



Feminist Fiction in Karbala: The Medusa by Salima Sultan Noor as a Model

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Abstract

Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds, who created His creation male and female, fulfilling His wisdom in creating humankind to be complete through others, and to remain worshipping the One, the Eternal, the Self-Sufficient, who alone has neither taken a wife nor a son, and who sent prophets to guide them to the paths of salvation. And praise be to Him, continuous praise, for choosing from among His messengers the Seal of the Prophets, Abu Al-Qasim Muhammad, may the best prayers and most complete peace be upon him and upon his pure and righteous family and his chosen companions.

Literary texts are the means by which humans communicate with one another, express their innermost thoughts, and chronicle their humanity. Feminist literature is an important aspect of the duality of human production, and highlighting this literature in a conservative society like Karbala is a significant issue with several dimensions, foremost among them being the encouragement of the continuation of this short-lived, albeit limited, production. This study is divided into three sections and a conclusion, preceded by an introduction. Since there are no examples of this literary genre (the feminist novel) in Karbala that would allow for tracing its development, the introduction provides a biography of the author of the novel under study. The first section examines the plot in the novel "Medusa," while the second section analyzes the characters, and the third section focuses on the time and place. The conclusion summarizes the most important findings of the study. So, the study drew its material from literary and historical sources and references. It is essential to note the most significant challenge the research faced: the lack of women's novels from Karbala that would allow for comparison and the drawing of clear conclusions.

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1. Introduction: Glimpses of the Writer's Biography

Salima Sultan Noor Abbas Al-Fatlawi is an Iraqi researcher and writer, born in 1974 in the Al-Hindiya district (Tuwairij), Karbala Governorate, Iraq. She studied Arabic language and literature at the College of Arts, University of Baghdad, graduating in 1992. She then earned a Master's degree in Arabic language and literature from the College of Islamic Sciences, University of Baghdad, in 2000 with her thesis entitled "The Influence of Religion and Heritage on Poetry Directed at Young People in Iraq." Finally, she received her doctorate from the College of Education, University of Babylon, in 2008 with her dissertation entitled "Vision in the Poetry of Yusuf Al-Sayegh."

In addition to her academic career, Salima Sultan participated in a number of courses inside and outside Iraq, including: an educational course at the University of Karbala, a course in the art of negotiation at Mercy Corps in cooperation with Harvard University, a three-week project management course in Korea organized by KOICA in Seoul, a course in e-governance in Erbil and Baghdad, a trainers' course from the Arab Institute, as well as a number of administrative and media courses.

She worked as an Arabic language teacher for the Ministry of Education, then traveled to Libya where she taught Library and Information Science and General Arabic at Omar Al-Mukhtar University between 2001 and 2003.

She also worked at the Institute of Imamate and Preaching, where she taught morphology, syntax, and Arabic writing. Upon returning to Iraq, she served as Head of the Arabic Language Department at the Teachers' Institute, and as a professor of Andalusian and Islamic literature and morphology at the Open Education College. She also taught Islamic literature and research methodology at Ahl-Albait University. She continues to work as a teacher for the Ministry of Education, in addition to heading the Ninson Center for Studies and Research in Karbala. She was elected to the Karbala Provincial Council for the 2009-2013 term, where she served as Head of the Culture and Media Committee.

1.1. The Writer's Career

She has several published studies, including: "Children's Poetry: Between Creator and Recipient" in the University of Babylon Journal; "A Sniff of Opium: The Green Poem by the Poet Yusuf al-Sayegh" in the Iraqi newspaper Al-Adib; "The Black and White World in Nabil Yassin's Poem 'Night Train': A Study of Color in Poetic Text"; "The Duality of God and Satan in Yusuf Al-Sayegh's Poem 'A Sniff of Opium'" in the University of Karbala Journal; and "A Translation of the Holy Quran" in the Journal of the Institute of Imamate and Oratory in Al-Bayda, Libya.

She also has several books to her credit, including: The play (The Doors) in 2003, performed by the Al-Bayda Theater Group, won a number of awards. A book published by the Euphrates Center in 2004 entitled (Women's Freedom Under Terrorism in Holy Karbala Between Reality and Imagination). The collection (Mirrors and Glass) by Dar Al-Yanabi' in Damascus, Syria in 2010. The collection (Ends of Circles) by Dar Akad in Cairo, Egypt in 2014. She also published two novels, the first entitled (Medusa) by Dar Akad in Cairo, Egypt in 2014, and the other entitled (Mirrors of Fire) by Dar Mesopotamia, in addition to a number of articles in Arab and Iraqi newspapers and magazines.

Finally, she won first prize in the Nazik Al-Malaika competition in 2009, shared with Dr. Nahida Abdul Sattar. A collection of her poetic texts was also translated into German, French, and English as part of the Goethe project, under the supervision of the German Embassy in Iraq, in cooperation with the Iraqi Al-Nour Foundation. She was among nineteen contemporary Iraqi female writers chosen by the German journalist Birgit Svensson, who considered their writings a model of contemporary Iraqi feminist literature.

