mosque's imam visited our house and said to me, “I know that hearing is important and may even outweigh other senses in importance.” He reminded me that the Quran prioritizes hearing over vision: (Indeed, the hearing, the sight and the heart - about all those [one] will be questioned) [Al-Isra: 36], (...They were not able to hear, nor did they see) [Hud: 20] (204)

The notable transformation in Azad’s character, despite his deafness, is what we wish for with disabled women. The objective is to empower them to actively participate in society, facilitating their meaningful contributions to its growth and development.

In our Arab-Islamic environment, the Holy Qur’an is the cornerstone of belief that shapes individual convictions and societal norms. Its teachings are deeply ingrained in the fabric of our culture, guiding our actions and perceptions. Thus, any efforts to instigate change must resonate with these fundamental beliefs to gain traction and significance. By honoring and aligning with the principles of the Qur’an, initiatives for change can earn genuine support and credibility to foster a meaningful impact within our community. In the novel, Sheikh Lazd explains the importance of hearing in light of the verses from the Holy Qur’an thus setting the stage for the advice he intends to conclude his speech with:

“But this doesn’t mean surrender. It means that Allah has tested you with a great trial, and you must prove yourself worthy of it. Step up your efforts and make a difference in the world.” His words profoundly impacted my actions and decisions, almost as if I needed someone to recognize the challenges I faced. I didn’t need someone to trivialize them. His words kindled a fresh sense of purpose within us both. (205)

The Sheikh’s words bring about a major shift in Azad, Hayat, and Nawar’s mentalities by strengthening their resolve and calling on them to persevere and not give up. They are being tested because they are special and capable of making positive changes in their world. These dynamics shed light on the nature of the shifts required in Arab societies. For instance, the examination of Arab women with disabilities in fiction reveals that the task of empowerment is a shared responsibility between the legislative authority and society.

The process of empowerment begins with providing the necessary support and opportunities for their advancement. Subsequently, it is incumbent upon the individual to seize these opportunities and cultivate a proactive mindset and strong determination. By enhancing their scientific, economic, and professional qualifications, as suggested by Sharma (2023), they broaden their job prospects and contribute to their empowerment in society, as highlighted by Lehmann (2023). This is evident in Nawar and Hayat as they are two women with disabilities that play vital roles in society. Nawar loves life and teaches the deaf and mute children in a school despite her disability caused by the war as a result of a crazy missile that tore her sister to pieces and left her with no hearing. Al-Hasan writes:

The bombing began, and I do not remember its beginning except that it was violent, a cacophony beyond comparison, unlike the usual threats or intimidation! My sister, our companion, and I quickly fled from that besieged balcony. We ran, gripping each other’s hands tightly, in every direction until we scattered in different directions. When I opened my eyes, all I could see were the remnants of my sister. Her dismembered body surrounded me from every angle. I called out with words pouring from my throat, words I doubt I truly comprehended. (45)

Due to her perseverance, resilience, and determination, Nawar is a superb teacher for students with hearing impairments and speech disabilities. She demonstrates that surrendering to adversity is not an option for women with disabilities. As she faces her challenges head-on, she overcomes the pain of her hearing loss and the loss of her sister while carving a path forward. The reader gains a deep understanding of her character and experiences as they immerse themselves in her world. The intimate connection is crucial to instigating change and providing effective care for women with disabilities who need psychological and social support as well as understanding.

Conclusion

Fiction often reflects reality and can inspire a vision of a better future where women with disabilities are seen as equal members of society with the freedom to make important life choices. Both ancient and modern fiction strive for progress and depict characters not as they are but as they should be. This futuristic lens is evident in works like Volga's *The Liberation of Sita* and

Yashodhara, which celebrate strong and courageous female characters, as noted by Ruchi and Jha (2023).

Cochlea's Secrets contributes to the empowerment of women with disabilities by highlighting their experiences and exploring the intricacies of their lives, including their psychological depth. This fosters greater awareness of their challenges and helps identify their specific needs within Arab societies. Ultimately, this awareness-building process aims to equip them with the necessary preparation and qualifications to actively contribute to societal development.

This study highlights the social constraints faced by Arab women with disabilities. Unlike men with disabilities, women with disabilities are often greatly restricted by fear. Typically, disabled women must have permission from guardians for even the simplest rights, such as leaving the house. Further marginalization can result from this limitation in education and employment. In addition, families lack effective communication and openness. The paper also highlights the positive impacts of the support received by Arab women with disabilities that enables them to overcome obstacles, achieve empowerment, and contribute to society. Moreover, this study unveils the aesthetics of expression within marginalized paratexts, including titles, dedications, and colors. It illustrates these elements; strategic utilization and pivotal role in conveying the psychological nuances of Arab women with disabilities. Furthermore, it delves into how marginalized women with disabilities can contribute to societal development and foster sustainable progress.

Because fiction and literary studies are important platforms for social awareness, this study encourages writers to focus on the positive and effective characters of women with disabilities. Furthermore, supporting creative women living with disabilities to write autobiographical novels that express their unique experiences, because they are the most capable of raising awareness of their problems. In contrast, literary criticism should be directed towards studying creativity in the humanities by publishing scientific papers, conducting seminars, forums, and conferences, and establishing electronic platforms focused on the literature of Arab women with disabilities.

This study also emphasises the need for a comprehensive governmental plan to protect disabled women's rights and well-being. It recommends inclusive policies and targeted efforts to improve specialised services and support systems. Furthermore, the study suggests that disabled women should actively participate in policy making.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge that no content generated by AI technologies was used in this study. We utilized Grammarly solely to enhance the readability of our writing.

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