English Summary of Dissertation

Women's Writing in the Middle East: Subverting the Image of the 'Third World Woman' in Sahar Khalifeh's Writings

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Significance of the dissertation

The central contribution of the dissertation and its primary goal is to bridge the gap between literary production in the Middle East and Western feminist frameworks, particularly focusing on the representation of Middle Eastern women in the selected works of Sahar Khalifeh. By exploring certain recurring images and themes in Middle Eastern women's writing, the analysis could reveal a shared imagistic and thematic coherence among female writers from both Middle Eastern and Western contexts. As Gilbert and Gubar observed in their book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000), "reading the writing of women from Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë to Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath, we were surprised by the coherence of theme and imagery that we encountered in the works of writers who were often geographically, historically, and psychologically distant from each other." (2000, p. xi) Thus, this dissertation extends such observation to the Middle Eastern feminist literary production, attempting to highlight the persistence of common challenges faced by women, particularly within the context of double oppression/colonization, the intersection of patriarchal systems and occupation in regions such as Palestine and Iran. In this regard, the leading African American poet and essayist Audre Lorde inserts, "As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change." (2003, p.26) In light of this, the dissertation aims at making connections and bridging the gap between women writers in the Middle East and the West through incorporating some post-colonial Western feminist frameworks in analysing Khalifeh and Satrapi's works.

By placing the analysis on postcolonial theories, the discussion aims to highlight the on-going struggles faced by women in the Middle East, offering an understanding of the way oppression manifests uniquely yet shares common threads across various global contexts. The focus on sisterhood as a unifying concept reinforces the universal nature of women's experiences, offering a platform for solidarity and cross-cultural dialogue. This echoes Lorde's words, "Survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths." (2003, Pp.26-27) Furthermore, the

significance of the dissertation goes beyond its application of some Western feminist frameworks to Palestinian literary production. It reveals a unique perspective coming from me as a Palestinian researcher, and an insider analyst, with personal ties to the Middle Eastern context. This connection is crucial in comprehending the nuances of the works analysed, as I draw on my cultural repertoire to elaborate on the intricacies of the novels in question. This insider perspective not only feeds the discussion but also questions conventional modes of interpretation often imposed by external scholars. The present dissertation tries to investigate the narrative forms both Khalifeh and Satrapi's works employ to include the Middle Eastern woman in the discussion on the post-colonial feminist discourse.

Dissertation design

The present dissertation consists of two main parts; the first part will be devoted to the analysis of Palestinian literature, which will be the focus of the present research, in light of feminist frameworks. The second part is aimed to compel with the comparative aspect regarding the feminist scene within the Middle East; in particular, Palestinian and Iranian female writers, namely Khalifeh and Satrapi. Therefore, the dissertation is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter offers a contextualization of the topic, besides providing a historical and theoretical background. The second chapter is devoted to the analysis of Sahar Khalifeh's work in light of feminist frameworks. The third chapter covers the comparative aspect through analysing the life stories of Khalifeh and Satrapi. The dissertation ends with a conclusion and some recommendations for further research on the topic.

Methodology

The dissertation employs close readings of the selected novels and textual analysis as a means to address the feminist aspects within the chosen corpus. Besides this, the theoretical framework of the dissertation draws on the Western and Eastern feminist waves in the exploration of the Middle Eastern feminist scene. The dissertation places the feminist waves in a historical perspective which the researcher applies to the analysis of Middle Eastern literature, particularly, Khalifeh and Satrapi's work. Alongside the Western feminist canon, the dissertation draws on some important concepts in the post-colonial discourse. It is important to view Khalifeh and Satrapi's novels in light of post-colonial feminist frameworks since Khalifeh and Satrapi as

female voices belong to third-world countries, namely, Palestine and Iran. Such a context entails the need to draw on the concept of representation between the West and the East based on the work of some well-known post-colonial/feminist critics. The dissertation elaborates on the following definitions:

-Edward Said's Orientalism (1977): The term Orientalism is used in the same sense that Edward Said employed to reflect on the binary divisions commonly related to the tensions amid the Occident and the Orient, such as Self-Other, West-East, civilized-barbarian, and feminism-antifeminism. So, Orientalism refers to the depiction of the aspects of Eastern cultures (Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian countries) by Western writers, artists, and historians. They give themselves the authority to make statements and depictions about the East. In Edward Said's book, Orientalism came to mean how these depictions portrayed the East in increasingly patronizing and polarizing terms. The dissertation elaborates on some of these depictions/stereotypical images of the Middle Eastern feminist scene.

