

Womens' Images in Contemporary Sudanese Mens' Novels: (The Other Shore) by/ Abaker Adam Ismail (2006) as a case study

By

Elsadig Hussein Fadlalla Ali

College of Science and Arts (Tanumah) – King Khalid University- KSA

Email: alsadighssn@yahoo.com

Abstract

This paper is a discussion of the images of Sudanese women in contemporary Sudanese novels. It sheds light on two female characters, Selma (a major character) and Suad (a minor character) in Abaker Adam Ismail's novel 'The Other Shore (2006)'. The researcher used literary analysis for analyzing the personality traits of the two characters. The study also investigates the extent to which portraits of Sudanese women in literary works represent the nature and role of women in the Sudanese community. literary criticism is used to examine the image of women in Sudanese novels, in addition to analytical and descriptive methods. From the analysis, it appears that the characters are portrayed as dynamic characters since both changed greatly from positive to negative persons. The study comes out with some results some of which are: Sudanese society is a patriarchal society with the father as the head of the family. Consequently, the selected novel depicts female characters against the backdrop of patriarchal values which oppress women with their cultural, traditional, social, and ideological norms; as well as male authors tend to concentrate on the physical details of their female characters.

Keywords The Other Shore; Abaker Adam Ismail; Sudanese women; feminism; female character; Sudanese literature.

Introduction

The Development Of Literature In General And The Novel, In Particular, Correlates With Cultural And Social Variables In Society, And Since The Relation Between Literature And Society Is Inseparable, So The Novel Is Affected By Society And Develops With It Whenever Society Advances Culturally And Educationally; Therefore, The Writer Of This Paper Tries To Find Out How The Novelists Portray The Women In Their Novels Since This Will Reflect How The Society In General And Male Novelists, In Particular, Perceive Women In Fiction And Consequently In Reality. To Do This The Researcher Chose A Novel That Is Written By One Of The Famous Male Novelists In Sudan, Abaker Adam Ismail, (Other Shore 2006), For Analysis. The Analysis Will Focus On Only Two Of The Female Characters In The Novel Selma (A Major Character) And Suad (A Minor Character).

“The Other Shore Is One Of The Novels, By The Uprising Star Abaker Adam Ismail, Which Puts Him On The Front Line Of Sudanese/Canadian Writers. He Offers Such A Beautiful Set Of Events That Takes The Reader To Youthful And Hopeful Times To Live The Awkward Moments Of Starting Fresh As Teenagers And Approaching Adulthood. Yet, At The Same Time, He Transfers Us With Such Eloquence To The Harsh Reality And Consequences Of Betrayal Actions”. (Hamed, 2015)

Aims of the Study

The aims of conducting this study are: to shed light on the topic in Sudanese novels besides drawing the attention of the reader of Sudanese novels to the topic; the study also

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investigates the extent to which portraits of Sudanese women in literary works represent the nature and role of women in Sudanese community, to draw more attention to the position of women in the community, and to find out whether the changing role and status of women in society in general influence how Sudanese writers portray women in their literary works.

Methodology

To achieve these aims literary criticism is used to examine the image of women in Sudanese novels, in addition to analytical and descriptive methods to analyze the selected novel.

Significance of the Study:

The researcher thinks that the study is significant because it takes a scholarly approach to analyze in depth the Sudanese novels concerning the image of women besides it gives women a voice and focus on their affairs, especially the marriage institution.

The Author:

Abakar Adam Ismail was born in the Nuba Mountains in the western part of Sudan. He studied dentistry at the University of Khartoum. He moved to Canada in the early 1990s where he studied anthropology as well as gender, race, and class. He is the author of several works of poetry, short stories, books, and articles in which he tries to reflect the power struggle in Sudan. His most famous books are *Dreams in the Land of the Sun*, *The Dialectic of the Centre and the Margin*, and *The Road to the Impossible Cities* as well as *The Other Shore*.

“Abakar is known as a political activist working to highlight the struggle of marginalized groups in the country”. (Hamed, 2015, UPWEB)

Summary of the novel:

The novel is about two major characters, Aamir Décor and Selma. It is narrated in several techniques and intertwined back and forward events. The basic technique is the flashback.