2. Women's Novels in Karbala

Feminist literature is defined as literature written by women expressing their concerns and outlining their unique identity and worldview through their female environment, including the projections of others onto this environment. This concept was absent from the Iraqi novel from the emergence of women's fiction in the early part of the second half of the 20th century until its end. While Salima Sultan Noor's novel *Medusa* represents a model of women's fiction in the first quarter of the 21st century, it also does not constitute feminist literature. The question this study attempts to answer is why the features of feminist literature disappeared from this novel, despite its novel itself contains many features of breaking

taboos, which the writer deliberately did.

The short history of women's writing in a conservative country like Iraq, and especially in the province of Karbala with its well-known religious and tribal characteristics, is noteworthy. Until the end of the 1950s, there was no recorded literary presence of women in Karbala. This absence cannot be studied in isolation from the history of Arab women's writing in general. It is related to a number of intellectual, social, and historical reasons. Under a patriarchal culture, it was not easy to allow women to leave a written mark. They then began to emerge gradually, with a number of female writers making their mark on the annals of Arabic literature, including the novelist and poet Salima Sultan Noor.

2.1. The Event

In the explanatory glossary with which the novelist presented her novel, she pointed out that her novel was based on real events, indicating that the similarity is the origin and the difference that may occur is not what may be by chance, and in this she goes against the pattern followed, as novelists are accustomed to disavowing the similarity that occurs between the events of their novels and reality, and they attribute it to unintentional coincidence, while Salima deliberately emphasizes that her novel is realistic and its people are real, even if this is something that is criticized in the novelist who records reality as he sees it in front of him, as he is considered nothing more than a camera devoid of ideas, but the atmosphere that the novelist conveys here is a male atmosphere, so her intrusion into their world is the space in which she moves away from the direct recording of the reality that she adopted for the events of her novel.

In this novel, Salima attempts to liberate herself from the accumulated tragedies experienced by the individual Iraqi, tragedies she believes shape contemporary society. She recounts events spanning several decades, each a moment of intense suffering. Simply releasing these thoughts is a release of tension, which, according to Colin Wilson, is a prerequisite for a successful novel.

While the novel's title alludes to the myth of *Medusa*, the author also points out that the title carries a realistic connotation in addition to its mythical one. The ship around which the novel's main events revolve bear the same name. *Medusa*, this mythical creature, embodies several hidden symbols that can be employed to depict the central event. In its general form, it symbolizes a terror that surpasses the capacity of ordinary humans to resist. One detail of her myth is that she petrifies those who gaze upon her, and she has transformed many knights into powerless stone statues.

In Salima's novel, the central event around which the subplots revolve is the sinking of the ship bearing the name "Medusa," and the escape of its captains, leaving its passengers to face the horror of drowning. Among these passengers were a number of Iraqi immigrants fleeing the harsh conditions in Iraq for Australia. The idea behind choosing this myth is that among the passengers were a young man and his cousin. The latter drowns, and the former is unable to save him, as if Medusa and her terror had turned him to stone, rendering him powerless to help. All the subsequent events revolve around this moment, as the drowned man's sister relentlessly pursues him with questions about the incident. All the subplots in the novel relate to the wars that Iraq has endured and continues to endure, forcing its youth to flee after participating in these wars and suffering their horrors. This leads to the suffering of exile and the memories that haunt them. Due to the numerous

shifts in focus, the main narrative is lost in the flurry of recordings that the author attempted to incorporate into her novel. There is no single central event other than the suffering inflicted on Iraqis by the government's policies of violence, oppression, and war.

3. The Analysis of the Role of the Characters

The most striking feature of Salima's novel is that all the main characters are men. Through their voices, the author conveys her messages, attempting to shed light on the Iraqi youth of her time, as if relaying the cries of each one of them. Her choice of a male narrator was intended to allow her to break the taboo she deliberately addressed in several instances without the restraint that would have been necessary had she chosen a female voice. Had she chosen a female voice, her engagement with the forbidden would have been twofold, once through the author and again through the character speaking. The novel features a number of characters like:

1. **Abu Muhammad:** The novel opens with him telling a story to the children. Abu Muhammad represents the patriarchal system that instills all the symbols of his tale in the minds of the people. The story is fantastical, and when the children ask questions, he interrupts them, forbidding them from asking and demanding that they simply listen.
2. **Muhammad:** Sarah's brother and Ibrahim's cousin. He emigrated with him to Australia and drowned at sea.
 - a. **Sarah:** Muhammad's sister and Ibrahim's beloved. She constantly pursues Ibrahim for details of the incident. Salima portrays her as the one who awaits suffering within Iraq, unable to escape grief but rather haunted by it.
 - b. **Ibrahim:** Salima uses him as a mask, projecting all her ideas onto his tongue. He is the chronicler of Iraq's events during its wars and siege, and the suffering endured by its people both inside and outside the country.
 - c. **There are other characters:** Haider, Omar, and Hassouni, whom Salima employs to complete the dialogues and scenes surrounding the main character.