-Chandra Talpade Mohanty's concept of Third World Woman: In her well-known essay "Under Western Eyes" (1984) Mohanty argues that the writings of contemporary Western feminists about Third World women contribute to the reproduction of colonial discourse where females in the South are represented as the undifferentiated 'Other' (1984). The dissertation employs this concept of third world woman to refer to the stereotypical representations of women in the Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian countries created by the Western frameworks that try to discuss Third World women's status.

-Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988): Spivak employed the term 'the subaltern' to discuss her post-colonial perspective regarding the oppressed groups including women. This concept is incorporated in the analysis of the Middle Eastern feminist scene indicating that the Middle Eastern woman is represented as an oppressed subaltern subject.

-Judith Butler's theory of Performativity (1990): The dissertation draws on two important concepts from Butler's theory namely, 'repetitive acts' and 'subversive acts'. The dissertation uses the concept of 'repetitive act' to indicate the idea that the character in question is acting according to the expected cultural norms within his/her social context, s/he is adhering to the repetitive norms within his/her society. In this sense, s/he is performing 'repetitive acts'. In addition, the dissertation employs the concept of 'subversive act' when the individual is acting against the expected cultural

norms within his/her context. In this sense, the individual is performing 'subversive acts' by going against the cultural norms within his/her context.

-Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's concepts of 'the angel in the house' and 'the monster woman': These two terms are used in the present dissertation in the same sense Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000) employed them meaning that if the female character is adhering and following the cultural norms and expectations within her context, then she is 'the angel in the house' but if she goes against these norms and expectations, she will become 'the monster woman'.

-Homi Bhabha's concept of 'the third space': It is employed in this dissertation as a connecting link among the narratives of Khalifeh and Satrapi. The dissertation will employ 'the third space' concept based on Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). To subvert colonial domination, Bhabha (1994) proposes the in-between space of the cultural encounter of the colonizer and colonized which he calls 'the third space of cultural enunciation'. This space undermines "the binary thought and essentialist identities produced by colonial knowledge" (p. 276). It deconstructs the binary of the West and the East, the colonizer and the colonized, or the self and the other. Moreover, it is the space of uncertainty, ambiguity, and the renunciation of colonial power (Bhabha, 1990). Bhabha claims that there is a space "in-between the designations of identity" and that "this interstitial passage between fixed identification opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy." (1994, p.4) In this sense, what articulate cultural difference is defined as "in-between spaces" (1994, Pp.1-2, 38). Accordingly, 'the third space' becomes the space of negotiations between the differences. In addition, in this intercultural and international third space, the inhabitants do not occupy an equal space and may not undergo a uniform experience of cultural negotiation. In light of this, the dissertation attempts to elaborate on the concept of sisterhood between women in the Middle East and the global feminist scene as sisters in pain, who come to share the patriarchal oppression and patriarchal representation of them, regardless of their geographical location with an eye on the perception of identity as a cultural construct that is always in progress, it is not something stable, one can add and shape his/her identity based on his/her life routes in this post-colonial era. Those key terms are supported with examples from the selected corpus in the dissertation chapters.

Discussion and outcomes

The dissertation aimed at a detailed analysis of Middle Eastern women's writings against the double oppression imposed on them particularly the work of the Palestinian novelist Sahar Khalifeh and Iranian writer Marjane Satrapi. The dissertation is divided into two main parts; the first part tackled the female representation within Palestinian literature, while the second aimed at making connections between Middle Eastern female writings, namely Khalifeh and Satrapi's autobiographies in an attempt to provide insights into women's voices locating within the Middle East. The dissertation attempted to discuss the feminist aspect in their writings from a new perspective, diverging from the commonly employed post-colonial frameworks when approaching Middle Eastern women's writings. The dissertation tried to integrate both post-colonial approaches and feminist frameworks in analysing the selected works, ultimately reaching the following conclusions:

The first chapter which is devoted to the discussion of Palestinian literature and Sahar Khalifeh's work, in particular, demonstrates that women's representation in Arab literature is always penned up with images of patriarchal control that represent women as objects, mothers, or symbols that fit the national and masculine frames of male narratives including concepts such as motherland, fertility, and generosity. Such a situation ends up with Middle Eastern women being doubly colonized, being both third-world subjects and females. Khalifeh's work represents an attempt to subvert this double oppression imposed on Arab women and Palestinians in particular. Khalifeh's work allows the female characters to resort to subversive acts in their behaviour within their social context as a means to refute the stereotypical representations of them as being tradition-based, vulnerable, and passive Middle Eastern, third-world subjects. These subversive acts express women's refusal to adhere to their normative/repetitive roles mainly as obedient wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, etc. Thus, Khalifeh's work instead of representing women as objects and symbols portrays the female characters as subjects, round characters, which develop through the course of the actions in the selected novels while fighting their confinement within their surrounding socially occupied context drawing on means such as having a profession, acquiring knowledge of different spaces and getting a proper education. The female characters do not aspire to become heroines, yet they act as ordinary individuals who do very basic things such as, eating, sleeping, dancing, dreaming, committing mistakes, etc. In light of this, Khalifeh's feminist

approach becomes clear, an approach that places women in everyday life situations as individuals, who are devoid of any patriarchal or national traces, such a realistic representation aims at liberating women from the patriarchal pen/penis.