Selma grew up in Aldoem town as well as Aamir Decor, and her mother Haja Alia was selling vegetables and other things in the market. She met Amer Decor in the hospital when she accompanied her mother while he accompanied his niece. A strong love relationship is linked between them in addition to some sexual affairs. When she entered the university, she was introduced to Najat, a progressive girl who lived a bourgeoisie life, and their relationship strengthens until it became a friendship, then Selma, also, held progressive ideas. She continued her relationship with Aamir Décor, and she regularly used to have sex with him every Wednesday which they named ash's Wednesdays. while she was at the university, she met her cousin Kamal Abdel Aziz, who admired her and entered in competition with Aamir Decor to win her as a wife. And he won her with the help of her friend Najat who was contemplating pragmatic ideas while Selma was thinking romantically. They lived a comfortable life in Saudi Arabia after their marriage - Kamal and Selma. She accompanied a maid with her from Sudan. Her husband took advantage of the circumstances and betrays her with the maid. Aamir Decor migrated to another country and won an award in the drawing. An emotional relationship linked Osama Sorour, a friend of Aamir Decor, with Gamar which ended with their marriage after Gamar's fighting to be engaged to him. Osama ended up in a psychiatric and neurological hospital for alcohol treatment. Ali el- Eheimir a devout young man, also, feels affection for Gamar, but he did not win her then retreat and ended as a Sheikh (religion instructor) of Koranic khalwa (a local religion school) in Kordofan (a region in the west of Sudan).

Characters Selected For Discussion

Analysis of the depiction of Selma:

She is a major character in the novel. Her first appearance was when she returned from exile, in her thirty-eight, she seems a fat and healthy-looking woman, where the narrator said,

"Selma opened the window near her seat to the right of the sixth row to arrange a preliminary meeting between the truth and the eyes of her younger son Ammar, who spent his four years in distant cities, the happy cities with continuous electricity." (Ismail (2006) *The Other Shore*: 12)

It seems, here, that she has a good relationship with her younger son, and she has been portrayed in a positive way, where she plays her role as a mother who enlightens her children and prepares them psychologically.

In her second appearance, she is blaming herself by saying:

"Am I not the cause of all that happened by insisting to bring this maid? (She remembered how Kamal agreed reluctantly to bring the maid)" (*The Other Shore*, 2006: 21 - 22).

She is here insisted on bringing the maid, despite her growing up in a poor family, it seems that she was compensating for her growing up in poverty, but later we discovered that she did so as an imitation of her bourgeoisie friend and, also, as compensation for her sense of inferiority when she was with her friend at the airport who was accompanying her maid.

She is physically described as,

"Fatter and slightly taller (than her friend) which gives a chance for her legs and other things to overlook the world." (*The Other Shore*, 2006: 23).

We find in addition to her feelings about the 'bourgeois friend' and her maid. Selma continued her feeling toward Dina, she feels towards her a little jealous,

"Selma admitted to herself that she feels jealousy towards Dina. And until recently she did not find an answer to the question: Why she felt that she was at the level of the maid? Is this a result of Dina's glance at that moment? ..." (*The Other Shore*, 2006: 24).

This feeling continued with her even after she became the wife of a rich man!!

Although she was educated in the oldest university in Sudan, she agrees to put all that aside and consented to be just a housewife, doing the daily housework that is done by every woman, despite the presence of a maid at home, she said so in one of the Awakening moments of her mind,

"A picture of her graduation from the University, wearing a robe and smiling, that picture that looked to her as two gods: god of irony (Bachelor of chemistry, with honors, and the result she put sugar on drinks and move it!! Thirteen years of moving sugar in cups ... "(*The Other Shore*, 2006: 32).

It seems, here, that she is a submissive and passive person, with limited ambition, as it seems that the peak of her ambition was to live a comfortable level of life and has done so by marrying a rich man.

Also, she is portrayed as not committing community morals. She was having sex with her boyfriend regularly every Wednesday, not only this, but she used to let him help her to fully nude bathing,

"When Ash's Wednesday started: nights of joy and festivals of stars are repeated between them. Selma bathes before she goes out since she has another appointment with joy. It was Aamer who washed her!!" (The Other Shore, 2006: 34).