In Salima's novel, the academic style is readily apparent. The characters' cultural backgrounds are not clearly defined in the narrative, yet they speak with a profound and meaningful language. Although their specializations are not explicitly stated, they speak with the authority of Salima, who holds a doctorate in modern Arabic criticism. If "the novel is the writer's attempt to create a clear self-portrait," the question arises: Did the author rely solely on her male protagonists to paint a clear picture of herself? To express what cannot be said by a woman in the conservative society of Karbala? She resorts to the most vulgar language to describe the events.

3.1. Time

Salima moves through time in her novel, chronicling events at the end of each chapter to establish historical accuracy. Her novel is a historical record, and she emphasizes that the chronological connection between the events in the novel and actual history is essential for understanding the text. The events begin in 1982, when the uncle begins telling the children a fantastical story about animals in the forest. This story foreshadows future events that these children will experience. Thus, throughout the novel, she continues to

establish the date to confirm the connection of the events to those thirty years. The novel ends with Salima's signature and the recording of the actual date, along with a note that the events are still ongoing. This reinforces the novel's realism on one hand and its accurate representation of history on the other. Salima's focus on the years is a crucial element, but it limits the novel's appeal to the Iraqi reader, and specifically to those who lived through those years.

3.2. Setting

One of the criticisms that examines women's approach to novel writing concludes that they are unique in their descriptions of rooms and their spatial details. This criticism is attributed to the woman's attachment to enclosed spaces, stemming from her frequent inhabiting of her own room. However, Salima's work here also deviates from this judgment of feminist writing. The spatial setting she employs is expansive and diverse. The events of her novel move between Iraq, Iran, Indonesia, and Australia, between land and sea, and even within Iraq itself, she moves between its cities. The dominant setting is the battlefield, and the narrative unfolds in both approach to and retreat from it. The novel mentions the Al-Amiriya shelter and the tragedy that occurred there during the American bombing of Baghdad in the 1990s. She also pauses in Basra, depicting what soldiers witnessed as they fled the bombing. There is also a passage through Najaf and the valley of Al-Salam cemetery. She stops in her hometown (Tuwayrij). In the novel, when Hassouni, the soldier who fled the American bombing, arrives in his hometown (Tuwayrij), the voice of Salima, a daughter of the same town, rings out: "He stood at the beginning of the market, delighted by the familiar voices in his hometown. But was it really his hometown? Some of those present approached him, and he addressed the nearest person in a weak, hesitant voice:

"So, this is Tuwayrij?!"

"Yes," the man replied, looking at him intently.

"Ah.." He turned his head as if searching for something.

In this town, there is a shrine to one of the saints (Abu Hashim), where Umm Hassouni prays for her son's return. It is another place that holds a special place in the author's memory; it is a refuge for the women of her town, a place they seek shelter in times of hardship.

Salima speaks of her homeland with anguish in her novel. All the pain of exile she reveals in its details is matched by the pain of home itself. "The Iraqis in Iran are weak and weary. How can a person be outside their homeland except weak, fragile, and crushed?" (It's not paradise, so why search for another?) Muhammad said firmly, declaring that the old Muhammad was gone, that he was a different Muhammad, changed by the wind, the rain, and the snows of Qom. The snows, which had delighted him when they fell gently and enchantingly, had gathered upon him until he froze, and from the snow rose a man unlike any we knew. Then he continued, "We will travel to other countries." The game was becoming increasingly dangerous. If you didn't like the situation, you could leave for any Islamic country with a forged Iranian passport, bought for as little as the dust of Iraq you left behind. Then you would apply for a place of safety and obtain citizenship. You would have a new homeland, and we would become respected citizens with value. No one there would punch holes in your identity card to sell you flour and rice in a limited quantity that wouldn't be enough to feed you or your family. "You will go hungry, but there you will have the

freedom and pride of those who have a homeland to embrace them. You will not be forced to fight your own people and bomb your own cities where your people live." She is hesitant to decide where she wants to make a home for her characters.

4. Conclusion

As a result, Salima Sultan Noor is a Karbala-based writer who is considered a pioneer in a region that has not witnessed many female writers, and even if there were, they were not able to publish their work. Therefore, she deserves to be studied, especially since she continues to write, making criticism an important factor in clarifying her path. Female writers were absent from the literary output in Karbala. There was no women's literature, and therefore, it is not possible to study women's works. Noor's novel is not considered feminist literature because it does not take women as its subject, nor does it speak from their perspective. However, the novel can be studied in light of feminist criticism, as it contains some situations that fall within the scope of this criticism, especially since it is written by a woman.

Interviews

Interview with Dr. Salima Sultan Noor, University of Karbala, February 24, 2026.

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