Furthermore, the dissertation draws on themes from the 1st and 2nd feminist waves to discuss Khalifeh's work as a reaction to this treatment of the female image. The analysis reveals some common images and themes between Western women's writings and Khalifeh's literary production such as the inheritance laws, marriage problems, and the reproduction process. Such connections make it convincing to reflect on Khalifeh's work from a Western feminist framework on the one hand and argue that there is solidarity among women despite being geographically distant from one another, on the other hand. The analysis reveals some connections between Khalifeh's work and Western feminist frameworks namely, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and Hélène Cixous's works. The analysis contends that Khalifeh's work mainly insists on the female space and financial independence that Woolf emphasizes in her feminist framework. In other words, all the female characters in the novels discussed strive to become financially independent including, the educated, the widow, the unmarried, etc. The novels show that these female characters could not survive the oppression imposed on them, except with money in their pockets/purse as their main means of killing the angel in the house.

In addition, the dissertation discusses some of the myths related to the Palestinian female that Khalifeh's work tries to dismantle and prove as invalid patriarchal myths that exist for the sole purpose of sustaining patriarchy over the female and emphasizing her role as a subordinate subject such as the image of the man as the rain provider and the woman as the passive receiver. The analysis reveals that such myths aim at sustaining the patriarch system and stereotypical image of third-world women. Khalifeh's work tries to demystify those myths by stressing the positive representation that Cixous calls for. Khalifeh's novels reveal that those patriarchal myths are culture-driven practices, which come to 'make the woman', in de Beauvoir's terms, 'to become a woman' and have nothing to do with religion, which is in most cases used as a cover for the patriarchal colonial agenda. This connection between Khalifeh's work and the selected feminist frameworks helps highlight Khalifeh's feminist approach in relation to the global feminist scene and accordingly, includes insights from the Middle Eastern literary production in the discourse on this global feminist movement. The dissertation reveals that Khalifeh's

work discusses those feminist themes using colloquial Arabic, along with several literary techniques such as monologues and dialogues that allow her to communicate her feminist views with the readers. However, the dissertation does not extensively elaborate on the use of language because of the limited availability of academic resources that elaborate on the language employed by female writers within the Middle East region. This could be a call to stimulate further research on the characteristics of language employed by female writers within this region.

The second chapter aimed at covering the comparative aspect of the present dissertation; thus, it tried to make a comparative study of Khalifeh and Satrapi's life stories. The chapter aims to provide an outlook on the feminist scene in the Middle East to avoid falling into the trap of creating a homogenous coherent image of women living in the Middle Eastern region, where the experience of the Middle Eastern female mistakenly being viewed as unified one regardless of the socio-political context. The chapter opens by highlighting the perception of women's life stories in the Middle East, and then it shifts to provide some feminist insights from both Khalifeh and Satrapi's life stories and tries to discuss them in light of some feminist frameworks, including issues related to the female's social context, sexuality, feminist motifs, the narrative forms, etc. The chapter argues that Khalifeh's work could be viewed in light of the 1st and 2nd feminist waves while Satrapi's work could be connected to the later feminist waves, namely, the 3rd and 4th waves. The chapter highlights some connections between the works in question and some Western feminist frameworks such as Judith Butler and Hélène Cixous' works. Through this comparative chapter, the dissertation reveals that Sahar's quest to become a free woman is more complicated compared with Marji's. Sahar has to overcome several obstacles in her quest as a female living within the Palestinian context, Sahar has to surpass her unwelcoming traditional familial atmosphere as a daughter, her miserable marriage, her status as a colonized Palestinian subject living under the Israeli occupation, and her status as a third world woman subject. Sahar's quest is a multi-layered one, whereas Marji has to surpass the patriarchal practices that encounter her as an Iranian subject who is living under the Iranian regime and as a third-world woman/subject living in the Middle East. Sahar's quest contains more thorns in the way compared to Marji's.