She is portrayed here in a negative way in terms of morality; they have sex regularly without any sense of guilt or shame.

The opinion of her sister-in-law about her was negative; her attitude towards her is that she is in addition to being non-virgin (as the rumors say) she is a (Negro!), And these two points are justified and enough to reject the marriage of her brother to Selma,

"She (Buthaina), besides her fighting to marry Kamal to her friend, the daughter of her aunt, Laila, 'to keep majesty in the family' thinks that Selma does not worth what Kamal spent on her, which is a good reason for the refusal, in her opinion, in two ways: she is negro in origin on one hand and not a virgin, as the rumors say, on the other hand!" (Al-Dafaa al-Oukhrra, 2006: 36).

She is, also, described as a shallow woman despite her university education; she often spends her time in amusement,

"The empty days returned to Selma, just like those old days that she spends in amusement by watching TV programs, reading magazines, and speaking on phones." (The Other Shore, 2006: 58)

She is also not respecting religion, customs, and traditions, she hugged Osama, a friend of Aamir, although she meets him for the first time,

"We are deeply sorry - Osama Sorour said before he hugged her." (The Other Shore, 2006: 62).

She was – when studying in university - also hoping to be in a better economic and social status; she is not pleased with the status of her family and feels crisis for her status,

"Selma said in a hopeful explosive moment: 'You know Najat; I have a dream that I have my room with windows like these! ...'" (The Other Shore, 2006: 76).

She shows a clear conflict in her character, between what she wishes, what she believes in, and what she does, this comes clear when she joined a progressive party,

"Selma, Shahinda, and Najat have officially joined the Progressive Party. And they were working enthusiastically to rally supporters for - The Coalition of National Forces - ..." (The Other Shore, 2006: 78).

Then, the conflict raged inside her between her capitalist wishes and her progressive ideas, but the victory of bourgeois thought began with the help of her friend Najat when Najat said:

"Leave yourself aside... Think about your brothers, consider your mother, your father, can you tell me what you will do for them?!"

'Enough by God Najat, it is enough' (Selma cried). "(The Other Shore, 2006: 94).

This cry was the beginning of giving up her love and progressive ideas. Selma surrendered to the pragmatic ideas, and began to abandon romantic and progressive ideas in the middle of the fourth year of university, with the encouragement of Najat and most of her female colleagues,

"Selma has returned on vacation, in the middle of the last year of the university, to their home surrounded by the messages of Kamal and his victorious smile and a delight pressing on her hand; and encouraged by the majority of her female colleagues, especially Najat, and their pushing her towards the practical way in the journey to the future." (The Other Shore, 2006: 172)

It seems that Selma lived a double personality; she buried the first deep when she was in exile, but once she returned the conflict appeared again; she returned to think about her boyfriend, and how to see him. We see the duplication of her personality through the eyes of Najat,

"She saw this time how much unhappiness that lives in the body of Selma, she, moreover, discovered that Selma became a compound of two persons who live in one flesh!!" (The Other Shore, 2006: 102).

The author described her as her judgment of things is incorrect,

"Selma was with the innocence of the beautiful ones and her wrong judgment has interpreted Suad's extra interest in Kamal as part of Suad's good heart and as a result of her long living and harmony with them." (The Other Shore, 2006: 123).

She is described at the beginning of her life as frank and bold, when her boyfriend intended to travel, she told her mother that she wanted to go to say farewell to him...

"Haja Alia did not find what to say in the face of this sincerity, sharp audacity, and beautiful honesty; she colluded with the idea and threw aside the restrictions!!" (The Other Shore: 197).

And she, also, told her teacher that she is going to say goodbye to a beloved person.

"Her teacher, Asma, looked at her face and find that it is beautiful and honest, setting aside the strictness she is famous for and accepting the idea!" (The Other Shore, 2006: 198).

At the end of the novel, the desire in Ash's Wednesdays comes back to Selma although she is married.

As a result of all her internal complexity and the conflict between a group of beliefs; and as a result of her suffering due to the ongoing concessions she reached a state of complete psychological collapse at the end of the novel,

"Selma's face changed into red as well as rates of sadness and disappointment fell throughout her heart and body:

-Oh, my mother Oh my mother

She screamed and then remained silent till Haja Alia came in and found her frozen and take a static gaze at a remote location... Far away! Her lips are dry like a stream that is dried by the hot winds of April!

This time Haja Alia does not leave it to doctors; she called Sohair Boupar, who contacted Zaar 'Kodia' (a woman who arrange the Zaar ceremony). And Selma was taken to the Zaar ceremony

Selma woke up the next morning light and beautiful!! "(The Other Shore, 2006: 215 - 216)

Then, this happened again, and the same condition happened to her,

"She walked like a tied horse then danced like a slaughtered bird... Then circled round and round and round then flew like a dove that festival of stars erupted in her blood!!" (The Other Shore, 2006: 225).

Analysis of the depiction of Suad:

She is a minor character, a maid working with Selma's family. Her first appearance was at the return of the family from Saudi Arabia,

"Kamal stands aside pointing while the maid is picking up the bags with great difficulty because of its weight, which she can identify without a need for his pointing." (The Other Shore, 2006: 21).

Then, the driver in one of the situations said:

"When Mr. Kamal will ask me to go and bring Suad, which is the logical matter! He is worried that she has already been replaced by the new Ethiopian maid who speaks English! ..." (The Other Shore, 2006: 50).

Before working with Kamal's family, she is mentioned when she was looking for work and practicing typewriting, to be employed by a lawyer who promised her, which means she was in continuous motion to learn to get work. After that she saw an announcement for a maid job, she applied for the position and accept to work with them in exile. She is described at the beginning of her work with them as,

"She was decent, functioning dutifully, as a result, Selma liked her more, and dealt with her as a sister rather than as a maid, and then, Selma discovered her talent in henna, so she allowed her to draw henna for expatriate women to increase her income." (The Other Shore, 2006: 122).

But her modesty and sincerity changed into sexual adventures and a betrayal for her employer (Selma) after she passed through an inner struggle between either continuing modestly and faithfulness to her employer or fulfilling the desires of the flesh. She passed, in her struggles, through many stages extending from the imagination, smelling and hugging Kamal's clothes, and trying every possible means to satisfy her sexual desires, then she starts to send sexual signals to Kamal, then a reaction is taken by him followed by their betrayal of Selma,

"Kamal starts, as he crossed to the outside bathroom, to look at the window of Suad, while she is waiting for this passing by, and she sometimes intentionally replaces her clothes in those moments from behind the open window! This scene is repeated many times ... then he sat on the chair that was within the range of her movement while he was doing his work at night. "(The Other Shore, 2006: 124). And, "Suad understands that he entered the reaction zone. She starts to get out to him while Abaya (a piece of cloth) opens from the front on a sleep garment, which becomes shorter and more translucent sleep garment with the passing of days!

The collusion continued and delivering juice became a habit...

'What is important is that she makes me feel that she is the most important woman in the world then she opened the door', (Kamal said to his brother). And then?

Oh, my brother, she is the tastiest woman that I ever met in my life: she pinches, cries and screams: '(The Other Shore, 2006: 124 - 125).

She deceived Kamal that she was pregnant after her period was delayed for several days more than usual and that she planned with her aunt to conceal the return of the menstrual cycle again to blackmail him with a sum of money. He asked her to have an abortion, but she refused and asked him to marry her, Kamal said about it:

"The (Negress) refused! Brother, she insists to create a scandal for me!! Imagine! She asked me to marry her! By God, look at the Negroes of these days?!!" (The Other Shore, 2006: 120).

She justified her refusal for religious reasons, as Kamal says about it: "The 'daughter of dog' refused. She said that she heard the Imam of their mosque saying that doing so is like 'killing' and 'that God forgives all sins but disbelieving or killing oneself!" (The Other Shore, 2006: 141)

There was hidden information from Kamal and his brother that is,

"The menstrual cycle of Suad returned to her on the second day of her arrival at her home, just hours after disclosure herself to her aunt and her friend at the same time, the nurse. The next day Suad told her aunt, the nightmare drift story, and told her intention to tell Kamal the joyful news, and innocently infuriated her aunt, who said to her:

Oh God, you disappointed me Suad, are you mentally retarded!!