This scene paves the road to view Khalifeh's work in light of the 1st and 2nd feminist waves, where the main focus of women was on gaining their very basic

rights including, education, voting, freedom of speech, owning property, etc. while Satrapi's work could be linked to the later feminist waves since her familial context supports her which, in turn, allows her to be open to more advanced perspectives and viewpoints regarding the female status such as those later feminist waves which come to negotiate issues related to the female's sexuality and identity. In this detailed investigation of the life stories of both Khalifeh and Satrapi, through their narrators Sahar and Marji respectively, the dissertation manages to reveal the discordant experience of the females living within the Middle East, refuting their representations as a coherent homogenous group who share the same cultural, political and ideological context. Thus, through narrating their life stories in different literary forms and de-veiling their surrounding socio-political contexts, the chapter shows that Khalifeh and Satrapi, through their pens, created a house of language for themselves, a platform, where they de-veil their unique experiences as females living in the Middle East, and negotiate some stereotypical images related to the way the West views them as weak, passive and backward subjects, since both Sahar and Marji come to interact and manoeuvre within a Western context namely, American and Austrian contexts, resulting in their experience of the in-between, third space of cultural hybridity. Such themes serve as unifying starting points/essentials that could make the Middle Eastern woman's voice loud and powerful, through using language or other forms of expression.

The dissertation shows that despite the differences in the narrative form where Khalifeh narrates her life story in a traditional written form while Satrapi uses graphics along with words, both female writers come to share some common feminist motifs on their status as being third-world women subjects indicating the idea that the form may be different, yet the purpose is the same, that is subverting some stereotypes. Spivak's concept of "Strategic essentialism" could be a temporary solution for the Middle Eastern female to de-veil her life story in front of the global feminist scene. In addition, the chapter employs Butler's concepts of normative/subversive acts to reveal the way each female reacts within her social context, which helps in arguing that the female experience within the Middle East is not a coherent one. Thus, the present dissertation encourages further comparative research to be conducted on Middle Eastern women's writing. Such a comparative approach can provide a more in-depth understanding of the feminist scene in different regions within the Middle East in connection to the global feminist scene.

The researcher ends the dissertation by recommending some topics for further research based on the ideas raised in the discussion throughout the present dissertation. The researcher encourages further research to be conducted on the analysis of the linguistic features and literary techniques employed by Palestinian women writers, focusing on the unique characteristics of their language. In addition, the researcher recommends carrying out research comparing the portrayal of women and their roles in the narratives of Palestinian women and men writers, with a focus on gender representation. Moreover, the researcher highly recommends investigating the presence and significance of graphic novels within Palestinian literature, (if they exist) since this is still an underdeveloped area of study regarding Palestinian women's writing. Finally, in light of the current Palestinian political context, the researcher suggests comparing Palestinian women's writing 145 with those of Jewish women, considering the role of occupation in the broader context of women's oppression and seeking insights for potential solutions. Such topics could publicize Palestinian literature in light of the global literary scene besides the present dissertation that the researcher enjoys a lot and finds fruitful at all personal, national, and academic levels.

List of Publications related to the dissertation

- Alawna, H. (2022). "A Quest for Women's Emancipation in Palestinian Literature: Sahar Khalifeh's Sunflower." In Fanni, K. L., Cintia, B., Zsolt, P. & Szabó, R. (Eds.): *10th Jubilee Interdisciplinary Doctoral Conference 2021 Conference Book*. Pp. 312-321. Doctoral Student Association of the University of Pécs, Pécs. ISBN 9789634298199

- Alawna, H. (2022). "Art as a Means for Women's Voice: Marjane Satrapi's Graphic Novel 'Persepolis' as a Case Study on Oriental Feminist Discourse." In Molnár, D., Molnár, D. Nagy, A. S. (Eds.): *Spring Wind 2022 Tanulmánykötet I*. Pp. 396-409. Association of Hungarian PHD and DLA Students, Budapest. ISBN 9786156457134

- Alawna, H. (2023). "A Feminist Reading of Palestinian Literature in light of Western Feminist Frameworks: Sahar Khalifeh's Work as a Case Study. In *2nd Nitra Conference Proceedings*. Verbum: Praha. ISBN 978-80-88507-13-0. Print (forthcoming)

- Alawna, H. (2023). "Between Performance and Performativity: Performing Female Identities in Zadie Smith's White Teeth (2000)." *British and American Studies (BAS)*, 29. Pp. 89-97. ISSN 1224-3086

- Alawna, H. (2023). "Feminist Insights From Middle Eastern Literature: What is Being Inherited?: A Feminist Reading of the Palestinian Novelist Sahar Khalifeh's The Inheritance." In Fanni, K. L., Cintia, B., Puskás, T., Szabó, R. (Eds.): *11th Jubilee Interdisciplinary Doctoral Conference 2022 Conference Book*. Pp. 257-268. Doctoral Student Association of the University of Pécs, Pécs. ISBN 9789636260705