And Suad was surprised by this reply, but her amazement disappeared when her aunt explained to her the good plan, from which she gained, in the end, an amount of money that she never dreamed of! "(The Other Shore, 2006: 143).

Evaluation of the presentation of female characters in the novel:

The first character (Selma) is physically described positively and in detail, she is beautiful and has a beautiful body, especially the legs. Initially, she is described as graceful, and then her body increased after her migration. She is of a Negro origin from her mother's side. She is an educated woman, who studied at the University of Khartoum and graduated with an honorary degree. She worked in politics when she was a student at the university where she joined a liberal party and was active in it. But when we examine her character throughout the course of events, we find that she has been presented negatively, she lived in somewhat a poor family and this life led her later to all that had occurred. She grew up as an ambitious person

and this aspiration for a better life led her to abandon progressive and romantic ideas and left her boyfriend to marry a rich man who offered her and her family a better life.

We find that she is also portrayed as submissive and passive, and has no affiliation or obligation to customs, traditions, and religion. She was having sex regularly with her boyfriend without feeling guilty. She felt jealousy, envy, and inferiority towards her friend Dina, which led her to insist on the use of a maid at home as an imitation of her friend to compensate for the feeling of inferiority and a life of poverty that she experienced, as well as social prestige. She is intellectually empty and has wrong measuring of things (her interpretation of the attention and caring of the maid towards her husband). Despite her university education, she accepts to be just a housewife, and does ordinary housework, despite the presence of a maid at home. She lives a dual character, where she believed in progressive ideas and had an emotional personality while practicing bourgeois life and behaving practically and realistically on the issue of marriage. This matter led her to a violent psychological conflict after returning to Sudan the outcome of which was, eventually, a psychological and nervous breakdown.

The second character (Suad), the maid, is described in terms of her physical appearance as a normal girl, she is less beautiful, but the details of her body are exciting and attractive. Have a modest and semi-round face and she looks innocent with a tinge of sadness; her lips are thick. Her health improved more after she was employed with Selma's family. She is mentioned positively at the outset; she trained and strives to look for work. She does not care about the type of work; therefore, she accepts to work as a maid. She is also decent and sincere in her work and has some talent in (henna) drawing. Then her personality changed, and sincerity turned into betrayal and sexual adventures with Kamal, Selma's husband. That is after a fierce struggle between the desires of the flesh on one side and chastity and decency backed by prayer and supplication on the other side. Where the desires of the flesh triumphed; and she **colluded** with Kamal on betrayal. Then her character changed more when she used her monthly period delay and deceives Kamal that she was pregnant to blackmail his sum of money, and her plan succeeded with the help of her aunt.

Characters' Traits

In This Part, The Researcher Will Focus On The Term "Trait", Or Distinctive Features, In Characters. A Trait Is "A Stable And Consistent Personal Quality Which Differentiates A Particular Character From All Other Characters. Different Personality Traits Can Be Distinguished In Characters, Namely Social, Physical, And Psychological" (Mathye, 2003:128). Therefore, The Researcher Will Discuss The Female Character's Physical, Social, And Psychological Traits Of The Two Characters That Are Chosen From Abaker Adam Ismail's Novel 'The Other Shore (2006).

(Mathye, 2003) Cited In Ali (2017) "A Character's Social Traits Are Those That Concern The Character's Place In Society, Especially The Character's Relationship With Groups And Institutes Recognized By Society. Physical Traits Refer To The Identification Of A Character's Physical Build, E.G., Short, Tall, Fat, Or Thin. Psychological Traits Consist Of Inert Feelings, For Instance, They Show Whether A Character Is Emotional Or Intellectual, Aggressive Or Gentle, Secure Or Insecure, And Active Or Passive".

Physical Traits

Physical traits refer to the identification of a character's physical build (ibid: 128). The analysis of female characters in the novels shows that the two characters are described as beautiful women. One of them (Suad) uses her beauty to attract a man and then blackmailed

him. Both are described in detail as beautiful women with different degrees of beauty. It is clear from what is said that the author gives attention to the physical features of the female, which is an effect of a patriarchal culture that looks at a woman as a body.

Social traits

A character's social traits are those that concern the character's place in society, especially the character's relationship to groups and institutions recognized by society (ibid: 128). The discussion of social traits is going to be on the following aspects: their relations, role, education, work, village vs. town, positive/negative, ethnic & regional background, and marital status.

The novels emphasize on wife – husband relationships besides the good relation of women with the other persons around them. The two female characters in the novel have good relations with their surroundings. The two female characters accept their traditional roles, and this is the result of the patriarchal society. The author displays the female character that is a full-time working woman who works as a maid which is also related to home duties (Suad). Both are educated women Selma and Suad; Selma is a university graduate and stays at home while Suad finished her secondary school and has a course in typing and works as a maid. The two female characters are from western Sudan and are not belonging to the place in which the actions took place, so he gives attention to the regional/geographical or ethnic background. The author portrays women who go out for work only when they are in need, and they work in low types of work.

From the above discussion, we notice that the author portrays female characters in a positive way and strong characters in their relationship with the people around them and who are behaving positively, in performing their social role, and in their marital status. The author portrays women (Suad) who work in a low type of work, and they are forced to do this type of work which is an effect of their patriarchal background. But the author does not give attention to the problems which arose between males and females.

Psychological traits

When discussing the psychological traits in the novel the researcher finds that there is a variation in portraying female characters regarding strength, oppression, submission, suppression, and passivity; this variation is going to be presented in the following points: In the novel, the two female characters are strong persons, for, Selma used to be a strong character who controls her family but collapsed at the end of the novel, and the other character is presented as a weak person; no female character is depicted as an oppressed woman; one of the two characters is presented as a submissive woman, (Selma). From the analysis, it is found that one of the female characters in the novel collapsed psychologically at the end of the novel, namely Selma.

Departure from the Stereotype

Departure from stereotypes means deviation from cultural values and norms. From the examination of the selected novel, it is observed that no female deviated from the stereotype clearly in the novel but there are some shades of deviation from the stereotype, for example, Selma has sex regularly with her boyfriend, and Suad in the same novel also has sex with her employer and then blackmailed him.

Results

The analysis of female characters in the selected novel by a male novelist revealed that:

- Sudanese society is a patriarchal society with the father as the head of the family. Consequently, the selected novel depicts female characters against the backdrop of patriarchal values which oppress women with their cultural, traditional, social, and ideological norms.
- Male authors portray female passive characters.
- Male authors tend to describe the physical details of their female characters.
- Male-authored novels emphasize was on the good wife-husband relationship.
- Male authors are almost alike in portraying female characters that do their home duties without reluctance with slight differences.
- As a result of the author's geographical background, male authors portray their female characters from the same background.
- There is no signal for deserted women in male-authored novels.
- Male authors portray imaginary characters concerning female physical features (green eyes, foreign beauty etc.).

Conclusion

This study presented an analysis of the image of women in a selected Sudanese novel by a male author. It was based on the analysis of women characters as reflected in this selected novel to evaluate their portrait.

In conclusion, both characters changed from good people to dishonest persons and from a positive image to the negative one. Both characters are similar in that they are Negro descent, from poor families, and illegally had sex. This can be the author's point of view on the issues of women from certain origins or ethnic backgrounds and certain social classes.

The main character of this novel is Selma represents every girl with hopes for a future and a chance to achieve the dream of happiness. This novel portrays the tale of a lost generation of youth who at the peak of their intellectual prosperity and growth are faced with the harsh realities of socio-economic desperation. Their different situations eventually make them choose between being true to themselves or following the flow. Selma's ultimate sacrifice for the sake of her family was to marry, not for love, but for a class that leads to prestige and economic stability. Yet was the price she paid worth the sacrifice? The characters represent different sorts of corrupted individuals with actions such as the betrayal of loved ones, immoral behaviors, economical influence, and lost hopes and dreams. The Author used different events to weave his plot till it reached the climax of Selma's self-reflection. In the end, the question that Ismail leaves us with is "whom to blame?" Is it the weakness of the individual, society, or social-economic circumstances that bred such a lost generation?

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All English translations from the novel’s original Arabic text in this study are the researcher’s translated.